

-I was on my way down I-90 driving to church for Ash Wednesday worship. As usual, I had the radio on NPR and the headlines came across the air: "17 victims in a school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL. The shooter, a former student, carried an AR-15 automatic rifle and mowed down students as they were changing classes. The suspect is now in custody." I have to admit, I immediately turned off the radio and drove the rest of the way to church in silence. It is such an awful picture of violence, I guess like many of us, I chose to protect myself from letting it penetrate too deep. This is the 30th mass shooting in 2018 and the number seems like it will for sure increase.

-Even though we at moments have to, for self-protection, shield ourselves from this violence I am determined not to let this be normal. This is not normal. This is not normal. As a future father, I am frightened of the violence that my future child will encounter and wonder, how did we ever get here?

-As people of faith, scripture can help reorient us, I think, in ways that allow us to move forward. Maybe this "Flood Story" of Noah can be that reorientation for us as we continue to struggle with violence in our time and place.

-Violence, for ancient Israel as I think it eerily is for us today, was a major challenge. Israel, in the time of the book of Genesis, was a small kingdom constantly under threat. Some scholarship points to that a piece of the book of Genesis might have been written during what is called the "Babylonian Captivity" or when Israel was conquered by the Babylonian Empire and exiled from their homeland. Death, capture, rape, torture were just a piece of the violence that Israel faced during this time.

-It's perhaps understandable then, that this violence carried into mythology and religious traditions, too. If you had an empire that beat and slaughtered other kingdoms, you ought to have a god that could do the same thing and back you up. Tiamat, Enlil, Ishtar, and Marduk were all gods and goddesses of Babylon that killed and punished others in violent ways. Of course, the new empire of the time that would eventually overtake Babylon, the Greek Empire, would become more famous for war gods: Ares, Mars, Phobos, and Athena all competed for the top spot in violence and terror.

-To be successful conquering group, you needed a religion that could strike terror into others. Which is why this story of God and "the bow" is so interesting.

-It's so interesting how this story of Noah is so often used in Sunday school complete with little stuffed animals and a boat, because it's actually a story of genocide and destruction. God is so fed up with creation that God wipes everything away except for one family (Noah's family) and some animals. What's more, this story more or less ends up as a failure. Turns out violence didn't really do what God thought. Just before our story this morning, in Genesis 8, it reads: "the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind..... nor will I ever again destroy every living

creature as I have done.” Theologically, it’s weird to say this “God’s mistake”, but I don’t know any other way to interpret these words.

-Following this, God makes a covenant with ALL people (notice not just Israel) and ALL living things on earth: never again. Then God puts the bow in the sky. I know we automatically think of a rainbow here for our Sunday School children, but the hebrew is actually very specific. God puts God’s bow (as in bow in arrow) down. What a radical and unusual step to take: a God putting the bow aside and saying never again will I use violence to wipe out the earth. The God of Israel is now radically different from the gods of Greece or Mesopotamia. This God has taken total violence and destruction off the the table.

-This doesn’t mean that the rest of the Bible is not full of violence, we all know that is not true. But from this point forward, the God of Israel has made a choice that violence is not the last word. Pastor Rob McCoy writes: “This [flood story], in a way, is a story that is outdated. It tells of a God that no longer exists. It is a reminder of how people thought of how gods acted in the world, but is also a foundation to how God is different.”

-So where does this leave us? I think to start with, we need to say: theology matters. There is a strong strain of Christianity that envisions Jesus coming back as a warrior, ready to destroy those that have opposed him. This twisted theology is often wrapped in terms like rapture and tribulation (popularized by the Left Behind series). But, this story of Noah flies in the face of all that. The promise of God lies not in the mode of destruction, but in the act of “never again”. God is hanging up the bow - God is giving up that kind of behavior. Maybe we should too.

- Elizabeth Webb, Theologian in the Episcopal Church writes: “That bow in the clouds is the sign of God’s promise that whatever else God does to seek our restoration, total destruction is off the table. An implication of this promise is that God will try everything else. God will seek us and seek us, despite or perhaps because of God’s knowledge of every sin, every grief, and every shame that veils our vision of God’s reality. Whatever dwells in our hearts that keeps us from hearing the harmony of all life in God’s care, God will not give up on loving us into restoration.”

-One of the many disturbing patterns of mass shootings is this: 97% of mass shooting events between 1982 and 2017 have been done by males. The connection between our warped sense of being male in our society and violence is staggering. In Montana, we have a front row seat to this. Being male means you can only show basically two emotions: a “party boy” kind of happiness or “I’m gonna kick your *bleepin *bleep” anger. That’s not a very emotional large tool box is it? Now add depression, mental illness, and guns into the mix and things start to go downhill quickly. Maybe we need another image of what maleness and power looks like. Maybe males like myself need to learn another way of being male that is not based on a twisted sense of power. Maybe real power comes from hanging up the bow.

-Our world is full of violent gods, so the church doesn't need to throw one more log on that fire. Instead, maybe we need to teach another path to our kids. Maybe this Lenten season we need to look deeper into our stories of faith and loudly proclaim: "never again." May the grace of God be with us on this challenging journey. Amen.