

“NOAH AND THE ARK”

Genesis 6:5-7:5, 7:17-8:12, 8:15-19

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I have come to believe that bittersweet is the very embodiment of wickedness. It is sin itself in the form of a plant. For those of you who don't know, bittersweet is a vine that gets little orange berries in the fall. A lot of people will cut a sprig or two of the berries to use in a centerpiece. It's pretty. But the vine is a perfect metaphor for sin.

At first, you're quite pleased with it. It works its way up the arbor, across the top... fills in nicely, very full, very green through the summer. This is the innocent stage, before you have any idea what's about to happen. Every year its gets thicker, fuller... heavier. And then you realize one day that it could pull the whole arbor right over.

So you trim it... seriously trim it. And after you've worked all afternoon, you take a look and you think. It's nice. I can manage this. So... sin starts out innocently enough. It's not that bad. And then you realize it's gotten out of hand, but you think you can handle it.

But it's not too long before you realize how wrong you were. Because when you prune something, it always finds a way to grow. There are lots of things when you cut them back too far, they just die. But not bittersweet. It spreads. The more you manage the growth, the further it spreads. Like sin, you can make it look nice on the surface, clean it up a bit. It's not so bad. But underneath the ground, it's wreaking havoc on the garden. When we returned from vacation, there were at least a dozen new sprouts of bittersweet growing up in the lawn. It's the roots that are the problem, that embody wickedness. Before you know it they're no longer playing nicely on the arbor. They've spread and they're wrapped around your lilac bushes, choking the life from them. They've infested the beautiful bed of brown-eyed susan's. They've taken over the pole you'd intended for the sweet pea (another plant with the same issues).

So why am I telling you all this. Well, it's given me a new appreciation for the story of Noah. Several years ago, we were really pleased with what we'd been able to do with these particular flower beds, but last week, Janet and I are looking at them and realizing that they're a mess. And one of the reasons they're a mess is "bittersweet." So at the beginning of our story, God is looking out over the garden of the world which God had created and realizes that it has become overgrown with bittersweet. It's ugly and out of control.

It seems like there's nothing to do but rent a backhoe and dig everything up. Make sure you go deep enough to get all those nasty roots, maybe even discard the dirt and truck in all new dirt and start all over and make sure you don't plant any bittersweet. Destroy it all and start all over. Maybe a flood.

I think we can sympathize with God a great deal at the beginning of this story, because the world is not so trivial as a garden. Israel-Palestine, Syria, Afghanistan, Iran. Terrorism, school shootings, bullying. Racism, sexism, homophobia. Degradation of water, air and soil. Habitat destruction and climate change denial. Corporate and individual greed. Poverty and economic exploitation. We try to address these things and sometimes we're able to put a good face on it... but it's all about the roots. And they poison not just our world, but sometimes make their way into our personal space. Broken relationships, domestic violence, illness and disease, job loss. There's a lot of bittersweet out there. Wouldn't you just like to start all over?

I'm not so quick these days to fault God for the flood. I get it. But I don't want to forget the insights that come from a child's viewpoint. When my children were very young we had this bath toy: Noah's ark (which I think we still have). There was Noah and Mrs. Noah because we didn't know what to call her, and there were cutout animals that could be used as cookie cutters. At that age there's just this fascination with the story and it's all about Noah and the animals living together on the ark.

As adults, we get caught up in the flood and the devastation, and the story begins to trouble us... the idea that God would want to destroy the world. But young children know that the story is really all about the things that were saved. They know that even while God is looking out over the wickedness of the earth, God sees something worth saving. God sees a family and God sees these marvelous creatures and determines to find a way to save them.

You can't be thinking about the bittersweet all the time. I was driving home one night last week and noticed this bright light in the sky. Maybe it was Mars or a satellite. I was really taken by it and was reminded about what a marvelous universe we live and what great mysteries there are out there to discover. I can have my attention captured by an unusual bird, a scenic landscape, an act of kindness, a curious thought. For all the trouble I see in the world, there are so many things worth saving. The child in us knows that God sees this too. There's hope in that.

But children grow up and it isn't very long before that precocious child throws out the question that every Sunday School teacher dreaded. "So why did God have to kill all those people?" or "What about all the other animals?" And there's always the stumper follow-up question, "Isn't killing wrong?"

It's quite shocking that God treats human beings and animals like some noxious weed that's to be pulled up and thrown on the burn pile. At first the child is just interested in watching the teacher squirm, but before too many years, the question is genuine. "Why did God do that?"

I don't recall that any of my Sunday School teachers ever answered that question. I think most of us would attempt some smooth transition like: "Why don't we talk about that rainbow now?"

Well, the Bible does give us an answer, and it's very interesting answer. We assume that God was angry with the world, because we associate destruction mostly with anger. But that's not what we're told. Not once are we told that God was angry. But twice we are told that God was sorry.

Again, we assume that when we talk about God and sin, anger is the primary motivation. But the truth is that sin grieves God. Seven times in chapter one God declares that the creation is good. We get at the end of creation this sense that God is so content with the world. That lasts until the man and woman violate trust and instead walking around garden with God, suddenly they want to hide from God. But okay, it's not the end of the world. God makes some adjustments and equips them to survive in the still good world. And then Cain kills his brother, but even this is not the end of the world. God sees to Cain's protection despite the grievous offense. As an aside, defenders of capital punishment never cite this story.

And then we come to the days of Noah and God is not angry at anyone, only sorry about the state creation has come to. And God grieves, and in that grief believes that most of it cannot be saved. The potter who has worked so hard on a particular piece that loses its shape in the kiln. The artist who can't manage to get the vision in his head to come out that way on the canvas. The senator who has crafted the perfect piece of legislation to bring relief to flood victims only to have it fail by one vote. Being second choice for the tenth straight job application. You know the kind of heartache I'm talking about. You have to live a very charmed life not to know it. Heartache, not anger. Grief moves God to destroy the world. It's not really an answer, but it makes more sense to me than God's anger.

Grief doesn't make it okay, but I think we get it. We can grieve with God over the state of the world. Hopefully we do. If we're surprised by this grief, we must be astounded the second time God feels sorrow in the story. It's in this moment that the story's full impact comes through. God was sorry about making the world at the beginning, but at the end, God is sorry for having destroyed it.

This just makes me want to weep. It's in this second instance that we know that God's grief is not about ego, but about love. Maybe we struggle with the destructive force of the flood, but when it's done God feels every bit of the loss. Like the potter who breaks the pot only to discover in reassembling the pieces that the kiln has improved its appearance, or the artist who slashed the canvas only to realize that work is better than the vision in her head.

Twice in one story God confesses to an error: first in making the world and second in destroying it. Whatever your notions of perfection might be, you should leave them at the door when you read this story. And if you have some notion that God never changes, think again. Intuitively we know that "love changes everything and everyone." So if God is love, there's going to be a whole lot of changing going on. That's how it is in relationships, adapting to the changes, working through the feelings.

So if you've been going "ho-hum" about this story, you haven't really read it. It is not a little thing for God to grieve. And to show that, God marks it with one of the universally agreed marvels of the world: the rainbow, a symbol of great joy, happiness and hope. With this beautiful image, God declares "I will never again destroy what I have made... no matter how much it grieves me. It is all worth saving, all worth redeeming.

There is so much to grieve in and about our world, but the greater grief would be to destroy it, to lose the good with the bad, to lose all hope in the face of despair. Never again! Never again! Because God already knows the grief of despair and destruction and will never go back there. Always something to save! Always something to hope for. This may be one reason why the Bible is such a long book. The roots of wickedness run deep, but love saves, love hopes. There is a rainbow, even for the bittersweet run amok in the garden. Amen.