

Palisades Presbyterian Church
First Sunday in Lent
March 5, 2006

Readings: Genesis 9: 8 – 17
Mark 1: 9 - 15

Hymns: # 72 When Jesus Came to Jordan
85 What Wondrous Love is This?
#460 Holy God We Praise Thy Name

From the Shadows into the Rainbows
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Creation time is filled with shadows, much like those that work their way into the evening through latticework, playing onto the walls in intricate designs as sleep approaches. Untangling the myths and legends of creation are like this: interesting and engaging at first, even for a while longer, and then they seem to have that quality of eventually turning into a intellectual form of somnambulation or sleep-walking!

In thinking about Noah, Naamah (his wife), and their family, I found myself sloshing about the early flood stories of Ancient Mesopotamia.

One of the earliest of creation stories...

The Sumerian creation story of Atrahsis is a wonderful myth, complete with gods who create humans to relieve them of their work, Humans, who after a while, though, multiply and make too much noise for one of the gods, Enkhi, who designs devious ways to reduce the population. With each attempt, though, Atrahsis (human) seeks guidance from a friendly god (Enhil) on how to deal with the trials sent by Enkhi and save his fellows. Enhil assists the Atrahsis, devising ways to help the humans survive, much to the annoyance of Enkhi. After, disease, famine, and other travails, Enkhi orders the gods in charge to send a flood, and when they do the storm that is unleashed, somehow gets out of control.

All the windstorms, exceedingly powerful,
Attacked as one,
At the same time, the flood sweeps over the cult-centers.
After, for seven days,
the flood sweeps over the cult centers.
After, for seven days and seven nights,
The flood had swept over the land,
And the huge boat had been tossed
About by the windstorms on the great waters,

Prior to the beginning of the deluge, Enhil finds a way to warn Atrahsis and he and others build a boat and sail out the downpour. When the rain finally stopped, Atrahsis offers a burnt meat offering to the gods, who immediately smell the cooking meat and embrace Atrahsis, since their scheme had caused the gods to nearly starve, with no food being provided by the humans or able to be found due to the flood.

It seems, in this epic, that gods and humans need one another (an each others' cooking!). There's no separating creation from its maker and vice versa, no matter how high the waters or deep the shadows.

Another creation myth...

The Babylonian creation story *Enuma Elish*, highlights the warrior god Marduk, who consumes other gods and is known by the more than 50 names of those whose powers he has usurped. A flood **and** a rainbow are elements of this narrative. In the end, the warrior-god hero's bow is brought to the heavens and honored with three names: Rain-bow, Starry-bow, and Long-wood. Just as God lays down the bow in the heavens at the end of Genesis, so does Marduk in this variation on a theme.

According to ancient tradition, lighting bolts were thought to be the arrows fired from God's bow. When God tells Noah that the rainbow which appears in the clouds will forever remind God that the bow has been set aside – God is telling Noah that no longer would there be battle between humans and their maker. In fact, the covenant which God makes with Noah is unconditional. God simply tells Noah that no more will violence be used upon humans. Out of kindness, protection, or hunger? It's hard to tell. Even Genesis talks of more than one god and a threat should humans become too knowledgeable.

Perhaps you have often wondered why in the Garden of Eden, when God is about to banish Adam and Eve scriptures records it in this way: Gen 3:22 "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." (NIV)

One of **us**? Were there other gods, less powerful serving the main god? Angels and archangels? Some who would fall and conspire against the powerful ruling gods?

To say the least, it's a cosmologically murky time. Most historians and scientists date the time of the great flood between 2500 – 2300 B.C.E. Some actually have figured out a particular day and year: November 16, 2343 BCE. These creation and flood epics that are referred to here, are all written within a few hundred years of those dates. What is certain is that there was a cataclysmic event of some kind. The Bible refers the events in Greek translation as *kataklusmos* from the Hebrew *mabbol* – meaning catastrophe. Something **did** happen.

Theories abound about whether it was a shift in the tectonic plates, a *tsunami*, or other massive natural disaster from the human viewpoint are many. Maybe, someday, we will know.

For now, though, what does seem true is that the flood does not wipe out life on the planet. Other civilizations were thriving during the times recorded for the floods, and no break in their continuity is recorded anywhere. For example, between the years of the flood stories, from 2400 – 2300 BCE Egypt was being ruled by 6th Dynasty pharaohs Unis and Pepi I. In Asia Minor, during the same years, Sargon I united Mesopotamia and established the Akkadian Empire. Lastly, during this time, China was in the Yao Dynasty and Empire Shun was ruling.

So... just how big of a flood? We really don't know.

We do know that the Priestly writers were at work in this account.¹ While there are J influences, as well, the P-version writers would have been interested in maintaining order and behavior of the tribes, and what better way than to frighten them into good behavior with a story and the recurring threat of a flood?

¹ Most scholars consider that the Pentateuch - the five books of Moses - is actually an edited combination of several sources: E (Elohim), J (Jehova/Yahweh), P (Priestly), and D (Deuteronomy). The E and J sources were named because of the name for God that each used. The P source is so named because it deals with priestly duties, numbers, statistics, genealogies, etc. The D source is considered the last source which wrote Deuteronomy as well as the final editing of the Pentateuch.

Catastrophic tragic and near tragic events always have a way of focusing people. In times where superstition and magic were often the answer for unrecognized or misunderstood natural phenomena, understanding survival from the flood as a sign of God's grace and willingness to forgive humanity would easily have humbled and cowered many into, well, behaving. It works. It is an effective way of keeping peoples' attention doped with fear, enough fear to keep them in line following the rules.

For these ancient civilizations, powerful and sometimes vindictive gods were a real threat. Those who did have a better understanding of science used that knowledge to control and manipulate the masses. Absolutely, there was faith – but there was a lot of fear driving things, as well.

Sooner or later, though, such methods of controlling populations often end up joining with other dominant forces, creating strange partners – seeking power at any cost.

It was this type of collusion that led to the execution of Jesus.

In a book by Mark Lewis Taylor called The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America he writes about this partnership of between religion and politics.

In the introduction, Taylor his concept of the god (small g) of political domination. Throughout his work, he attempts to bring meaning to the idea of God (Jesus) having been executed, and what it is God's execution means for us as Christians. His claim is that one of the first things we need to do is to free ourselves from the lesser gods (small g) of political domination and the desire for religious respectability, at the cost of our "edge."

He states:

The value of the executed God is to let go of the god of political domination. This means not the death of all respect for political organizations that shape social life and define basic rights and duties of citizenry. The god, small "g," of political domination is the one that lives in imperial modes of control like the state-sanctioned apparatus that came to issue a death warrant on Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus died the victim of executioners with imperial power. There is an inescapable opposition between the life and death of Jesus and imperial power. To embrace and love the executed God is to be in resistance to empire. [and] To venture down a road without having a place in systems of imperial control. It is to be on the suffering side of empire, but in spite of that it is also to work resistance and even victory amid imperial pretension and practice.

Taylor suggests in what follows that, in many ways, the state-ordered peace of the United States that he sees is as much a *Pax Romana*, as the ordered Roman Peace that was in place during the time of Jesus.

As proof, Taylor points to the increasing subjugation of our citizenry to a transnational empire, as part of the U.S. Superpower position, with more of our citizenry (at last count more than 2 million) under the control of state sanctioned prisons and supermax prisons; living in the shadow of their death on death rows, and everyone being subject to an increasing presence and policies of paramilitary policing.

This is far from the Noahide laws and the primary directive to Noah - by God - to take no life – for all life is sacred. Where, indeed has the outrage gone, if not subsumed into the respectability garnered by religion groups working more closely with state, inadvertently moderating mission and ministry to fit into the hegemony of modern politics?

Do you think that Christians and followers of Jesus' teachings by other names have lost track of the fact that God on the cross was executed by such alliances? Jesus' state-sanctioned execution was the work of not only the politically powerful but also of the religiously powerful. It was a partnership that took his life.

So why don't we hear more of this in our places of worship and leaders? One of the reasons we see few Christians speaking of the executed God, Taylor states, is that they would then be situated on the underside of today's imperial practice. Many cannot even see, or refuse to see, that the underside of imperial power exists. Instead, they have made a god of political domination, and they adjust their spiritual life to the landscape shaped by the government.

In something of a warning, Taylor states that to raise questions about the United States' rights to be the super-power with a quasi-religious aura, to wield its fist of military might, to enact policies that concentrate wealth in an ever smaller elite, or to buildup lockdown America – all this is rarely taken up by [any] Christian because it requires the detachment from comfortable, respectable, stable – and a real chance of becoming ridiculed and ostracized. To follow the executed God today is to let die the god of religious respectability.

Simply, we cannot serve the both executed God and the god of religious respectability.

Taylor's arguments do strike a chord, especially when I have wondered about why we have such trouble in effecting change, inclusive, welcoming, Christian change in this country without terrible risk. Those willing to take the risks are a small group, who benefit from broader spiritual and financial support, but still sometimes we ask people to put it all on the line for what we believe in. Janie Spahr is someone who knows about putting it all on the line.

This week, Janie was acquitted by the PJC of the Redwoods Presbytery for charges brought against her that she had violated her ordination vows and the Book of Order by performing marriages for same-sex couples. Rather than accept a verdict that dropped the charges on a technicality a few months back, Janie insisted on going forward, to speak the truth of her conscience and live out the Good News as her ordination vows called her to do. This can all still end up in an appeal, however, it is a nonetheless stunning ruling, that says, "Yes! The Executed God is with us!" Here it is:

The Permanent Judicial Commission of the Redwoods Presbytery, having conducted a trial in the above proceeding, and having deliberated and voted in accord with Section D-11.0403 of the Book of Order, reports its decision as follows:

The issue before this commission is: How does the constitution - specifically the Book of Order (Sec. G-6.0108 and Sec. W-4.9001), the Authoritative Interpretation of 1991/1993 (hereafter AI), and the Benton Case - apply to the charges against the Rev. Dr. Jane Adams Spahr, (hereafter Spahr)?

FINDINGS

1. Section W-4.9001 is a definition, not a directive. We note that its application to the performance of marriage ceremonies for couples of the same sex has been disputed, at the highest levels of polity, for 15 years - i.e. at least since the request for an interpretation made in 1991 to the Advisory Committee on the Constitution. The issue remains unsettled because the authors of the AI, having available a lexicon in the preface to the Book of Order, chose to say that such marriages "would not be proper" rather than use mandatory language. The AI establishes the performance of same sex marriages as a matter of propriety. We find that neither the AI or the Benton Case prohibit the performance of such marriages by ministers of the Word and

Sacrament. Therefore we find that no offense has been committed within the meaning of Sec. D-2.0203(b).

2. Section G-6.0108 describes the scope of freedom of conscience within boundaries. The subject of same sex marriage has not been shown to be outside of, or contrary to, the essentials of the Reformed faith as understood by Presbytery of the Redwoods. Conscience is subordinate to constitutional mandates and to essentials of the Reformed faith, but conscience takes precedence over propriety. We find that Spahr was acting within her right of conscience in performing marriage ceremonies for same sex couples. We also find that the accused acted within the normative standards of Redwoods Presbytery, faithfully reporting to it her activities at reasonable intervals.

It is a story, an example of faith, risk, courage, and a belief in the abundance of God in all kinds of ways. A story about the courage of those who understand the demons Jesus went into the desert to battle following his baptism. I don't think these were the demons of the Old Testament, but the ideological ones which were ready to strangle the risk and beauty of God's call into the milquetoast of religious respectability; read: dominance. Standing on the underside, speaking truth to power – is not for the faint-hearted, which is why we have our community and faith to bolster us and need to support each other in all ways we go about carrying the Good News, rainbow and all.

And for others, we need to pray and continue to work with those who resist the Executed God's call, for whatever reason.

Today's *The Layman Online*² has a letter from someone written on March 3, before the outcome of Janie's trial, later that same day.

Listen and see if you hear someone who seeks respectability at the price of the executed God:

Title: *Saddened at the low state to which Presbyterianism has declined in so many areas*
March 3, 2006

Having read the article about Jane Spahr recently, I followed the link to Downtown UPC's [United Presbyterian Church's] Web site. As I perused that site, I happened upon a link to their most recent newsletter. On that Web site and in that newsletter, I read a lot about all of the very progressive, liberal and liberationist activities that they are pursuing in their attempt to live out their very liberal view of what Christianity is all about.

Having read all of that I was saddened at the low state to which Presbyterianism has declined in so many areas. I was also frankly saddened to think that so many people are so deluded into thinking that this is what Christianity is all about.

But then I noticed two things. First, their newsletter freely admits that they are yearly losing members. Their history section notes that their church is the fruit of three UPC churches that united in 1974 because of membership losses. Then their newsletter notes that their current attendance is only around 116, with a membership that is declining to around 300.

But (and this is the second thing) though their attendance is so low (for a congregation that once made up three vibrant congregations), their annual budget is almost **a million dollars** – \$978,671! This isn't because their few attenders contribute heavily. Rather, it is because they spend \$797,514 annually out of their investments and endowments. I was incredulous.

² (March 5, 2006) www.layman.org

But the saddest thing about this budget is the thought that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of faithful Christians gave money to the three churches that united to form DUPC in the hopes that that money would be spent to build the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now all of that money that could be used to send who knows how many missionaries overseas or into our own communities to plant new evangelical churches and to shine the light of Christ into the world is poured down a black hole of promoting homosexuality, of espousing a religion that is at best a modern-day version of Samaritanism, and of endorsing all manner of ungodly liberal nonsense. (They even mention Sophia as being discussed at their women's function.)

I just had to share this with you all. May the Lord deliver the PCUSA from this kind of apostasy?

This is a mild response, but you get the idea. Do I believe these are bad or unfaithful people? Absolutely not. In fact, I want to get to know them better and allow them to know me, as we both work our way toward the callings we hear in our hearts. Unlike the ancient god Enhil, I don't need to silence their voices to gain peace, nor do they need to silence ours. We need to talk and to listen and to pray together and for one another.

Perhaps like the original imagery of the rainbow, with God putting down the bow and arrows, we can do the same and get on with the work of evangelization instead of preservation.

In one of the very few references to the flood in the New Testament, Peter stated:

1 Peter 3:18-22: ¹⁸For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. ²¹And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

However it may have happened in the past, however even the synoptic writers continued to be influenced by the reality or myths of the past that the P and J writers so created, it is clear that we are now united in the baptism of the waters. These waters unite us and we cannot separate water from itself anymore than we can separate the love of God for and from one another.

Over the next few weeks with Jesus, we set our faces toward Jerusalem. May this journey be about the Good News, first, and then about the courage, trust, and risk of following the Executed, Risen, and Ever-present God. As this congregation knows, we are in a place of abundance from which to do all our work. We believe it, for it is so.