Every now and again it’s fun to frolic with an old story. Just so it is today, as I turn our thoughts around one of the best-known epic tales of all time.

Let me introduce it like this. On the day our son was born, my sister gave him a brightly colored music box depicting the story of Noah’s Ark in miniature. An old and bearded chap was on the deck of a rather unusual boat standing next to a barn-like-shelter and a menagerie of tiny animals. A rainbow was painted on the side, as if to tell the end of the story in advance. The melody within it played “Talk to the Animals,” and for a good many infant nights, Tim rode off to sleep with that lullaby.

Strange (don’t you think!) that the thought of surviving a devastating flood, caused by God no less, would be used to lull an innocent child to sleep! Odd that so unsettling a tale as God’s regret and despair would ever become the soft lullaby of a music box! And surely peculiar that Noah’s Ark has shown up on sheets and pillows, pajamas and wallpaper and coloring books - all in the light of offering comfort!

But then, come to think of it, maybe it’s not so strange after all. In fact, maybe it’s the only way that we who are adults can hold the story at a safe enough distance so as not to fall off the edges with all sorts of troubling questions - and this single story holds a boatload of wondering - pun absolutely intended!

Karl Barth was once asked how he interpreted difficult Biblical stories like this one. He answered with tempered wisdom: “I take the Bible far too seriously to take it literally.” Which was his way of saying that some passages are not offered as history or factual accounts as much as they are as conveyors of sacred truth. This is one of them, and the genre here is parable or symbolic story.

And as far as the historicity of the story, you might be interested to know that there are two strands of tradition that are harmonized together to create Noah’s Ark as we find in Genesis, and that flood stories just like them have been found in every part of the ancient world. In fact, the composite we have in Genesis is most likely adapted from an early Babylonian story about a flood in the Euphrates Valley.

Be that as it may, let’s get to the story. As you well know, it opens with a world gone awry. A few generations have passed since creation, and the brokenness of people and the fumbles and fractures of humankind are becoming all to clear. A murder has taken place, and family discord has followed and disobedience of sorted variety has emerged.

At the most basic level, something called sin has set loose. Most of us have a hard time with that word and don’t quite know how to hold up sin as a measure in our own lives, let alone in Noah’s. But something Frederick Buechner once wrote helps me to set it clear.
He said that sin is whatever we do or fail to do that creates distance between God and us. It what pushes us away or widens the gap. He also said that, if human sin, the lion share are not the big ones, but the constant erosion of smaller shadows with which we live daily.

I know that I have shared this before because I love it! It is a prayer that has made the rounds: Dear God, so far this morning, I’ve done all right. I haven’t gossiped, haven’t lost my temper, and haven’t been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish or over-indulgent. I’m really glad about that. But in a few minutes I’m going to get out of bed to start the day. I then that I will need lot more help.

So, Noah’s epic adventure starts with that shadow, and distance from God, and alienation from the benevolence in which life is given.

But the story moves on then to something more shadowed yet. It brings us face-straight to the despair of God. There are actually a number of words scripture uses: despair, anger, regret, sorrowful, broken-hearted. But the one I am taken by most says that God was grieved to the heart.

That a hinge on which the whole story takes a new turning for me. You see, I have always struggled with the notion that God caused the flood in anger and regret – even in the language of metaphor. It has been the burden in the story for me. But this thought of God grieving is much different.

Perhaps because I have come to experience the depths of both grief and gladness in the mix of life; and have come to know that the two are intimately related; that it is not so binary as one way or another. As such an understanding grows wider and sinks deeper, I able to let myself off the hook some, and I guess I also let God off the hook some, too. And, as this larger mind has come to me, and I have come to trust that God could be regretful and sad and yet still love; be despairing and sorrowful and yet still care, I have come to the conviction that God loves this world so persistently as to grieve at times and to cry now and again for the choices that we make and the predicaments that we find. And those tears could surely be enough to cover the face of the earth.

So the tears of God and the fumbles of people. If I stopped the telling now, we would miss the ride home! But, if we listen carefully enough, it becomes clear that all did not get swallowed up in those waters. Everything did not end. There was a bluing sky, and receding waters, and a seeking dove, and the sprig of an olive branch, and God’s sign of a rainbow over it all.

Some years ago, Bill Moyers created a wonderful series on the stories in Genesis in which he asked a handful of people to consider a single newspaper headline. Imagine, he said, that you are reporting on the story of Noah and the great flood and you only had one headline to offer. What would it be? One person said, God Destroys the World! Another said, One Family Survives with Many Animals. A third person, a man well
acquainted with suffering and deeply grounded in biblical faith responded, “God Gives Life a Second Chance.”

And that’s just it! Some scholars call this “remnant theology.” It’s the chance to start over! I am quickened by such a thought! I am surprised and humbled, too, by faith that’s able to see in the rainbow an in-breaking, overarching covenant with God . . . without getting stuck on the ‘whys’ and ‘wherefores’ of it all!

Elie Weisel, renowned Jewish voice and survivor of a different holocaust, once wrote this of starting over. “April 11, 1945. Buchenwald. Hungry, emaciated, sick and weakened by fear, we were free. We did not grab to food offered by American liberators. Instead, we gathered in circles to pray. Our first act as free human beings was to say the Kadish, glorifying and thanking God’s name.”

**We no longer wind up that music box for Tim.** But I’m so glad for the sprig of hope and for a God who keeps holding the whole world. I’m glad for a rainbow sign and a covenant promised. And I’m ever grateful that once upon a time there was a man who hand picked the gopher wood, and measured out a cubit and built an ark!

In the name of the One whose love is in the story, and beneath the waters, and among the menagerie, and above the clouds, and over the rainbow! Amen!

© 2014 Charles Geordie Campbell.

---