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Genesis 8:2-19

28th Message

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THE RAVEN AND THE DOVE

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

This past week we have seen the juxtaposition of life and death. Last weekend we were shocked by the killings in Tucson. For several days death was the dominant motif, but on Wednesday we watched as the president led the nation both in commemorating the dead and in celebrating the living. A corner was turned: he, and many others afterwards, expressed hope that new life would emerge from this death-filled tragedy. How jarring that the youngest killed was born on September 11, 2001. In herself she had embodied that hope of new life from death, yet now she too was dead. We wait to see how much good will come from this great tragedy, how much life will come the other side of death.

Even more recently we've seen a transition from death to life in Tunisia. The suicide of a frustrated young man just a month ago culminated in the flight on Friday of the corrupt, autocratic president. Out of the ashes of that young man's death has arisen hope for the suppressed people of the whole nation. It is reminiscent of events in Eastern Europe twenty years ago.

This morning, as we continue in the story of Noah, we will see a transition from death to life. In this case the transition is represented by two birds: not a phoenix rising from the ashes, but a raven and a dove.

We saw last week that the turning point of the flood narrative is God's remembrance of Noah and those with him in the ark:

But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded. (Gen 8:1 TNIV)

The next eighteen verses describe these receding waters, culminating in the disembarkation from the ark of Noah, his family and the animals. In these verses we find the reversal of the arrival of the Flood that was described in chapter 7; most of the elements of that chapter find their counterpart in reverse in chapter 8. The text is in three main sections. It begins with the receding waters (2-5) and ends with the disembarkation (15-19)—counterparts to the embarkation and the prevailing waters of chapter 7. In between is a section with no counterpart: the lengthy central section about the raven and the dove (6-14).

The Waters Recede (8:2-5)

Now the springs of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens had been closed, and the rain had stopped falling from the sky. The water receded steadily from the earth. At the end of the hundred and fifty days the water had gone down, and on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. The waters continued to recede until the tenth month, and on the first day of the tenth month the tops of the mountains became visible. (8:2-5)

The waters of the Flood had broken upon the earth when the springs of the deep were burst asunder and the floodgates of the

heavens were opened (7:11). The result was rain upon the earth for forty days and forty nights (7:12). Now the springs of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens were closed, and the rain from the heavens was stopped. In both the opening and the closing of the sluice gates above and below the verbs are passive. We're not told who did the opening and the closing, but it was clearly God, who has sovereign power over his creation. It was he who had collapsed the boundaries that he had imposed at creation between the waters above and the waters below. He had covered the whole earth with water, returning it to its primeval state before the first creation, before he had spoken order into the chaos. Now he restored the boundaries, and the rain was withheld. But still the waters prevailed upon the earth for another 110 days. The Lord kept Noah waiting in the ark. The Flood had brought death to all that was not in the safety of the ark. Outside the ark death was still triumphant. Inside the ark Noah must wait patiently. For 110 days the waters gradually receded, returning to their places in the reservoirs above and below.

Finally Noah and those with him felt the bump of the ark hitting the mountains. Formerly there had been fifteen cubits of clearance above the highest mountains. Now there was no longer sufficient clearance, and the ark ran aground. On the 17th day of the seventh month, 150 days after the Flood came upon the earth on the 17th day of the second month (7:10), the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. Ararat is the name of a region, not the name of a specific mountain. It is the region now known as the Armenian highlands, at the intersection of Iran, Turkey and Armenia. Much later, roughly coterminous with the kingdom of Judah, the kingdom of Urartu flourished here. The ark rested somewhere in these mountains. Subsequent tradition has narrowed the site down to one particular mountain, the highest in the region at 5,000 m (17,000 ft). This is Mount Ararat. This is where all the expeditions search for the remains of Noah's ark. But the Bible does not say the ark grounded on this particular mountain.

Since the day when the rising waters lifted up the ark, it had drifted over the surface of the earth. Noah had had no ability to steer it, since the ark lacked a rudder. The ark was at the mercy of the waters, or rather at the mercy of God who controlled the waters. But God wanted Noah and those with him to live, so he had been safe. The ark's wanderings were now over and it came to rest (*nuah*), a play on Noah's name.

But still Noah must be patient. For another two months and fourteen days the waters continued to diminish, until, on the first day of the tenth month, the mountain tops were again visible, reversing their prior covering (7:19-20).

The Raven and the Dove (8:6-14)

The second section details Noah's sending of two birds. A remarkable amount of space is given to these birds—seven verses. First we read about the raven:

After forty days Noah opened a window he had made in the ark and sent out a raven, and it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth. (8:6-7)

After forty days Noah opened a window which he had made in the ark. We didn't read about this window when the Lord gave Noah careful instructions about how he was to build the ark, unless it's the *zohar* he was told to make. Out of this window Noah sent a raven. The raven is the largest member of the crow family. These birds are opportunistic scavengers. They are not picky about what they eat; they eat whatever they can find, be it roadkill or a discarded bag of french fries or chips. We provide plenty of such food which is why we're suffering an infestation of crows. As their taste for roadkill shows, the crow family are carrion birds, feasting on dead animals.

Ravens are a popular tourist attraction today at the Tower of London, since Charles II issued a royal decree that there always be six of them at the Tower, lest the legend be fulfilled that the absence of the ravens spell the end of both the tower and the kingdom. But for Israel the raven was not a positive bird. The raven was an unclean bird because it feeds on carrion, on death. In the food laws of the Torah, the raven was included in the list of birds that Israel was forbidden to eat. These birds are described as detestable (Lev 11:13-19).

The raven must have had a great time flying back and forth. There was plenty of carrion on which to feed, plenty of dead bodies, both human and animal. There were plenty of eyeballs to pick out. The raven here is symbolic of death. Many artistic representations of the flood story depict the raven perched on a carcass on which it is feasting. The raven's presence here signifies that death still reigned upon the earth—except for in the ark, the one sanctuary of life amidst the death and destruction.

Next Noah sent out a second bird, a dove:

Then he sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of the ground. But the dove could find nowhere to perch because there was water over all the surface of the earth; so it returned to Noah in the ark. He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark. (8:8-9)

Where the raven was so unclean that it was detestable, the dove was so clean that it was suitable for offering to God in sacrifice. Noah sent out this bird as his spy, to see if the waters had dried up from the surface of the ground. As the dove flew to and fro over the waters she found nowhere to perch. The raven had had no such problem; he was happy perching on the dead bodies. But the dove would not contaminate herself with death. And so the dove returned to Noah, to the ark. Here the narrative slows down to give us a close view of the dove's return. As if in slow motion, Noah reached out his hand, took her, and brought her in to himself, into the ark. It's a moment of great tenderness. Here we have another wordplay on Noah's name, though TNIV unfortunately obscures it: the dove found no resting place (*manoah*) for the sole of her foot, so she returned to Noah, whose name means rest. Where the raven represents death, the dove represents life. Outside the ark death and destruction still reigned. The ark had found its resting place on the mountains of Ararat, but there was not yet any resting place outside the ark for living creatures. Life was still confined to the ark.

Seven days later Noah sent the dove out a second time:

He waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its

beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth. (8:10-11)

That evening, after a day spent flying around, the dove returned to Noah, to the ark. But this time there was a momentous difference. Look, a freshly plucked olive leaf was in its mouth. Noah now knew that the waters had receded from the earth. The spy had accomplished its mission. What joy there must have been in the ark. The olive leaf itself was small, but what it represented was of great significance. Life had returned to the devastated earth outside the ark. Vegetation, which forms part of the structure of the earth, had returned. The earth was once again habitable, ready for life. Ever since, the olive branch has been symbolic of life and peace.

After another seven days Noah sent the dove out a third time:

He waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, but this time it did not return to him. (8:12)

This time the dove did not return. She must have found a resting place for the sole of her foot. Now she had the privilege of leading the way in the recolonization of earth, an earth that had been scrubbed clean. We hear no more of the raven; its duty was done. The herald of death had been replaced by the herald of life.

Meanwhile the waters continued to subside:

By the first day of the first month of Noah's six hundred and first year, the water had dried up from the earth. Noah then removed the covering from the ark and saw that the surface of the ground was dry. By the twenty-seventh day of the second month the earth was completely dry. (8:13-14)

Noah had sent out the dove to see, to be his eyes upon the earth. Now Noah removed the covering from the ark and he saw for himself. He looked and behold, the surface of the ground was dry. The date was the 27th day of the second month, six months and ten days after the ark had come to rest on the mountains of Ararat, one year and ten days after the start of the Flood. Both the earth and the face of the ground were dry. The Flood was over. Death was over. Now it was time for life.

Disembarkation (8:15-19)

Then God said to Noah, "Come out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and their wives. Bring out every kind of living creature that is with you—the birds, the animals, and all the creatures that move along the ground—so they can multiply on the earth and be fruitful and increase in number on it."

So Noah came out, together with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. All the animals and all the creatures that move along the ground and all the birds—everything that moves on the earth—came out of the ark, one kind after another. (8:15-19)

The Lord commanded Noah to disembark. Just as he had commanded Noah to enter the ark and to bring the animals in with him (7:1-4), so now he commanded him to exit the ark and to bring the animals out with him. And again Noah was obedient. Just as he had entered the ark with his family, and the animals had entered (7:7-9), so now he exited from the ark with his family, and all the animals exited the ark. In both cases, embarkation and disembarkation, Noah waited for the Lord's command before acting. We never hear Noah speak in this story, but time and again we see him act. Always he acts according to the word of the Lord. Throughout the flood narrative he is a model of faithful obedience. Here we have a man who is righteous, blameless in his generation, and walks with God.

The ark had now served its purpose. It had kept life alive through the destructive waters of the Flood. Those same destructive waters had both brought death to all outside the ark and held up the ark in which life was preserved. Life was now ready to re-colonize the earth, led by the dove which had a sizable head-start. Noah was to bring the animals out of the ark so that they could swarm over the earth and be fruitful and multiply. This again is the language of the first creation account, where God had commanded the waters to swarm with living creatures. He had blessed these creatures, commanding them to be fruitful, multiply and fill the waters (1:20-22).

The Dove's Search for Rest

The story of the raven and the dove invites symbolic interpretation, and many have been given. Both Jews and Christians have seen the dove's first failed sortie as symbolic of the weary soul, unable to find rest until it comes into the ark. The ark is symbolic of the place of rest for the weary soul, but as to the nature of that place of rest there is considerable variety of interpretation.

Jewish tradition understands the ark as symbolic of the sabbath day. The seven day intervals between the successive missions of the dove have invited speculation that these sorties took place on the sabbath. The weary dove returned not just to the ark, but to the sabbath day where it found rest. This is expressed in a Jewish liturgical song: *Yom Shabbaton*, one of the *zemirot* songs sung after sabbath service. My rough translation of the first verse is:

The sabbath day—there is no forgetting,
Its remembrance is like a fragrant aroma;
Yonah (the dove) found in it rest,
and there those whose strength is exhausted will rest.

In Hebrew it's much more pithy, with a careful rhyming scheme. The last two lines of this verse form the refrain, sung after each subsequent verse. The sabbath day was a refuge for Yonah the dove, and it remains a refuge for all whose strength has expired.

Christians have also understood the dove as symbolic of the weary soul, but the ark in which she finds rest is symbolic of God's salvation, or Christ. William Muhlenberg's hymn "Like Noah's weary dove" (1827) understands the ark as God's salvation:

Like Noah's weary dove
That soared the earth around,
But not a resting place above
The cheerless waters found.
Oh, cease, my wandering soul,
On restless wing to roam...
Behold the ark of God,
Behold the open door...

The famous commentator Matthew Henry described the dove in similar manner, as "an emblem of a gracious soul, which, finding no rest for its foot, no solid place or satisfaction in this world, this deluged defiling world, returns to Christ as to its ark, as to its Noah."

There is certainly truth here. God has provided a place of rest for his weary people, a refuge for the weary soul. I can't read the refrain of *Yom Shabbaton* without thinking of Jesus' invitation, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28).

The ark is clearly a place of refuge. But it was not so much a refuge for the weary soul as it was a refuge for life amidst death. God's purpose for the ark was as a refuge for the preservation of life, as he had

instructed Noah. To read the dove as symbolic of the restless soul seeking rest in the ark of God's salvation misses the point. That's not what the dove is doing here.

From Death to Life

On her first sortie outside the ark the dove was unable to find a resting place, so she returned to her rest inside the ark. But on her third sortie she did not return; she *had* found a resting place outside the ark. On her second sortie she brought back a token of life: the freshly plucked olive leaf. On her first sortie all life and rest was contained within the ark, but by her third sortie both life and rest were available outside the ark.

The raven is symbolic of death, the dove of life. These two birds are different in every way. The raven is big and black; it is detestable; it feeds on death. The dove is small and white; it is pure; and it heralds life. The sortie of the raven showed that death was still triumphant upon the earth. Life was confined to the ark, the chest which God had Noah build for the preservation of life. God's purpose was not simply that life be kept alive in this chest, but that after the Flood was over the earth be recolonized, that life exit from the safety of the ark and swarm upon the whole earth. The three sorties of the dove document the return of life to the earth, the triumph of life over death.

God does invite the weary soul to come and find rest in him, in his salvation, in Christ. As Augustine famously said, our hearts are restless till they find their rest in God. But God is about more than just giving us rest. He is engaged in turning death into life. Yes, the Flood brought destruction and death to the earth, but God's purpose was to wipe the earth clean so he could repopulate it with life.

The New Testament draws a parallel between the Flood and baptism. Noah was saved in the ark in which he was brought safely through the waters that brought death. Similarly, in baptism we are brought safely through the destructive waters that bring death. The Flood brought death and life. Baptism represents death and life. Our Scripture reading was Romans 6:1-14. Paul is emphatic that the Christian life is not about simply coming to Christ then carrying on living our lives the same old way. In baptism we die and rise to new life. When we are baptized into Christ Jesus we are baptized into his death, buried with him, then raised with him into new life. Yes, we are kept safe in the refuge of Christ, but there is something that lies beyond that refuge: new life. God has saved us not simply so that we might have a refuge in Christ, but so that we might have new life. We have died to the old nature, and risen to new life. God is now recolonizing the earth with people who have been brought through death into new life.

The raven represented death; all around us are the signs of death. But we have been given life; that's what our baptism represents. God now sends us out to recolonize the world, to colonize his kingdom as he spreads it across the world. He wants us to swarm upon the earth, to be fruitful and multiply and fill it. May this message of the raven and the dove fill us not just with comfort that we can come to Christ for rest and refuge, but with the hope and the excitement that he has turned our death into life and now sends us out into the world as bearers of life, seeking to bring life out of death wherever we go.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, into whose death and resurrection we have been baptized; the love of God, who loves us enough to turn our death into life; and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, who is God's invigorating, life-giving power at work in us, be with us all now and forevermore. Amen.

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