Living Our Goodness

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Works Cited in this Sermon:

Borderline Americans by Katherine Benton-Cohen

Border Citizens by Eric V. Meeks

Made for Goodness by Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu

Recently on instagram, I came across something rather controversial.  The website Epicurious, which has cooking tips and recipes, had a poll showing pictures of different a variety of different desserts and asking one question: is this a cobbler?  There was a variety of pictures - all fruit desserts, some with toppings made of cake, or biscuit, or crumble, or pastry.

And, as I’m sure you can imagine, the polling was lively and the debate about was vociferous about what constitutes a cobbler.  I believe people also feel strongly about chili, or barbecue, or whether the Thanksgiving table has stuffing or dressing.

Now all of this is meant in good fun, because generally we understand that in different regions, the same dish might go by another name, or the same name might be applied to different dishes.

However, I have experienced, and maybe you have too, that moment that takes you completely aback, when you’re going to a party, and you bring a cobbler, or whatever, and you get there and, someone says to you, in all seriousness, “You know, that’s not really a cobbler.”  And they proceed to tell you how you have done something wrong, and clearly you don’t know what a cobbler really is.

I’ve had this happen to me more than once and really I don’t care if you think my cobbler is a cobbler or not, but it has illustrated to me a certain point: That people will always find a way to try and set themselves above other people, to exclude and demean others, even if it’s about something as trivial as a cobbler.

The issue isn’t cobbler, it’s their need to create a division between you and them.

If you’re wondering how I’m going to get from cobblers to Noah and the Flood, we’re on our way, but first we’re going to stop in Bisbee, Arizona.

In 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the U.S.-Mexico War, and in 1853 the Gadsden Purchase, which included what would become New Mexico and Arizona, guaranteed Mexican citizens in those areas the right to US citizenship.  Because federal law at that time stated that only “white” immigrants could be naturalized citizens, all of the Mexicans in that area were therefore, legally, white, Mexican, and American.

Fast forward to 1917.  Historian Katherine Benton-Cohen writes about an event called the Bisbee, Deportation.  Bisbee was an ethnically and nationally mixed mining town - mostly Americans, Mexicans, and Slavs, though there was a large variety of other groups as well.  Sheriff Harry Wheeler temporarily deputized about two thousand men. And they gathered early one morning and, armed with rifles, swarmed through the town searching for targets - those suspected of being a part of, or supporting, a labor strike.

But it’s notable that the question Sheriff Wheeler used to determine his targets as he pounded on doors was not, “Are you a striking miner?” or “Are you supporting the striking miners?”  His question was - “Are you an American, or are you not?”

In his mind, labor radicals, Mexicans, and Slavs, and, importantly  anyone else with a questionable hold on “whiteness” were all NOT American.  And while the people they targeted were not all US citizens, they were US residents.  These men were rounded up, put into boxcars, and shipped into the New Mexico desert and left to die.  They were rescued by a nearby Army camp.

So, in the border region, between the mid-19th century and the early days of WWI, things had shifted, significantly, and several times.  Harry Wheeler believed in a clear racial divide - that, in Bisbee, to be American meant you were white, and vice versa, and to be not white meant you were Mexican or something else.

Historian Eric Meeks, and many others, have written much about “whiteness,” and how it was and has been under what Meeks calls “constant negotiation” in American life.  Various ethnic and national groups have been deemed “not white” and therefore “undesirable” or “un-American,” only to then wrestle their way to claiming whiteness, usually by excluding someone else.

Previous to the Bisbee Deportation, Mexicans and Americans in that border region frequently viewed themselves as the same - ethnically, legally, and socially, and were united at different times against different groups - the Apaches, against Chinese immigrants, and against white Cowboys.  So the divisions that were so clear in the mind of Harry Wheeler and his deputies were, historically, in fact, not clear at all.

But in 1917, being a white American meant that Harry Wheeler could look around his town, decide he didn’t like what he saw - and flood the town with deputies to wash people away.  To give a real, tangible meaning to the divisions that he saw between them. When they asked, “Are you American, or are you not?,” they were saying, “I am American, there is a division between me and you, and that gives me the power to decide what to do with you.”

In our Scripture today, God decides to wipe humanity off the face of the earth, except for Noah and his family.  Our Scripture actually skips over the ark and goes straight to the end, where God promises not to kill everyone on the entire planet again, and says that rainbows will serve as a reminder of that promise.

This leaves me feeling a bit uneasy.  Because my guess is that, whatever people were doing to each other in ancient times to upset God so much- we must be doing things a hundred times worse today.

It all seems a bit inevitable - humans make poor choices, humans grasp for power, humans hurt and humiliate one another seemingly as a matter of fact.  A lot of people like to use the phrase - “history repeats itself.” I take issue with that phrase because I don’t believe that history repeats itself.

I think what we really mean when we say that is this: humanity repeats itself.  Human beings repeat themselves, because we are greedy, selfish, violent, and angry.  So we find new and original ways to exclude, harm, and kill each other.

We see this in events like the Bisbee Deportation, where men wielded rifles, yes, but also institutional, political, and social power to literally rid themselves of people they didn’t like.  We see this in small, everyday events like bringing a cobbler to a party and being told that, somehow, a cobbler is wrong. Big and small, people drawing divisions between themselves and others.

And let’s just pause here before I move on and say that I don’t care what kind of topping your cobbler has, I’m going to eat it, because cobbler is never wrong.

In our Scripture, God promises, “never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

This alone is a basis for a very dysfunctional relationship.  “I can kill you, but I’m not going to.” And yet, here we are and we’re supposed to be thankful that God doesn’t just wipe us out.

Now there’s nothing wrong with being glad to live another day.  We all know that nothing is guaranteed.

But living in trembling fear of a God who might just reach down and snuff us out like a candle - how can we celebrate that and then say that God loves us unconditionally?  Unconditional love does not hover behind us, threatening to kill us if we put one foot wrong.

So what is this story?  Where did it come from?

I did a little research preparing for this.  You may know there are many, many other Flood Myths from the ancient world.  They share striking similarities and were probably told orally, though of course some of them were written down, which is how we know about them today.  They can be traced to Ancient Sumer, the southern region of Ancient Mesopotamia, 3,000 years before the common era. While the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers flooded every year in Mesopotamia, there is evidence that they tended to roughly alternate between mild flooding that allowed for crop growth, and violent, destructive floods that lead to death and disaster.  So perhaps the story began because people wanted to explain what this flooding told them about the gods.

So let’s take that approach.  What does the story of Noah tell us about our world and about our God?  Maybe that God is angry, and vengeful, and violent. But then God makes a promise, though as I said before, “I promise not to kill you even though I can” is a really poor foundation for any relationship.

Instead, let’s look at this story in the context of the entire Bible.  This story, though it occurs very early on, points, as all things do, to Christ.  It points us to redemption. It points us to reconciliation. It points us to a God who covenants with us multiple times, even though we seem to circle inevitably back to violence.  So instead, God sends us an example, a teacher, a precious son who will die and rise again, to show us how deep God’s love is for us.

Instead of living trembling in fear of retaliation, we can live resting in the assurance of God’s love for us.  Not afraid that God will wipe us out any moment, but afraid that we will *miss out* on a moment - to serve, to show God’s love, to share the good news of a God who never gives up on us.  A God who makes eternal promises and keeps them.

So why the flood at all, then, if this is a story about God’s promises?  Let’s look at that flood, at the storm. One of the other flood myths, the Atra-hasis Epic, describes the flood in this way: “The flood came forth, its power came upon the peoples like a battle, one person did not see another, they could not recognize each other in the catastrophe.”

It’s hard to imagine, a flood so powerful that you could not recognize your own family, your own loved ones in the downpour.  To be surrounded by people you should know, yet to be isolated because you don’t know who or where is safe, you don’t know where there is someone you can love and trust.  You are surrounded by people and yet you know no one.

In a storm of that power, people become faceless.

People become less than human.

In your own struggle for survival, other people become disposable.

The flood may be God’s, but I think that the storm is ours.

A destruction, not just of humans, but of humanity. A storm of inequality, exclusion, and violence.

A storm that allows a sheriff, wielding the institutional power of his office, to throw people out of a town like trash, and sentence them a terrible death in the desert.

A storm that allows Pennsylvania priests, wielding the power of their religious institution, to abuse thousands of children for decades without repercussion.

A storm that allows government-sponsored gangs in Latin America to torture and rape people, and when those people flee their homeland for ours, instead of finding sanctuary they find their children being torn from their arms and sent they know not where.

The storm robs people of their faces, of their humanity, and simultaneously blinds *us* to the systems and institutions of injustice that make such atrocities possible.

The problem is that someone else’s humanity exists outside of our determination and validation.  The privilege of bestowing humanity belongs only and always to God. When we demean, harm, and exclude others, we chip away not at their humanity, but our own.  How we treat people who are “beneath” us - economically, socially, politically - the poor, the imprisoned, the refugee - is not a reflection of their humanity, but of ours.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter Reverend Mpho Tutu Van Furth explain the concept of Ubuntu in this way: “My humanity, we say, is bound up with your humanity....we recognize that we all need to live our lives in ways that ensure that others may live well.  Our flourishing should enhance the lives of others, not detract from them.”

In Hosea 8 the prophet speaks: “For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.”  When we sow injustice, when we sow institutionalized racism, when we sow hunger, and poverty, and political disenfranchisement, we reap what we sow - a storm of such proportion that we no longer recognize the humanity of entire groups of people, because to dehumanize them means we don’t have to treat them the way we would like to be treated.

Let’s return to the beginning of the Scripture.  It doesn’t actually say that God is angry. It describes God as grieved.  Sorry and grieved.

*Why* is God grieved?

Because God has intended us for better than this.

God has intended us for goodness.

Archbishop Tutu tells us: “If wrong was the norm, it wouldn’t be news.  Our newscasts wouldn’t lead with the latest acts of murder or mayhem, because they would be ordinary.  But murder and mayhem are not the norm. The norm is goodness.”

To say that we are good is not to deny that we do evil.  To say that we are intended for goodness is not to wipe out every bad thing that ever happened.  It is not to placate, patronize, or dismiss the concerns of people who have been harmed. It is to say that, regardless of what *we* intend *God* intends us for good.

God intends that we help each other, lift each other up, choose goodness.  Archbishop Tutu and Reverend Tutu Van Furth challenge us: “What is the quality of life on our planet?  It is nothing more than the sum total of our daily interactions. Each kindness enhances the quality of life.  Each cruelty diminishes it.”

Creating borders between ourselves is not inevitable.

Borders require belief and they require participation.

Differences between us require belief and they require participation.

Now difference is not inherently bad - differences in background, culture, upbringing, language - these are all beautiful things that add richness and diversity to our lives.  What I am talking about is the stratification we have created in our value as human beings. Stratifications that we base on race, gender, economic status, nationality, sexuality, and almost anything else that we can think of.

There is no difference between my value and the value of a woman fleeing her home in Honduras or Nicaragua for fear of torture, rape, or death.  There is no difference between the value of my precious, beloved son and hers. They are equally loved and equally valued and equally human in the eyes of God.  And yet many of us did not realize it, or realized it only in theory, until a photo was published and shown on the news of a little girl crying while her mother was searched at the border.  That photo *gave a face* to those children, and we saw in her terror and fear our own.

It is our responsibility as humans, as children of God, as people who wield institutional power, as Christian who claim to preach the love of an unconditionally loving God, to lean into our potential, to live our goodness.  Listen to ArchBishop Tutu and Reverend Tutu Van Furth a final time: “Living our goodness is our way of testifying that we know ourselves to be perfectly loved by God.”

Over time, a long time, we have sown a wind and a reaped a whirlwind.  A storm where the people who we consider “less than” are unrecognizable, where we cannot see their faces because we don’t want to acknowledge their humanity.  And God is grieved by our storm.

But that storm is OUR creation, and not God’s.

And though we may not always believe it, or believe ourselves worthy, God has sown *us*, into this time and place, to nourish and grow our goodness.

When we look for which direction to grow, God points us always to redemption and reconciliation and Christ.

God wants us to give people back their faces, to give humans back their humanity, and reap a bountiful harvest of goodness.