

If we were Jewish, this weekend we would be celebrating Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of the Jewish year. It is also a festival that celebrates the creation of the universe and of humanity.

It would be an opportunity to blow a shofar – that curly ram's horn with the raw penetrating sound. In my opinion, Christianity does not offer near enough opportunities to blow a shofar.

The first Sunday in the narrative lectionary year is always a creation story – or in this case uncreation and recreation.

The dating of Rosh Hashana varies from year to year and it doesn't always coincide with our first Sunday of the Narrative Lectionary year. But this year it does which is kind of cool. Last year Rosh Hashanah coincided with Earth Day which is also kind of cool.

So, on to Noah.

For all the happy Noah's ark murals decorating children's nurseries and Sunday school rooms, this is no children's story. In fact, it's rather dark.

It forces us to wrestle with perhaps one of scripture's most difficult conundrums...weighing God's justice versus God's mercy.

So, first a confession. I'm not one who believes this story describes an actual historical event, at least not at the scale described in the story. Most of the Mesopotamian cultures in the area had flood stories like this and they were probably all inspired by actual floods between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

But what the story does works the same whether you believe it's historical or not.

Because it describes something that is very real...and that's the effect of human evil on all creation.

Let's go back to the first creation story.

In the beginning, when God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

You may remember complete chaos translated as formless and void. But the image of the uncreated world as a deep, dark, wild, untamed sea is universal. A wind from God tames that chaos and brings order and beauty into being.

What the flood story does is tell us what happens when human evil lets the chaos back in.

Even before any rain came, the world was flooded...it was flooded with violence. Chaos snuck in through the crack opened by Adam and Eve.

Violence began in the very next generation when Cain killed his brother Abel and the crack widened. The violence spiraled and the crack widened more.

Now, even before a drop of rain has fallen, the world is inundated with chaos. The waters of the flood are a visible manifestation of the chaos that was already there.

When humans decide they want to be like God, judging good and evil on their own terms, it would appear that violence will always seem like a viable solution to any problem.

In the flood, God gave creation a reboot. Noah and his family become the new humans. They are given the instructions to have dominion over the earth and to be fruitful and multiply.

When they emerge from the ark, Noah builds an altar to worship God. In response, God says this:

“I will never again curse the ground because of humans, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

²² As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night
shall not cease.”

Even before Noah or his family have a chance to do anything bad, God has realized that the flood didn't change the human heart.

And God promises to stick with humanity anyway. God's mercy wins out. God knows that humans are never going to get it right on their own. The flood didn't solve the problem. Hope for a harmonious creation through people is still out of reach. Hope will not reside in the actions of people but on the actions of God.

Ultimately, human chaos will be unleashed on Jesus, God made flesh. Human hearts will be transformed by God's mercy...a change that will begin from the inside.

There aren't too many stories that fit better for the world we're living in today...and that better show our need for God's mercy.

Friday we observed the 25th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attack. Nearly 3000 people died that day.

It was a tragic awful day. The results of human hate were a raw gaping hole where the towers used to be and millions of hearts broken by the loss of life.

But the aftermath has also been a pretty powerful demonstration of human violence and what it does.

After the attack, a wave of anti-Muslim hate and even violence surged. We spent the next 20 years at war. Five years after that war ended, we are in another war in the Middle East. Americans remain bitterly divided over Israel's massive response to Hamas' violence in Palestine.

Anti-Muslim hate is again on the rise. Antisemitism is on the rise.

You can come down where your values and politics lead you on any particular issue, but we all have to ask ourselves, how well does violence actually work as a solution? How well do retaliation and revenge work?

Does violence bring more peace and safety? Maybe in the short term, it might sometimes be the only way to stop a true threat. But if it never yields to something new, something better, the cycle just repeats endlessly.

Well, we aren't the ones making the decisions about war. We can vote. We can engage politically as fits our values.

But maybe what we mostly can do is look at ourselves. A flood of violence gets its fuel from the mass of human hearts who seem to be always drawn to violence.

Even if we're not ourselves physically violent or even verbally violent, how much violent speech do we cheer on? Who have we made less than human in order to justify violence against them?

Like everyone, I grieve the lives lost that September day. I'm grateful for the men and women who were willing to serve their country, in the military and as first responders. I'm proud of the many soldiers and airmen I know who were willing to answer their call to serve.

But I can't help but feel there are lessons we should have learned over the last 25 years – and for that matter the last several millennia – that we haven't.

This week also marked the first anniversary of Charlie Kirk's death. Also tragic. Cheering his death or mocking or justifying it are wrong. Anytime you are willing to cheer, justify, or minimize violence against someone, you are dehumanizing them. That is a dangerous path and it's wrong.

But so is cheering the sight of Haitians in shackles being boarded on a plane bound for a country that remains too dangerous for them...and where many of them haven't lived for years.

So is hate speech directed toward people who don't fit the straight cis mold. So is the dehumanization of the poor and non-white people.

Violence isn't just about taking up a sword. It often begins with that sharpest of weapons – our tongues. Or our fingers flying across our keyboards.

But none of our violence, none of our hateful words, none of our dehumanizing jeers at the suffering of others makes the world better.

We are called to work on behalf of God's justice...the kind of justice that leads to life for all God's people. To call out systems and actions that hurt people. To call out systems that do violence to people. And to honor the humanity of every single person on earth.

The story of Noah ends with God's mercy. God's promise forever is mercy. God's grand vision for creation will be repeatedly thwarted by human evil.

But the story of Noah reminds us that God is committed to this wild creation anyway...that God is committed to us. So committed that God became one of us to suffer the effects of our violence. And to show us a better way. In the end, Christ shows us that God's mercy is God's justice.