

“The Reign of Christ in a Changing Climate”

Reign of Christ C (November 24, 2019)

Scriptures: Genesis 9:8-10, 13, 16-17; Colossians 1:15-20; Luke 9:10-17

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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

Today’s Old Testament reading concludes the great flood story about Noah and his family. Given that the news has been so depressing the past couple of weeks, I thought it might be nice to begin today with some Noah humor. You know the Noah jokes - the ones like the one that asks, “Need flood insurance?” “I Noah guy.” Or the one that asks, “Who was the greatest investor in the Bible? It was Noah. He was floating his stock while everyone else was in liquidation.” According to the story in Genesis, Noah and his family and all those animals drifted around a flooded earth for 150 days after the rains fell and the waves foamed. They had natural light to guide them by day. At night they had flood lights. There are different versions of the flood story in the Book of Genesis. In one version, Noah takes two of every kind of animal. In the other he also takes seven pairs of clean animals in order to offer sacrifices to God. There were probably at least two versions of this story in circulation in ancient Israel - and an editor of Genesis most likely wove them together to produce the text as we read it in our Bible. This helps to explain why Noah and his family enter the ark twice in Genesis ch. 7. But both versions of the story agree that he welcomed a multitude of animals onto the ark. Seminary jokesters have speculated about whether Noah also welcomed termites, woodpeckers, and beavers onto his *wooden* ark. One jokester suggested that the beavers had to go through extra security before they were allowed onboard. Another depicted a weary Noah sitting at an Ark Complaints Department booth where an exasperated anteater wondered why only two ants were on the ark. And still another depicted two unicorns standing ashore watching the ark drift out to sea with the caption, “Oh, know, was that today?” I’m reminded of the film *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure* where high school students Bill and Ted, diligently studying for a history exam, were puzzling over who Joan of Arc was. They concluded that she must have been Noah’s wife. Noah in the Genesis flood story was told by God that a flood was coming, that he should build an ark to protect his family and the animals, and that the flood would allow God to begin creating a new world once the waters subsided. One internet jokester said the whole thing must have sounded “delugional” to Noah.

The Genesis flood story was not the only flood story in circulation in the ancient world. In fact, some scholars have suggested that the Genesis story combined traditions from Babylon, Persia, and Greece - three empires that ruled the ancient Israelites in quick succession from the 6th century BCE to the 2nd century BCE. One flood story from ancient Babylon is very similar to the Genesis account. It’s a story about a hero named Atrahasis.¹ His name means “extra wise” in the Akkadian language. Atrahasis, according to this Babylonian legend, lived at a time of overpopulation. Human beings, says the story, were originally created immortal by Babylonian gods. As humans had more children, the earth became inundated with people. The multitude of people were making too much noise and consuming too many resources, so the gods, according to the legend, decided to thin out the population by sending a series of

¹ Stephanie Dalley, ed. and trans., *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1989]), 1-38.

plagues and droughts, and ultimately a worldwide flood. In Genesis, the flood comes because people had filled the earth with violence. Atrahasis, like Noah, was saved. Noah was saved in Genesis because he was righteous. Atrahasis was saved because he was extra wise. Both of them rode out the flood with their families and animals in an ark. The Atrahasis epic was written in the 1700s BCE, and almost certainly influenced the writing and editing of the Genesis account. “The [Atrahasis] story of the Flood,” writes Oxford scholar Stephanie Dalley, “was one of the most popular tales of ancient times, and is found in several ancient languages, reworked to suit different areas and cultures² Dalley goes on to speculate about why it is that so many ancient cultures told flood stories. Maybe, she suggests, “the idea of a universal flood ... [helped to] explain observations in different places of marine fossils in rocks high above sea level ... [a]t a time when there was no conception of how geological change took place, nor of how vast was the time-scale of evolution”³

What’s interesting to me in this entire discussion about ancient flood stories is how literature and climate are connected. (Today’s AfterWord speaker, Sandra Steingraber talks of the connection between “biology and poetry.”⁴) The stories we tell as human beings are shaped by the climate we live in. Consider two examples. The first comes from Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *Flight Behavior*,⁵ which begins with a gripping and fine-grained story about the protagonist, Dellarobia Turnbow, hiking up the side of a mountain without her eyeglasses. As she approached the summit, something caught her eye: “a fleck of orange wobbling above the trees.” Next she saw, without her glasses, what looked like a “hornet’s nest ... or a swarm of bees” As she continued her hike, she saw what looked like “giant bunches of [orange] grapes from every tree.” She thought it was some kind of fungus, but soon she noticed that the entire forest was “thickly loaded” with these orange bundles that were moving. It looked like the entire forest was on fire. “Every bough [on every tree] glowed with an orange blaze.” The Exodus story about Moses and the burning bush came to her mind. These strange sights were accompanied by a strange sound: “a faint patter like rain on leaves.” It’s only later on, when Dellarobia returns to the mountain with her eyeglasses this time, that readers of Barbara Kingsolver’s novel discover that these flecks of orange, these bunches of orange grapes on every tree, are millions of monarch butterflies. Their flight behavior disrupted by climate change.

The second example of popular culture telling stories shaped by climate is the 1995 film *Waterworld*, starring Kevin Costner. It’s a post-apocalyptic flood story set in the year 2500 CE. The Earth is covered in water after the polar ice caps have melted. The surviving humans live on makeshift islands of ships called “atolls.” Clean water and dry dirt are the most precious commodities in their trade economy. And one person, The Mariner (Kevin Costner’s character), has evolved gills and webbed feet to help him survive. The goal of everyone in the film, like Noah and his ark in Genesis, is to find dry land, which they eventually do on the summit of Mount Everest.

Noah’s flood, Atrahasis’ flood, Kingsolver’s novel about monarch butterflies, the Hollywood film *Waterworld*, each tells a story that reminds us of just how fragile our climate is. Floods and changing flight patterns, melting glaciers and shortages of drinking water and food - these are happening now and predicted to worsen in coming decades. In his book *The*

² Dalley, ed. and trans., *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 1.

³ Dalley, ed. and trans., *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 7.

⁴ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/marcellus-shale_b_1428030

⁵ Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior: A Novel* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), chs. 1-2.

Uninhabitable Earth,⁶ David Wallace-Wells, notes that “seventy-one percent of the planet is covered in water. [But] barely 2 percent of that water is fresh, and only 1 percent of that water ... is accessible, with the rest trapped mostly in glaciers. ... [But, he continues, by] as soon as 2030, global water demand is expected to outstrip supply by 40 percent ... , [because] half of the world’s population depends on seasonal melt from high-elevation snow and ice.” Even if we cap global climate temperature rise at 3 degrees Celsius in the next 80 years, he says, “the glaciers of the Himalayas will lose 40 percent of their ice,” and glaciers around the world, sources of fresh water, will disappear. As of Friday, NASA’s global climate change website says we’re just under 2 degrees Celsius of warming since the industrial revolution.⁷ A 2017 article in *The New York Times* used satellite imagery and pictures to track melting glaciers in Glacier National Park from 1966 to 2015. The 39 named glaciers in the park have shrunk by an average of 50 percent in those 50 years.⁸ As populations swell “over the next three decades,” writes Wallace-Wells, “water demand from the global food system is expected to increase by about 50 percent ... ,”⁹ meaning that more and more cities may be like Cape Town was in April of 2018. In that month Cape Town faced its first “Day Zero,” when the water taps would run dry (but, through amazing conservation efforts and merciful rain that curbed the drought, Day Zero ended up being delayed.) “The United Nations estimates that the planet will need nearly twice as much food in 2050 as it does today,” straining what’s called the “carrying capacity” of the environment, that is, “how much population can a given environment ultimately support before [it] collaps[es]”¹⁰ In 1878, the American geologist, John Wesley Powell, drew a line in the dirt called the 100th meridian.¹¹ The line marked the boundary in the U.S. between the humid east and the beginning of the great plains. “In 1890, Powell wrote, ‘Passing from east to west across this belt a wonderful transformation is observed. On the east a luxuriant growth of grass is seen, and the gaudy flowers ... make the prairie landscape beautiful. Passing westward, species after species of luxuriant grass and brilliant flowering plants disappear; the ground gradually becomes naked, with ... grasses here and there; now and then a thorny cactus is seen’” Since 1980 that boundary - the 100th meridian - has moved eastward to the 98th parallel, “drying up hundreds of thousands of square miles of farmland in the process.”¹² And, as the climate continues to change, every decade the wheat belt around the world “moves poleward by about 160 miles,” straining soil in new territory that takes centuries to become fertile to produce our food. Water and food. Casualties of a changing climate.

Today is the last day of the church year - the Sunday we look to the future in hope. It’s called Reign of Christ Sunday - an image drawn from various hope-filled places in the New Testament and beautifully depicted in the serene Christ Pantocrator art so popular in eastern Orthodox Christianity - found on a mosaic in Hagia Sophia in Istanbul and an encaustic panel at St. Catherine’s monastery in the Sinai Peninsula. Advent 1, next week, is the beginning of a new church year, taking us all the way back to a vulnerable baby in a manger. The annual church calendar follows the life of Christ in the gospels, from birth in December in one year

⁶ David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2019), 86ff.

⁷ <https://climate.nasa.gov/>

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<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/05/24/climate/mapping-50-years-of-ice-loss-in-glacier-national-park.html?rref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2Fclimate&action=click&contentCollection=climate®ion=rank&module=package&version=highlight&contentPlacement=1&pgtype=sectionfront>

⁹ Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, 92.

¹⁰ Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, 49ff.

¹¹ Read his bio here:

<https://blogs.ei.columbia.edu/2018/04/11/the-100th-meridian-where-the-great-plains-used-to-begin-now-moving-east/>

¹² Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, 51.

to hope-filled reign at the end of November in the next. As we talk about climate change today - as we prepare for today's AfterWord, as we look at ancient flood stories and modern novels and films, as we examine some climate data, and as we do all of this on Reign of Christ Sunday - the Sunday of hope - one question that comes to mind for me is what our faith tradition has to say about God and climate?

All three of today's scripture readings are stories about hope. Today's Old Testament reading from Genesis deals with the aftermath of the flood. In the early theology of the ancient world, God was thought to orchestrate human suffering, including sending floods; but as we dig more deeply into that Genesis story we find a hope-filled promise God makes to people and planet. After the devastating deluge, God - as God always does in scripture - God labors to create again, to bring life from death - resurrection and *new* creation. God can't help Godself but to recreate after chaos - to bring healing and hope and to shine light even in the darkest of places. And so, God makes a promise in Genesis to people and planet, saying, "I am establishing my covenant with you ... and with every living creature ... , every animal of the earth" A covenant in the ancient world was an ironclad agreement - a sworn pact of mutual blessing between covenanting partners. God marks this covenant with a sign in Genesis. I'm "setting my bow in the clouds as a sign," says God. A bow was a symbol of war. But God's bow of covenant blessing is a rainbow - a sign of peace and hope that God would henceforth work tirelessly to bless people and planet and climate. And today's New Testament reading from Colossians - a staple Reign of Christ Sunday text - says that God created all things *through* Christ, and that *through* Christ, God would also reconcile all things. It's another rainbow promise - a promise that is a commitment by God to work in and with and through us in the name of Christ to move all things - all people, every animal and plant, the entire planet - from hostility to healing. Colossians calls it "making peace" - it's a universal vision of that old theological term "salvation." All things - people, animals, plants, earth - all things without exception come within God's plan of salvation hope. And Jesus makes all of this practical in today's gospel reading when he feeds a multitude with a mere five loaves of bread and two fish. Just seven bits of food - seven is symbolic of completion in scripture. 12 baskets full of food were left over in the story - 12 is also symbolic of completion in scripture. The feeding of the multitude is a story of hope - a story that says, what we have is more than enough to tackle life's biggest challenges. What we have - even if it's just a few loaves and two fish - mixed with a little faith and hope is more than adequate. "We are all members of a great human orchestra," said today's AfterWord speaker, Sandra Steingraber, "and it is now time to play the Save the World Symphony. You do not have to play a solo," she says, "[just grab an] instrument ... and find [a] place in the score."¹³ In his 2015 encyclical titled *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis referred to Noah and the flood, writing, "[Noah's story is about how God] gave humanity the chance of a new beginning. All it takes," wrote Pope Francis, "is one good person [like Noah] to restore hope!"¹⁴

Let me close today with a two statements about hope - one by a writer and the other by an ecologist.¹⁵ Writer Maria Popova said, "Today, the soul is in dire need of ... protection from cynicism. The best defense against it," she says, "is vigorous, intelligent, sincere hope - not blind optimism, because that too is a form of resignation, to believe that everything will work

¹³ <http://steingraber.com/bio/>

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http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html#_ftnref124

¹⁵ <https://www.yaleclimateconnections.org/2019/07/redefining-hope-in-a-world-threatened-by-climate-change/>

out just fine and we need not apply ourselves. I mean hope bolstered by critical thinking that is clear-headed in identifying what is lacking, in ourselves or the world, but then envisions ways to create it and endeavors to do that. ... [C]ynicism,” she goes on, “is a hardening, a calcification of the soul. Hope is a stretching of its ligaments, a limber reach for something greater.” And ecologist Carl Safina said, “Hope is the ability to see how things could be better. The world of human affairs has long been a shadowy place,” he says, “but [it’s] always backlit by the light of hope. Each person can add hope to the world.”

It’s fitting, I think, to end the church year on a hope-filled note. It’s easy to be cynical given all the terrible news. But an antidote might be to look at a rainbow, remember God’s ancient promises from Genesis, and then set to work adding a little hope to the world. Amen.