



Broken Reflections: Broken World

Genesis 9:8-17

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Welcome to the season of Lent, which we began last week with Ash Wednesday. Lent is a season of forty days, not counting Sundays, which ends with the celebration of Easter. It offers a time of repentance, fasting and preparation for the coming of Easter. It invites a time of self-examination, reflection, and renewal.

This Lent, you are invited to a time of reflection around this theme of *Broken Reflections*. In every aspect of our lives, we find that people are broken, institutions are broken, relationships are broken, and our hope for the future is broken. Yet, amidst our brokenness, we see the in-breaking of God's grace all around us, working as God does, to heal our brokenness. From the vast brokenness of international relations, to the deep brokenness of our own hearts, God offers love to heal all in Christ.

Each week of our Lenten journey, we will consider the brokenness in the world, how God is working healing amidst such brokenness, and how we are invited to participate in God's healing work.

To make the claim that we as humanity are broken would be an understatement, though at times, that can be hard to see, especially given the great joy of our local median lifestyle. It's true that we live in an area that can sometimes mask the brokenness of the world. In the past week, three articles were published raving of the great joy it is to live in our area. First, Forbes has named the Washington Metropolitan Area among the best 20 housing markets to invest in for the year 2018. The local job market continues to grow, and the housing costs are growing at a realistic rate, making it possible to afford, and worthy to invest. A second article, published by Expedia, names Alexandria as one of top 11 "delicious destinations" to visit in America. We have great food – and plenty of it!

Perhaps more glowingly yet, 24/7 Wall Street has ranked the City of Alexandria the 16th best locality to live in across the entire nation based on quality of life. Our local population continues to grow, while still holding less than 3% unemployment, less than 10% poverty rate, and an above average, 81.7 year-life expectancy. And if you don't live in Alexandria City, fear not: Arlington County, Falls Church City, Fairfax County and Fairfax City, Loudoun County, Montgomery County, and Howard County all make the top 25 list of counties with the best quality of life in America. That's huge! 8 of the top 25 counties in America, by quality of life, are located in the Washington Metropolitan area. That's phenomenal. We live in one of the highest quality areas in a nation that is praised for it's already higher-than-normal quality of living.

But such quality of life also poses a couple problems. When we become so overjoyed with our personal quality of life, we tend to be less sympathetic and observant to the pain being experienced by those in other communities. We can be so accustomed to our own quality of life that we can't even begin to imagine the lack of quality existent in other communities outside the DMV region, much less in other nations throughout the world. Such a mentality leads us to isolate ourselves from, and even reject the necessity for, the work of reconciliation necessary for all of God's people.

It can also be a problem for us on a personal level. Our expected and experienced quality of life can so exceed the average experience, that we begin to actually think of ourselves better than others from an existential level. We begin to ignore the brokenness that actually exists in our lives – from personal relationships, to work fatigue, to grief and mourning, to self-isolation – which leads us to offer little more than our lackluster prayers and concerns for those who have more '*miserable*' lives.

While it can be hard to see the full extent of our brokenness on the whole when we are so entrenched in our own self-loathing glory, one need only open their eyes, heart, and mind and read some real news to catch a glimpse of the reality of our world. We need only move beyond the personal crises of our 401K dropping a couple hundred thousand dollars at the greatest single-day drop in the DOW to acknowledge that while, in America, the average family has a net worth of nearly \$50,000, in India, the average family has a net worth of just \$600, and in Africa, the average family has a net worth of just \$400. Yet, here in our great City of Alexandria, over 45% of our families have a net worth of over \$100,000, while 15% enjoy a net worth over \$500,000.

I don't highlight our financial well being to say we are horrible people for having money, owning property, or having worked very hard to create such a safety net. But financial stability brings with it a lack of understanding for how the majority of the world lives. At large, we simply cannot relate to the real, tangible concerns of the majority world. Most of us do not worry about where our evening meal will come from, or perhaps, that's all we worry about, is *where* it will come from ... we never worry if we will have a meal to begin with. And even for those who may not have a safety net of wealth, we are blessed to live in a community that is trying to care for those in lower economic brackets, with multiple non-profits, churches, and governmental agencies offering locations to receive meals, clothing, and community services. Such social services simply do not exist in the majority world.

While one might not need to feel guilty for such personal quality of life, it would be a failure on our part to acknowledge how our quality of life comes at the expense of the quality of life for others around the world. The list is too long to name, but suffice to say, there are 47 countries who have a named minimum wage of *under* \$0.50 per hour, and a longer list of countries that doesn't even name a minimum wage. Our quality of life – from technology, to clothing, to automobiles, to furniture, to music production, to concert attending, to world travel – is largely affordable due to the economic disparity between our nation and the majority world, from where such goods are primarily created and imported.

Lest we think countries just aren't taking advantage of the wealth available to them, any quick research will show examples in recent years where major corporations have threatened to move (or have followed through on moving) whole manufacturing plants to competing industrial nations over pennies on the hourly wage. We like being an economic juggernaut, and at every level, our businesses are willing to take advantage of whoever they have to to ensure we maintain such a high quality of life. It would be bereft on our part to ignore such realities.

Along with such economic brokenness throughout the world, we also see political, religious, and cultural conflicts arising almost every day on the international level. If it weren't for the moments of unity and glory coming out of Pyeongyang at the Olympics in the world news section of the paper this week, all you would read is stories of political corruptness, manipulation on an international level, military boasting and maneuvering, and countries having to tell their political leaders that sexual affairs with office staff is inappropriate. (I'd say I'm shocked that a foreign government must declare such office promiscuity off-limits, but then I'd also say I'm shocked we have a Congressional Accountability Act in our own government that pays off accusers to not go public with stories of abuse, objectification, and harassment.)

In looking at such vast, growing, and seemingly unfixable brokenness worldwide, the storyline inevitably comes back to a single argument. In almost every news cycle and in every story naming international problems, the focus is on one question: who is to blame?

Whenever we are faced with the reality of *our* brokenness, whenever we are forced to have the conversation about how to start healing *our* brokenness, we always want to find the scapegoat to blame for the brokenness. As if to say, if we can push the cause of the brokenness on to someone else, we feel and come across as less broken and personally justified. I'm generalizing here, but just read the news: the Christian majority likes to blame the Muslims and the atheists. The Palestinian majority likes to blame Israel, and Israel likes to blame the Palestinian territories. An overwhelming number of citizens likes to blame illegal immigrants. Quasi-democratic nations like to blame the communists. The anti-gun lobby likes to blame the NRA, and the NRA likes to blame mental health. The Democrats keep pushing the blame to the Republicans, and vice versa, and the President always seems to find a way to place the blame on anyone and everyone else. ... At least, that's what my Facebook feed looked like this week.

For too long, since the historic days of the origins of humankind, we have always looked to blame others for the brokenness that exists in our world. We look to others who are deemed "different" than ourselves and say, "Them! It's their fault!" Just look at Adam in the Garden ... God comes and says, "Adam, how do you know that you are not clothed?" ... Adam says back, "The woman, God, it was the woman's fault. She's the one who gave me the fruit." ... God goes to Eve, and asks her, "Did you eat of the fruit?" What does she say? ... "The snake, Lord. It was the snake's fault! The snake told me to eat the fruit."

Whenever blame needs to be identified, we look to whoever stands on the other side of the line and claim them at fault. Greg Carey, a Professor of New Testament, describes this practice

of *othering* in regards to the war on terror, saying, “We imagine ISIS as ‘different’ than ourselves, a whole distinct category of the species homo sapiens. We did the same with Nazis back in the day, as if genocide’s engineers had not been the brothers and sisters of our own immigrant citizens, as if they were not the grandparents of the amiable Germans and Poles we befriend today. We forget, by the way, our own history of torturing – often burning alive – our own African American citizens, grandchildren of those this nation had enslaved.”ⁱ

The reality of the story of humanity is that *we are all broken*. Genesis 6:5 makes this claim, “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.” In fact, we are so broken, that even God was fed up with our failure to live into the image in which we were first created. God sought to fix our problems by wiping us off the face of the earth and starting clean once again. Such a practice is not far off from the nuclear arms race that threatens to wipe out whole nations, peoples, and communities from future history books.

Perhaps it shouldn’t be surprising to us that God wanted to wipe us off the face of the earth. God is just, and demands justice among the creation that is created in the image of the Almighty. So the flood was offered by God in hopes of fixing creation – of righting what had gone wrong. God had anticipated that with the mighty waters, a clean start could clear the sin from humanity like dirt from one’s hands and help us be born into a new creation. But it was not so.

“The evil tendencies of humans remain in a post-deluge world ... Scaring humans into obedience with threats of worldwide calamity and devastation did not and will not work.”ⁱⁱ Perhaps some of our born-again Christian political leaders would do well to remember the story of the flood when considering such bombastic rhetoric in their elected leadership. The reality post-flood, post-chaos, is that the brokenness of humanity was no different. Humans did not change in the wake of total chaos and destruction. ISIS remains no less committed to their ideals following a shock-and-awe bombing; North Korea’s leaders are no less committed to a totalitarian regime following threats of nuclear war; drug cartels are no less committed to financial gain through illegal drug trades following ICE deportations. You can kick out and kill as many as you disagree with, but the reality is, humanity has shown, it does not respond or acquiesce to God’s love at the consequence of (even justified) destruction.

We like to lift up the powerful will of God as an example for how to strong arm those who fail to live into right living. It not only invites, but necessitates we find those who are to blame, and wipe them off the face of the earth in hopes of an altered and more hopeful future. But the story of the flood is not ultimately about God’s total destruction of humanity. For as little as humanity changed because of the flood, the story line does change. There is something that happens differently following the flood that changes the course of history, and it’s not the dissipation of sin from humanity.

In the midst of the flood – while the waters were at their highest levels – we read in Chapter 8, “But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were

with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens were restrained, and the waters gradually receded from the earth.”

In a time when God could have forgotten about humanity completely, when creation could have ceased at the power of the Lord, God remembered Noah and the creation. God remembered the mighty connection between the Lord and his people. God’s remembering changes the situation of the world from hostility to covenant.

For all the lofty and ‘omni’ words we like to use to describe God – from omnipresent, to omniscient, to omnipotent – God’s mind here was changed in his remembrance. Such remembrance is a saving act. It’s the same invitation of Job to God, who in desperation cried out, “Oh Lord, that thou would hide me, and conceal me until the wrath be past, that at the appointed time, you would *remember* me!” It’s the same invitation of Christ at the table, when he breaks the bread, and says, “Do this as often as you do it in *remembrance* of me.” ***There’s healing power in the saving act of remembering.***

God remembers Noah and the creation and he stills and dissipates the seas. And with Noah, and every living creature for all future generations, God creates a new covenant.

A quick word about covenants in the ancient Near East: covenants bound two entities into agreement. However, as custom of the time, only one of the two parties was beholden to any obligations. It would be like me saying, you and I can be friends so long as you give me a fist bump every time we see each other. There had to be no stipulation on my part – but you had to offer me a fist bump for the friendship covenant to work. There’s an obligation for only one of the two covenanted parties. That’s what God is doing here. God is establishing a covenant wherein only one party is required to meet certain obligations – and that party, that obligation, falls on God. The text suggests, “God promised to refrain from future destructive activity, but the other covenant partners, [that is, us, the created], were not required to adhere to any specific norms.”ⁱⁱⁱ

If God’s destruction of humanity in the flood is not to be considered surprising considering the just nature of the Almighty, then such an established covenant, wherein God alone is the one beholden to our future hope should come as no surprise either. “While God is without a doubt just, God is also, as Scripture regularly attests, gracious, merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. It is God’s nature to save.”^{iv}

And here is where we must come to face the reality of our call as those who are broken, and who have been claimed by God in this life-giving covenant. We do not deserve such compassion. We are just as sinful today as when God brought about the flood with the hope of purifying creation. Our world-wide blame game, where in we look to point fingers at whole nations, people, cultures, and religions will not benefit us in pursuing God’s reconciliatory work. God did not choose to save humanity because we were worthy. God did not choose to calm the waters because we had turned toward the love of the Almighty. God did not establish a new

covenant with some expectation that we would fix ourselves so that we could live in better harmony with one another.

God offered a new covenant and started working toward the redemption of humanity through Jesus Christ, because God *remembered* that amidst our brokenness, we are still his work. We are still redeemable to the image of God in which we were first created because of *God's* participation in the act of salvation. We are still worthy because of the commitment *of God* to the covenant to reconcile humanity.

And this is the invitation of God to humanity in the covenant – we are invited to be participants in such healing work. The work is God's – but we are invited to be a part of it! We are invited to not only have our own lives redeemed, but to participate in the life-giving work of reconciliation throughout the world that gives life to all. We are invited to work toward equality for persons of all cultures. We are invited to work toward the economic freedom of persons of all nations. We are invited to work toward the sanctity of life for people of all religions. We are invited to work for the health, the well-being, the refuge, and the education of people around the world regardless of the color of their skin, their nation of origin, the god they worship, or the language they speak. And if it means we give up some of our quality of life to ensure they have a life ... Jesus said do that too.

We live in a broken world – but in the healing grace of God, it is redeemable. May we join in intentional and meaningful ways to make God's love known in all the world, that we may live our part in God's healing grace. For the glory of God, may God heal our brokenness. Amen.

ⁱ Greg Care. onscripture.com. Retrieved February 15, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Miguel A. De La Torre. *Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Genesis*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Diane Bergant. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 2*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008.

^{iv} David Lose. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 2*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008.