

Waters of New Life, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 03080601
Genesis 8:11-22, 7:24, 8:14-19 and Matthew 7:21-29
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We have walked with the Gospels through Jesus' birth, arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection, and his giving the Holy Spirit to his followers. Now, it is time to listen to what Jesus taught and did during his lifetime. This is the Gospel, the good news.

Sometimes, what Jesus taught and what the church promotes as doctrine are at odds with each other. The church has always been concerned with institution building. In accruing and holding on to power, the church has with certainty promoted what it calls truths and dogmas. I am never so uncomfortable as when I hear a televangelist proclaiming what he, and it is usually a "he," knows to be a biblical truth. Of course, the Vatican knows without a doubt that God never intended for a woman to be a priest.

If my salvation is in Jesus Christ, then it is important that I look to him for clues about how to live this life. To confess Jesus Christ as Lord does not mean that I am saved just because I said that. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."¹ Our faith in God as shown to us by Jesus will be obvious in our words and actions. This is not to say that we earn our salvation, no. We are saved through God's grace, but, if we are followers of Jesus Christ, it will show in how we treat others.

Jesus teaches us something quite different about the nature of God than what many had taught before. "The crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes."² When he said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God,"³ he was telling us something about God and God's children. He said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven..."⁴ We need to focus on what Jesus said and did, although his words are difficult to discern, because they are often buried in the institution-building of the Church. Jesus teaching and action shed new light on the nature of God.

As we look at it, the story of the flood seems to reflect a violent and vengeful God. God destroyed the earth with a flood. Genesis Chapter 6 says, "God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. In just five chapters, God's opinion changed from "Everything is very good," to "everything is corrupt and violent." Human sinfulness had led to the earth's destruction.

We can see evidences of earth's destruction through human sinfulness today. Human greed and self-centeredness have led to the annihilation of whole species of animals. They have led to the destruction of mountains and valleys in West Virginia, as power companies worship King Coal.

Greed and self-centeredness have polluted air and water. The human tendency is to squeal like a stuck pig when asked to do our share in the cleaning up of the Haw River and Jordan Lake. Our human sinfulness could lead once again to the destruction of all things living.

The flood had not so much to do with a vengeful God as with natural destructive tendencies of human beings. In the midst of the violence and destruction, God had compassion. God

¹Matthew 7:21

²Matthew 7:28-29

³Matthew 5:9

⁴Matthew 5:44-45

provided a way for some creatures, including every animal and bird, to survive. God went beyond justice and provided a new beginning. Water is the means of cleansing and rebirth.

Let me tell you where the Hebrews probably first heard this story of the flood. It was in the years following 587 BCE, when the residents of Judea were taken into captivity in Babylonia. Here, they heard the stories of Babylonian mythology, among them the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Babylonian Flood. Utnapishti was hero of flood.⁵ Gilgamesh, upset by the death of his dear friend, Enkidu, and afraid of his own death, journeyed to see Utnapishti. He found out how Utnapishti achieved eternal life. Utnapishti was given instructions to build a boat. He found out that the purpose of the flood was to rid the earth of sinful humans. "All that I had I now loaded aboard (the vessel). All that I had of Silver I loaded aboard her, all I had of gold did I load aboard her; yea, of the species of all living creatures, all that I had did I load aboard her. I made enter the vessel all my family and kindred; beasts wild and domestic and all the craftsmen I made enter the vessel."

It rained seven days and all humankind returned to clay. The boat landed on Mt. Nisir which held it fast. Utnapishti released a dove. It came back because there was no resting place yet. Then, he released a raven. It ate, flew about, and didn't come back. Utnapishti and his family had survived the flood. Utnapishti thus achieved eternal life.

The Hebrews, the writers of the Bible, took this old Babylonian flood story and turned it into a story about the one true God, Jahweh. Where there were many gods in Babylonian mythology, now the story related to one God. Where people were the playthings of the gods in the mythology, now people are loved and cared for by God as a loving but distraught parent. Where Utnapishti had achieved eternal life at the mouth of a river, Noah lived to be nine hundred fifty years old, but he died. There is only one God.

Noah and his family escaped chaos and took part in a new and clean creation. The waters of the flood brought new life. It was a chance to start all over again.

Through Jesus, we gain a deeper understanding of God. God is compassionate, not violent or vindictive. When waters surround us, we know they won't drown us. God is with us, giving new life!

We have witnessed three great deluges in the past three and a half years. In 2004, the great Tsunami in the Indian Ocean killed 225,000 people. Hurricane Katrina was responsible for causing \$81.2 billion worth of damage and killed 1,836 people⁶ And now, Cyclone Nargis has devastated Myanmar or Burma. Were these watery destroyers acts of God, or were they the results of natural geologic and atmospheric processes? Is God to be found in the destruction, or in the compassion?

The Myanmar military regime, jealously guarding its power and authority, has thwarted assistance. The people of Myanmar have turned to the Buddhist monks for assistance. These monks, these people of God, have devoted their lives to the well-being of others. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."⁷

As we are baptized into the body of Christ, we are immersed into his ways of living. The waters of baptism bring new life. It is a chance to start all over again. I will be interested to see what new life God will be creating out of the waters.

⁵"The Story of the Flood" *Documents from Old Testament Times*, © 1958, Edinburgh, Thomas Nelson and sons Ltd., Ed. By D. Winton Thomas

⁶Wikipedia "Hurricane Katrina"

⁷Matthew 7:21