

Finding and Forcing the Flood

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It might not surprise you to hear that flooding has been on my mind this spring and summer. After we experienced last summer's drought, this year has been markedly different. Even my finished basement allowed some of the all-invasive water inside while we were away on vacation. The earth that was dry, cracked and dusty last year is now spongy and squishy between the toes – and that's on a day when it doesn't rain. Roads have been closed by the floods and even some of my favorite gravel trails have been literally washed away. The whole town is saturated by an overabundance of water. And so my subject today was entirely inspired by nature and by circumstance. Why not embrace the water and let it flood my service like it has flooded so many plants this season so that each park and even the grass next to the highways is bursting with life that had been squelched too long by the drought?

I grew up as a United Methodist and when we talked about the flood in Sunday school, we glossed over the part about everything dying. As we learned in the reading, Noah was a top-notch guy who obeyed God's every command and sacrificed to him regularly. Because of Noah being in the good graces with God, he was spared along with his family and all of the animals that he could cram on one boat.

In Sunday School, we focused on the amazement that Noah feels when he steps out into the world and realizes that he is one of only a few people in the world. We focused on his thankfulness for being spared. I like this approach for some

reasons. It gave me perspective to see that even after the world was destroyed, something good came out of it. Life was renewed and life was able to begin again.

However, this story should make each of us uncomfortable. When we think about what happens after the flood, sometimes it can be easy to forget about all the people who died. So Noah was the epitome of goodness and grace... well, good for him but I certainly don't know if I could pass that sort of test if God were looking at me specifically. I'm pretty sure I'd be wiped out with the rest of the riff raff.

So while I was a child, instead of focusing on Noah, I focused on the animals and all the different ways that a scenario such as Noah's scenario could have gone wrong. How many fights were there between different species? Did he bring insects on board? And if so, did they spend their time climbing from one animal to the next and making everyone nervous? And hey, what about the dinosaurs? How in the world would they ever fit on the boat? Did they in fact go extinct because they couldn't fit on Noah's boat? And what kind of plan is that for a God anyway? What's wrong with dinosaurs?

Of course my Sunday School teacher was reassuring and told us that all the animals got along because God made the animals behave and that he had a master plan for each individual animal. But I never quite bought it. I was no biologist but a tiger had to eat something and if he was on a boat with an antelope, well I was pretty sure I knew what would happen even as a kid. As I got older and went to college and decided to study religion, imagine my joyous surprise when I discovered that not only was there a Noah's Ark but there

were flood stories from all over the world! (some of which predate Noah, some of which were influenced by Noah, and some which are disconnected from Noah).

In all of the religions of the world (at least the ones that I have studied), water is a common element that comes up frequently. Which is no surprise. Water covers 71% of the earth and is vital for living things to survive. In the Qu'ran, "living things are made out of water" (25:54) in the Hebrew Bible, "the earth was formed out of water and by water," (Genesis 1), and in Hinduism, the Ganges River is considered a deity who is able to purify and cleanse anyone who enters.

In the Hindu flood story of Manu and Matsya, we are not told of the motivation for a flood. There is little indication of why such an event occurred.

In the other two stories, however, we are told why the floods occurred. In the Sumerian story of Atrahasis, we learn that the gods thought that the humans, due to overpopulation, were being way too noisy so that the gods could not sleep. And in the Hebrew story of Noah, we learn that evil had taken over the human race and there needed to be a cleansing. Also, other verses in Genesis suggest that angels are having relationships with humans and corrupting the order that God felt was appropriate in the world. To solve overpopulation and to erase evil, a flood rushed over the earth.

In both cases, the gods felt that things needed to be completely destroyed in order to begin again. But even these capricious gods ultimately decided to keep humans around even though they were messy, loud, and disobedient. They were useful and some of them were even good.

Atrahasis, Manu, and Noah are commanded to bring animals on board to save living creatures but everything else was decimated. Nothing was left to live except the sea creatures which really weren't threatened by a flood anyway.

Which brings us to another question, which we'll be looking at this morning: What now? Noah, Manu, and Atrahasis are all given explicit directions by gods before the floods occur. After the floods, however, they are simply told to propagate and spread across the world as they see fit. Noah is sent a rainbow, Atrahasis is given a lapis necklace, and Manu creates the world in its "proper and exact order." Although they are given some direction, the guidance is nothing compared to the explicit orders they received before the flood.

By any measure, all of these people experience extreme catastrophe. I try to think of myself in their situation. They live to populate another day but what of all the people that they leave behind? Do they feel guilt that they are the ones remaining? Do they feel pressure because the entire human future is left in their hands? With so much on the line and in a state of emergency, what should be done?

Something that all three of the men in these stories have in common is that the flood forces them into a world of new possibilities. The flood is just the beginning. Tragedy has a way of forcing you into situations that you might have never imagined or considered in ordinary circumstances. In the moments of tragedy, humans often find out what they are really made of. There are many choices to make after catastrophe, and one of them is to make the most out of the possibilities that you are dealt.

Take the animals on the ark for example. Manu and Atrahasis take two of every animal on the boat with them. They don't base their decision on what kind of animal it is, they simply takes them all on. With Noah, he takes two of each unclean and seven pairs of the clean animals so the clean animals have a better shot. However, once he releases them all out into the wilderness of the unknown, all bets are off. There is no telling what will become of the animals. They have endless options and have to find their own ways.

After times of immense tragedy which many of us have experienced at one time or another, we're left in a place of pain, grief, and confusion. Many people turn to god for answers. But unlike our Hindu story when Matsya carries Manu through the flood to a mountain to safety, we're not usually given direct answers to our question of what to do after surviving devastation. So, what can we take from the stories?

One important piece of the story is the need for renewal. And I don't just mean a gradual process of change. I mean the agonizing pain of realizing you have to throw something out and start all over again. In some situations, a gradual change is fine. There are many things that can be accomplished gradually. However, those aren't the problems that we are looking at today.

Sometimes in our lives we have to play the same card that God did in the stories. The world is so messed up that there is no fixing it. Instead of fixing it, the gods decide that it is time to wipe the slate clean and start over.

There are projects that come along that we pour our hearts and souls into but nothing fruitful ever turns out. We spend hours and all of our creative energy

but still nothing truly inspired comes of it. When I was in graduate school, we were expected to focus on one area of expertise for our thesis project. Although this is a realistic request, I made the mistake of not listening to myself and ended up writing a thesis on a topic that I lost interest in almost as soon as it started. I didn't listen to myself and instead I let others steer me in a direction they thought was appropriate for me. And I resisted my own intuition and instead listened to their common sense advice. By the time I was finished with my loong thesis, I hated it. I hated the subject, I hated when people asked me about it, and I hated that I hadn't chosen something that spoke to my heart.

I knew the subject well going in -- That is why my advisors encouraged me in that direction. However, I had changed and my inspiration had shifted. Since I was somewhat experienced in the area I was working in (at least for the Master's level), I thought I owed it to myself and the subject to keep working on the same area until I knew it like the back of my hand.

I should have changed directions and I should have thrown all of that work aside. Of course, at the time that I was working on it, that would have appeared like a crazy decision. However, looking back, I know that I should have listened to myself and I should have flooded all those ideas that were weighted against me and started over on something new. I'd like to think that had I had better guidance in my advisor, I might have discovered it more quickly and before nearing the end of my program. However, there is no one to blame but myself. I should have let the project go and started anew. It's the difficult balance of knowing when to keep pushing and when it's finally time to let the flood in and let go.

It can be a research project, a creative project, or a relationship. But sometimes there are things that are so far gone that it is time to flood them out and start anew.

This doesn't mean that the project or relationship was bad. It means that we learned something from it and that we have grown as a person because of that life-altering event. Sometimes we have to play a little god and cut something out even when we think that we should stay with it. Sometimes incremental changes are not the answer. They are not what you need. And that is okay. Sometimes it is too late for salvaging.

The trick is in knowing when to let go and when it is time for a flood.

In 2008, my sister Ashley moved to Seattle with her then fiance, Vicente. They had met while she was in Mexico for a year and he was in the country legally. After living in Seattle for about a year, they decided to travel to Canada which was just a short drive away to visit some friends. The trip over the border was completely smooth but the trip back was a nightmare. The US border patrol would not allow Vicente back into the country because he was missing one piece of paper that he was supposedly given upon his original entry into the United States and was supposed to have to get back in. This paper was necessary for his re-entry into the US. Since he was missing this paper, he and Ashley were interrogated for hours upon hours for supposedly attempting to smuggle an immigrant into the country illegally.

Of course that was not the case and it was simply a misunderstanding. However, they gave him the option to fly back to Mexico within 24 hours or to be deported back to Mexico.

I'd like to say that love conquered all and that he was able to get back into the country and that they were able to start a life together. However, this event was the first crack in the dam, precipitating a series of events that a long-distance relationship already under a huge amount of strain could not bear. There was no end in sight to the battle that they were going to have to face to get him back into the country.

My sister went through a heart-breaking journey of paperwork and government run around even to get the process to begin. After another year of this struggle, Ashley finally decided it was time to let the flood wash things away. She had to let go. It was not so simple as paperwork. Every step was a battle and they were almost 3,000 miles apart and stressed to an unreasonable level. Even though they loved each other, she had to make the difficult decision to let it go. Once it happened, the two of them were eventually able to find joy in their lives separately. They were able to move forward in their lives - Vicente has an advanced degree in Mexico where he was able to find a good teaching position and Ashley was free to work just long enough to fund a trip throughout South America for her own form of self-exploration. She yielded to the flood and once the dust had settled, her life was renewed and she was able to go on and experience things she probably wouldn't have in her original scenario.

Of course my summary does not do justice to the battle that she had to go through but I tell this piece of her story to give you an example of knowing when you have to bring a flood into your world.

Noah, Atrahasis, and Manu are given advice directly from a deity which leads to their rescue. However, once they are off the ark, reality sets in and the world and the future weighs upon their shoulders. Lacking direct guidance, they are left to play their own roles and sometimes to play god in their own lives.

We are perpetually in a state of making decisions for ourselves and for our lives. At times, making decisions can be natural, easy, and nearly effortless. Other times, however, we may wish for a god that would give us unambiguous definite direction and to steer us in different situations. Instead we're left to decide for ourselves and sometimes that involves letting go of something to which we are attached.

The trick is in listening to yourself and knowing when to yield to a flood in your life and make the most of the possibilities that it grants to you. The process is mostly painful but once the water recedes and you realize that you took responsibility and you trusted yourself and cut off a limb that was already dying, you will gradually be washed clean of the weight and then... just like Noah saw that streak of colors after the flood waters had receded, you will see a rainbow shining gloriously in your sky.