

Genesis 6:5-22; 8:6-14; 9:8-16

Lots and lots of ancient peoples had flood stories. It seems to be an archetype. The Hebrew Bible flood story—or actually stories, because there are two versions interwoven, which is why today’s reading is all chopped up; we’re reading just one version—is shaped in a way to mull over the relationship of a God who made everything, who cares about good and evil, and whose creation, which has evil elements, this God nevertheless continues to preside over. In the beginning, we’re told, in the first creation story, God made everything step by step and was pleased with all of it. God pronounced every element of the creation “good.” Then things went from good to bad to worse, with Cain killing Abel and so forth, and God said to Noah,

“I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.”

All flesh was filled with violence, not just human flesh. This rabbi I listen to for scripture commentary said that she was reading this story with one of her bar mitzvah students, and he had questions about it. He asked, 1) what about the fish, how would a flood drown them? 2) Did Noah feed meat to the carnivores on the ark, and if so, did he take living animals on and slaughter them as they went, or kill them first and let the meat rot? 3) Or were the carnivores not supposed to be carnivores, and that’s the violence of the non-human animals—did God create all animals to be herbivores, but some of them transgressed?

Good questions, all of them. And it just shows that if you think about this very familiar story long enough, you start to see multiple ethical problems among earth’s denizens, and also the depth of God’s disappointment and despair at the way this once-promising project is

turning out. Who among us has not finally balled up the project and chucked it in the wastebasket, so as to start again fresh?

But this is a terrible and terrifying story. If you take it at face value, God's flood swept away babies and lovers and stargazers. Indeed, there are variations on the story that highlight this dimension: in the Qur'an, Noah has an extended argument with one of his sons who thinks he can ride out the flood on his own, and Noah weeps as his son sinks beneath the waves. In the medieval Chester mystery play "Noyes Fludde" Noah's wife puts up a fuss because she doesn't want to leave her friends behind. Another commentator I follow said he didn't think Noah could have heard any of God's detailed instructions about how to construct the ark, because he had to be reeling in horror at the thought of everyone being swept away.

But the story ends with God promising never again to resolve the problem that we earthly creatures are by demolishing us. And God makes a change, represented by the rainbow, to remind Godself of this commitment. Human beings and animals make no reciprocal commitment. We go on being the way we are. And voila, the first covenant in the Bible. So the Hebrew Bible version of the flood story is a meditation on how a good God is going to be in relationship with an ethically challenged creation, which is what the authors of the story see in real life. If God is not going to respond to violence by wadding up the whole creation and starting over again, how *is* God going to respond to violence?

Recently Krista Tippett interviewed adrienne maree brown, a young writer and organizer. She's written several books, including [Emergent Strategy](#), *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, and *We Will Not Cancel Us*, published in 2020. Krista Tippett said of their conversation that it shines a light on an emerging ecosystem in our world over and against

the drumbeat of what is fractured and breaking: working with the complex fullness of reality, and cultivating old and new ways of seeing, to move towards a transformative wholeness of living. Which is sort of what the flood story is trying to do—see what’s fractured and breaking, and move toward a new way of seeing that will lead to transformation.

When asked to explain “emergent strategy,” brown says that

emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of relatively simple interactions. So birds flapping their wings, birds in a flock together, is a relatively simple interaction; but birds all doing that together and avoiding predation can become the most complex, gorgeous patterns of murmurations, migration, survival. So we’re all emergent beings — humans are an emergent species amongst emergent species.¹

Strategy is adapting to current conditions while at the same time moving toward a vision of wholeness. So what that sounds like to me is, God sort of accepts that human beings and animals are the way they are—that’s current conditions—*and* embarks on a process to change us all.

Now, I think the sort of flat, Calvinist way to read the Flood story is to accept God’s violence as necessary and deserved. We ARE utterly depraved; just look around. And we deserve to be swept away in a flood, and only by God’s grace are we not. But adrienne maree brown would suggest that the change God wants to happen cannot happen through violence, on our part or on God’s part. Our model of change is flawed. She talks about having done electoral organizing in 2004, thinking, We just need to get Bush out of office and someone better in, and things will change. But suddenly she realized,

oh, we are trying to just change the top layer of this very layered cake, this very layered process, this system of governance. We think that if we just win the presidency, that then we’ll be able to change the world.

And it clicked for me that it's like, actually, it's a fractal system. And it's layer on top of layer on top of layer. And if none of us are practicing democracy anywhere, it's not going to just suddenly work at the top layer. [*laughs*] And I got it.

Every single large system or structure or network or political protocol, all of it is made up of small things: of humans either having or not having necessary conversations, and humans being willing to stand up for what is right and stand up against what is wrong. It's all these small activities that we need to get great at if we want to actually have anything that would be a real democracy.

Her thesis is that change happens through patterns, and we can change the big patterns by changing our small patterns. I think the Bible shows us sort of following old patterns, then questioning them, then someone changes one, but at the same time the old patterns are still pretty robust—it's very slow change. The people of Israel invade Canaan and fight the non-Israelites as if they were subhuman, but at some point someone tells a story about a Moabite woman who married into the community and ended up being King David's grandmother. At some point someone makes up a story about a prophet who wanted the capital of Assyria to be decimated, and God made that prophet go and warn them so they could change their ways because as God said, they don't even know their right hand from their left, not to mention the livestock.

For us now, some of the friction points between our current condition and our vision of God's New Earth are, how do we fight fair? How do we practice accountability without punishment, or in a less brutal way? Because we have to fight for justice, but we can't do it unfairly, or it won't change the pattern. We have to have accountability, but we're realizing that our criminal justice system simply reinforces unfairness. Because of the urgency, because of the damage that our current situation does, we get in a hurry and then we want to make our changes brutally. Brown writes,

It's just that you are a personal front line. What's happening in your life and in the relationships you have with your family and how you treat people when you're upset with them — I always ask people that, when I talk about transformative justice: Are you punishing anyone right now? And could that punishment be shifted into a boundary or a request? Is there a courageous conversation that needs to be had? How do you personally begin to practice whatever's in alignment with your largest vision?

Let's return to the Flood story. Even as God is planning the flood, God is also planning the aftermath. There will be a Day 41 for Noah and the inhabitants of the ark. And linger for a moment on the tenderness of Noah with the dove: it found no place to set its foot, so he put out his hand and brought it back into the ark. But then it went out again and came back with a scrap of vegetation, and then it went out and didn't come back. And Noah did not interpret that as a sign that the dove had died, or that it had gotten lost; he interpreted it as a sign that God had been faithful, and the flood really was subsiding.

Then God tells Noah about the covenant that changes everything: the situation on the ground is far from God's vision of what it could be, but God is doing something new, unilaterally. God is committing not to do mass destruction like that ever again. God is changing the pattern, and opening the door to the ripple effect of pattern change—flattening out the violence spikes on the fractals and building up the wisdom knobs. [sorry, having trouble finding appropriate vocabulary for fractals] The Flood *was* horrible. God sees that now, and isn't going to do that any more. Instead, God's going to work with us as we are and just not stop working with us until we all have internalized the new paradigm.

We hear this story on September 11, the day when the US was attacked by terrorists. Our national response was to hit back in every way we could think of. The US unleashed so much violence upon the world, damaged veterans, a flood of refugees, doubts about how to

know what's true. Our government replicated the violence. But on a smaller scale some of us enacted a different pattern, sheltering refugees and trying to amplify wiser voices. That is the pattern and the direction we need to follow, because it's the pattern God sets in the aftermath of the Flood.

The Flood story is terrible, but it ends with God saying, "No more," and with the invitation to us also to say "no more." We can choose another shape for living. We can be powerhouses in the stories of our own lives and God's people's lives.

God, help us to practice liberation and justice and freedom mindfully and on purpose.

ⁱ <https://onbeing.org/programs/adrienne-maree-brown-we-are-in-a-time-of-new-suns/#transcript>