

After the Flood

Genesis 9:18-28

Anna Carter Florence

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

Remind me again: why did God choose Noah? *A man of integrity*, right? *A righteous man*. Not that he had to be the most righteous, because the text never says he was. Not that he had to be perfect: you don't earn your way onto the ark with "perfect." But I admit: I was hoping for grace; just grace. After so much of it had been shown to him. After God had said, *Never again; I will never again destroy; I am hanging up my bow*. I was hoping Noah would hang up his bow in favor of grace, too. At least for a while. At least with his own sons.

What do you do when the new creation with its rainbow promises turns into paradise lost all over again in seven verses flat?

What do you do when the Bible character most likely to be featured on nursery wallpaper turns out to be the stuff of nightmares: the father who will disown you for what you did?

What do you do when Shem, the brother who comes out on top in this story—since he walks away with the God, the land, the tents, and the slaves—is also the brother who proves that the safest thing to do in a family crisis is to cover it up and look away? I'll tell you one thing you don't do. You don't sleep well.

This is a story that needs a PLEASE FASTEN SEAT BELTS sign plastered above it, and if I were the captain, I would keep it illuminated for the duration of the reading. Heavy turbulence; people could get hurt; people have been hurt. Be careful.

Be careful if you read it with your youth group. You think they want to hear about the guy who comes home, finds his father passed-out drunk and naked on the living room floor, tells his brothers, and then gets kicked out of the house for it? They've already heard it, too many times. It's not funny when it's a kid in your class.

Be careful if you read it in a 12-step Al-Anon meeting. You think anyone who lives with an alcoholic wants to hear about what happens to the man who sees the elephant in the living room that nobody is talking about, and who finally says to his family, "Hey—Dad's drunk"? They've been there. It's too close when the elephant lives in your home.

Be careful if you read it with your Roman Catholic friends. You think they want to hear about the brother who learns of his father's shameful nakedness, drapes a covering over it and backs away with his face averted? They've read it on the front page of *The New York Times* every day for a month, now. It's too painful when it's one of your bishops.

And be careful—be so careful—if you read it in the West Bank. You think the Palestinians want to hear about how Israel justifies its domination of the Canaanite people by tracing its lineage through the blessed and cursed sons of Noah? They've been living at the mercy of that reading for more than fifty years; dying from it, because the sons of Shem are so sure that Ham deserved everything he got. When you've spent your whole life behind barbed wire in the Gaza Strip, or on a plantation in South Georgia, being told that your oppression is ordained by God, this is a text of terror.

It's hard to see what a text like this has been allowed to do: in our families, in our churches, in our world. And it's hard to imagine what it might yet do, or say, that could qualify as hopeful. Is there any grace to be found in the story of a family that's coming apart? And not just any family: *the* family chosen by God to survive chaos. They were promised that it would never happen again, and then it does, right in their own home, because they bring it on themselves, only this time, there's no ark. Is there any grace to be found in a story like that, or would it be better to turn our faces and back away?

I was hoping for grace; just a little. My family is coming apart: my Presbyterian family. I don't know exactly where we are with respect to the flood—whether it's behind us or ahead of us or if we're in it right now; I don't know. And I'm not looking for a fairy-tale fix and "happily ever after"; I don't think the bow in the cloud promises "happily ever after." But I am hoping that maybe we've been chosen to survive chaos, even the kind we bring on ourselves. And I'm willing to read any story, no matter how hard, that will help me live in my liquid church—my beloved, flooded church.

About a month ago, when the time had come to stop dating this text and commit to a serious relationship with it, I spent a few days wandering around campus, dragging people into corners to read this story with me. I interrupted their lunches and barged in on them at the library and accosted them on the quad, and everyone was very gracious about it, considering that the nature of what I was asking them to read: a real day-brightener of a text. Most of the people I spoke with were young adults. And ageist person that I am, I expected them to have some pretty harsh words for old Noah, given his treatment of his sons. But that wasn't the case. They didn't condemn him. They recognized him. One man said to me, "This is what people do when they feel threatened: they run away, or they send away. This is what I do. I can be Noah, so easily."

These young adults: they understood how it could happen, a story like this. It made them sad; it made them angry; but they understood how things could escalate to a breaking point you never intended to reach, and aren't sure how to redeem. So we went back and looked at the characters in this story, to see if we could figure out where that breaking point was, and how it might be different.

We talked about Noah. Can you imagine what a relief it must have been for a man of the soil to finally get out of the ark? To leave behind the noise, the smell, the food, the fights, the living-on-top-of-each-other—everything that goes with *preserving life*, and to simply walk out into a green field by yourself and pray? It's like the end of the summer mission trip to Arizona, when you've logged fourteen days and two thousand miles with an arkload of kids, and you finally pull into the church parking lot, and the parents are there, and you say goodbye, and you clean out the van, and then you get into your car by yourself and you drive home in exquisite silence—oh, it's heaven. Noah spent twelve months on his mission trip. Of course he planted a vineyard. Of course he tasted some of the wine, and if he drank a few glasses too many, can you blame him? Of course he lay uncovered in the middle of his tent. It was *his tent*, for crying out loud. There have got to be some places where you can relax, let down, even make a fool of yourself, without fearing that you'll be exposed; your own home, for instance. And if you do make a mistake: there have got to be some people you can count on to cover for you; your own sons would be nice.

We talked about Ham. What do you do when you stumble onto your father's shame? It's not just nudity that Ham sees; it's shameful-nakedness; it's the things

about his father he never asked or wanted to see. Whether he should have been in that tent in the first place is an open question, and one that has already been answered decisively from the pulpits of the sons of Shem: they will tell you he had no business being there, that he was violating tribal custom, mocking authority, probing his father's weaknesses; and maybe they're right. Maybe Ham did go looking for something. But the text doesn't say that. It just says, *Noah was uncovered, and Ham saw*. Ham saw the shameful-nakedness of his father, and that's got to do something to you. Did it shock him? Did it shatter him? Did he laugh and point at silly old Dad, or dry his tears and think, *Well, you have to leave room for the fool in everybody*. We don't know; the text doesn't say, maybe because it's unspeakable. We do know what Ham did: he told his two brothers outside. Not the press; not the police; his brothers, because they were his family, and what he had seen he could not keep to himself, or manage by himself. What he had seen, he had to name. But notice: he didn't name it to the world. He named it to the family.

We talked about Shem and Japheth. They never saw what Ham saw. They chose not to look—which is a choice their brother never had, it seems. But Shem and Japheth turn their faces, out of respect, or pain, or even squeamishness, and it's hard to fault them for it. Some things you don't want to see. Some images will haunt you forever. And while there are weaknesses in your parents that you have to face and name and deal with, some of those weaknesses are not yours to probe. And some you just have to forgive, care for the best you can, and move on. That's what Shem and Japheth thought, apparently: that their job was not to face, or name, or probe, or even look-at the chaos their brother saw. Their job was to cover it, lest their father's shameful-nakedness become theirs as well. They backed into the tent and left the covering, like a message in neon: *Guess what, Dad. We were here. Guess why*. And then Noah awoke, and he guessed.

When you've lived for a long time in an ark, *preserving life* becomes a way of life. It's how you think about yourself and your vocation: I am one called by God to preserve life during this time of chaos. It has to be that deep, because it's messy work, whether your ark is filled with animals or teenagers or a congregation of the liquid church; there are still all these stalls to muck. And depending on who you are, and what sort of chaos you see and experience, you will approach the work differently. For instance: in the tenth month on the ark, with grain supplies dwindling, and dry land nowhere in sight, you may well ask: since the rabbits are multiplying like crazy, would it still be in the spirit of the project to feed some of them to the cheetahs? This is a *preserving life* question, and I bet Noah and his sons fought into the night about that sort of thing. Because when you are trying to survive chaos, either on an ark or in your own home, *preserving life* looks different to Ham than it does to Shem or Japheth or Noah.

If you're like Ham, maybe you understand the work of *preserving life* as naming what you see. You look around you, and you can't stand it, this shameful-nakedness, in your own people. You can't stand it that they seem to be so oblivious to it: they might as well be passed-out and drunk. And you can't stand it that no one is talking about it, and maybe not even looking. Airplanes fly into the World Trade Center, and we think our kids want to play sparrow tag? Our country is at war, and we want to draw lines around the communion table? How will we ever preserve life in this church if we can't name what we see?

If you're like Shem and Japheth, maybe you understand the work of *preserving life*

as protecting honor. You hear about the shameful-nakedness, and you know we're going to have to talk about it eventually, but first things first: cover the man up so the whole world doesn't see. Don't expose anybody; what good will that do? Don't broadcast all our church debates on TV. Exercise a little decency, and restraint, and respect for the way we've done things around here. How will we ever preserve life in this church if we don't value respect more than honesty?

And if you're like Noah, maybe you understand the work of *preserving life* as casting-out. If a member of your own family will do this sort of thing—dishonor, disobey, speak out of order and out of line—then you need to take action. There are behaviors the church cannot sanction. We have taken vows to preserve the purity of the church. Jesus said, if your right eye offends you, pluck it out. God said, watch me, destroying them, as well as the earth. How will we ever preserve life in this church if we do not destroy what must be destroyed and cast-out in God's name?

There is no doubt in my mind that Ham, Shem, Japheth, and Noah each believe that they are preserving life. Maybe there is a balance to be found between Ham's naming and Shem's protecting. One brother sees but cannot cover; the other brother covers but cannot see. Maybe they need each other in order to save their father and also themselves, because the alternative is domination and slavery. But Noah: I do not think Noah is preserving life anymore. Noah takes verbs that do not belong to him. He takes *destroy*, which belongs to God alone; make no mistake; to cast-out is to destroy. And cast-out people do not go away. They grow up in refugee camps in Palestine, and they are weaned on violence, and by the time they are eighteen-years-old, they have strapped bombs to their bodies and walked into supermarkets; but they were programmed to explode long ago. Cast-out people end up on the streets of Chicago as homeless teenagers, 15,000 of them, a third of whom are gay and lesbian, because they have been raised to believe that there is no place for them anywhere, not even in the church.

After the flood, I don't know if Noah can help us preserve life in our church anymore. But maybe his sons can, his three sons, who want so much to see and name and honor and protect, and who are trying to find the balance between looking and covering. Maybe the grace in this story lies not in how it has been told, but how it might be told—same characters, different ending. Like this:

You go back seven verses, you wake from your wine, and you find that you were uncovered in the middle of your tent, and that your sons have seen and covered you, not because they wanted to expose you, but because they are trying to preserve life in your family by naming what they see, even if it is your shameful-nakedness.

And then you take the violence of Noah's words, and you set them in the clouds, next to the bow and the verb *destroy*, and you say, *Never again*. Never again will we cast-out our own children.

And then you go back to your church, and you look around for all the Shems, Hams, and Japheths; the Hams are mostly in the youth group, I think; they see everything, whether we want them to or not. And you help the Hams to name what they see, with big enough questions. And you help the Shems and Japheths to respect without covering-up. And you help the Noahs to trust that maybe this younger generation really can carry on the covenant God first made with you, so that poor Noah does not have to spend the last third of his life remembering how he cast-out one third of his family.

I think it's possible. If you have enough bread at the table for everyone, seven verses isn't that far to go.