

Ahh, the story of Noah.

The story we have domesticated and used to teach our children about different kinds of animals.

But the story is actually about a violent, destructive, wrathful and vengeful God.

That's how I have always conceived of this story, until now.

I have recently come to understand the story in a new way, not about an angry and impulsive God, but about a grieving God who is forced to make a decision that I think God doesn't even like.

God is pained by the brokenness of creation, so God sends the flood not as an act of revenge, but out of grief over the brokenness of the relationship between humans and God.

Human betrayal of God's intentions had effects beyond human beings; our human sin issued in the corruption of all the earth, and therefore, in its destruction.

So because of the sinfulness of humans, which brought down all of the Earth with it, now all of creation is given a new beginning, a new opportunity to live in the harmony that God intended.

Now, God could have wiped out everything on the face of the earth and started over with new species, something to replace humans.

But God doesn't do that.

This story is more of a continuation than a completely new beginning, because God creates something anew with a remnant of the beings created at the start.

What this says to me is that humans are not completely depraved.

We're not beyond hope or help.

God knows we are capable of being kind and loving and good and helpful.

God knows we can be cultivators and caretakers of the earth, not destroyers of it.

Which is why God doesn't give up on us.

Now, the traditional conception of God is a being that is unmoved.

God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, stoic, and steadfast.

Aristotle describes God as the 'unmoved mover,' the "immortal, unchanging being ultimately responsible for all wholeness and orderliness in the sensible world." (Aristotle, Book 8 of Physics and Book 12 of Metaphysics)

But in Genesis, God regrets making humankind and God grieves.

God remembers and God decides.

God is emotive. God changes.

God chooses not to destroy the earth again.

Maybe we aren't comfortable with this idea of a God who regrets and has a change of mind, because then we might think that this God can make mistakes.

It's disconcerting to worship a God who might do things differently if God had to do it all over again.

But those feelings are on us.

And because worshipping an emotive God might make us uncomfortable, we choose to conceive of God as the unmoved mover.

When it feels like everything else is falling apart around us, it's reassuring to know that at least God knows what's going on.

God sees the larger picture.

God is able to make sense of the madness even if we can't.

But in this story, at least, God changes God's mind and we have to reckon with that.

In fact, God seems forgetful too.

God chooses to make a covenant with humans to never again destroy the earth, and God sets a bow in the clouds as a reminder.

But it's not meant to be a reminder to us humans about God's promise, it's meant to be a reminder to God.

God says, *“When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature.”* (Genesis 9: 14-15)

God will remember why the bow is there.

Maybe God has a tendency to forget.

Or maybe God acts impulsively when God is angry and so God needs a visual so as to be reminded not to be destructive in a moment of anger.

The bow, which we see as a beautiful rainbow, a symbol of love, inclusion and reconciliation, is formerly a symbol of violence.

The bow is a bow of battle.

It's the bow of a bow and arrow.

Ancient deities were often depicted with a bow and arrow, but when they hung up their bow, it meant they had retired from battle.

The Canaanite God Baal hangs his war bow in the clouds after the earth is created.

The bow in Genesis is the sign of God's promise that whatever else God does to us, destruction is off the table.

This is God's promise, or God's covenant to us.

But the covenant in this story is unique.

Usually a covenant is between two parties and they each agree to something.

In the ancient Near East, covenants were actually legal documents.

They cemented a relationship of mutual obligation, usually between a greater and a lesser power.

For example, a conquering kingdom might covenant not to destroy a losing kingdom, as long as the losers promised to fight against the conqueror's enemies and to support the conqueror with troops and supplies.

The obligations are indeed reciprocal, but the power dynamics are not often equal.

In today's story, the power dynamics are certainly unequal, I mean, we are talking about an agreement between God and humans.

But. It's not reciprocal.

It's completely one-sided.

Yhwh offers the covenant without strings, without conditions.

You and I and the plants and the animals, we have to do nothing to receive it.

It's just God's promise to us.

And here are the parameters: First of all, no more floods, no more destruction.

Second of all, the symbol of God's promise will be God's bow, hung in the clouds.

Third of all, the symbol is there to remind God of God's commitment and promise to us.

We can look at it, because rainbows are beautiful, but it's like a string tied around God's finger, reminding God not to resort to destruction.

It's all one-sided.

God doesn't ask us to do anything.

It's not conditional or reciprocal. It just is. However.

When someone promises something to us, it's generally considered the respectable thing to do to reciprocate with some sort of promise, either the same or similar.

It's like when someone says I love you, the socially acceptable thing to do is to return the sentiment by saying, I love you too.

So God says I will never destroy the earth ever again, I make this promise to the humans and animals, everyone who came out of the ark.

Now presumably God makes this promise because God values us.

You don't promise not to destroy something that you don't care about.

God cares about the humans and the animals and wants us to thrive.

So I think we should meet God's covenant with a promise of our own, maybe that we also won't destroy each other or the earth.

If living beings are valuable enough for God to want to save and protect, surely we should want to save and protect ourselves.

We should value life the way God does.

All life.

You'll notice that God doesn't say God is promising to protect only the Jews or only the Israelites.

God is vowing never to destroy any people, ever again.

There is no fine print with God reserving the right to destroy certain people or animals.

God doesn't pick and choose.

All life is valuable.

So guess what?

We aren't allowed to pick and choose either.

We too are called to respect and value and care for and work to protect all life.

In the wake of the most recent mass shooting in Parkland, Florida, I can't help but be reminded that we are doing really, really terrible job at caring for each other.

Three of the 10 deadliest mass shootings in modern United States history have happened in the last five months.

We are not caring for each other.

We are not caring for those who are bullied.

We are not caring for young boys.

We are not teaching them how to be empathetic and compassionate men.

We are letting too many of our troubled boys fall between the cracks.

And we are not caring for anyone by allowing it to be so easy to get an AR-15, which is easier to get in Florida than a handgun.

The United States, which is supposed to be the beacon of hope and freedom, is now seen as a dangerous place to visit.

Australia is warning its citizens who want to travel here.

Their government website says, *"The United States has more violent crime than Australia, although it rarely involves tourists."*

Shootings, including mass shootings can occur in public places. Be alert about the possibility of gun crime in all parts of the United States. No matter where you intend to travel, do some research on which local areas or suburbs may be less safe– check travel guides and seek local advice such as from your hotel reception or tour guide. For those living in the United States, familiarize yourself with emergency evacuation and 'active shooter' drills. Be aware that it can be legal in many states for US citizens to openly carry firearms in public.”

This is our reputation in the wider world.

We are not caring for each other.

We are letting our nation and the rest of the world down.

We must do better.

God hung up the weapon of war and promised never to be destructive again.

What would it look like if we made a covenant with God and with each other, and hung up our weapons and said no more?

Amen.