

Imago Dei, Part 3: When Grace Fell Like Rain
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Scripture: Genesis 6:10-18; 9:8-17

Thus far in our series we've been challenging the popular Christian notion that only Christians go to heaven while the rest of the world is destined to suffer eternal punishment in hell. We have been examining the foundation upon which this belief is based: namely, the doctrine of Original Sin. According to this doctrine, when humanity ate the forbidden fruit growing in the Garden of Eden, we committed an offense so grievous that the original couple could not suffer enough to pay for it. Indeed, they and all their descendants after them were condemned to be tortured for eternity in hell. We were condemned, that is, until Jesus came to take our sin upon himself, accepting the punishment we justly deserved, so that all who believe in him might be saved from hell and receive eternal life. Those who have not accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior must "turn or burn."

Of course, this version of Christian faith may be very far from your own, and thus you may wonder why we would bother to challenge it here. We bother because we have become the Christian partner in Omaha's Tri-Faith Initiative, which has brought us into closer conversation not only with Jews and Muslims, but with fellow Christians who believe that Jews, Muslims, and people of any other faith but Christianity are destined for hell. Some of these Christians further believe that our assertion that these religions worship the same God that we worship, and our abstaining from trying to evangelize them, means we share in the responsibility for their fate. According to some, in fact, we may even join our Jewish and Muslim friends in hell for our apostasy.

So this Original Sin doctrine is no small matter – for anyone concerned for the future of their souls. If we are defined in God's eyes by Original Sin, we are lost. Yet as we've found in our re-examination of the stories of Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel, we may be marked by Original Sin, but in God's eyes we are *defined* by Original Grace. And Grace changes everything. Both stories, which are interpreted by many Christians to be simple stories of sin and punishment, are not about sin and punishment but rather are about sin and *salvation*.

So where does that leave Jesus if he did not come to save us from our sins? Jesus *did* come to save us from our sins. And one of the foremost sins Jesus came to save us from was self-righteous condemnation of others, which in our day surely includes condemning others who have found God's salvation through other messengers God has sent.

Indeed, if you take Jesus and his message seriously, you begin to realize that Jesus is not the only one who came to save us from our sins. God has continually raised up prophets and other messengers throughout history to save us from our sins, which is to

say, to save us from ourselves. For, hell is not God's creation for the afterlife, but is something we humans create in this life. From the Book of Genesis through Revelation, we find God continually saving us from the hell we create for ourselves and claiming us for heaven – a heaven whose first fruits are already ripening in this life, not merely the next. As Jesus taught, the Kingdom of Heaven is already here. Jesus calls us to change our whole way of thinking and believe the Good News. (Matt 4:17; Mark 1:15)

Now, this claim that heaven is already here has always evoked skepticism among those who look out at the world and see more evidence of conflict and struggle than peace and prosperity, and rightly it should. Heaven is not merely to be equated with this world. Rather, heaven is a *condition* that may be found, and claimed, within it. If you don't find heaven in this life, then life feels a lot more like hell. The only hope to be found, then, is either escape from this world in death, or God's bringing some sort of apocalyptic end to the present world and creating a new one.

Speaking of apocalypse, how about that Noah story? Admittedly, the story of the Flood seems more like a Bad News story of God's judgment and wrath than a Good News story of God's grace and love. And the fact that all but a handful of God's creatures survive the Flood while the rest are wiped out seems to argue strongly against the idea that heaven can be found in the here-and-now. In fact, the Flood story provides some key inspiration to those who believe that our present day-and-age has become so corrupt that God will essentially do to us what God did to humanity in Noah's time, only with fire this time, not water.

Is this story merely one of God's wrath carried out upon sinners through a watery apocalypse that serves as a precursor to a fiery apocalypse that lies ahead?

Deep breaths! We must recognize first of all that the Flood as described in the Bible never actually happened in an historical sense. There is absolutely no credible historical or scientific evidence to support the claim that the earth was flooded 5,400 years ago or that an ark saved earth's creatures. You can certainly find plenty of websites claiming that there is evidence for the biblical flood but these have about as much credibility as the "fake news" sites we've been hearing so much about lately. Indeed, the main proof against the historicity of the Flood comes not just from science but from the Bible itself.

Do you remember how many days the Flood is said to have lasted? If your answer is 40, you are right. But if your answer is 150, you are also right. Both claims are found in Genesis.

Do you remember how many animals were brought into the ark, according to Genesis? If your answer is a single pair from every living species, you are right. But if your answer is seven pairs of every clean species and one pair of all unclean species, you are also right.

The fact of the matter is that there are two accounts of the Flood in the Bible, both of which contradict one another. Both were merged together by an editor who doesn't seem the slightest bit concerned with the contradictions because the editor knew that

the Flood story is not about something that happened long ago, but about something that keeps happening, over and over again, on up to the present day. The importance of the story comes not from its being God's word about yesterday, but God's word for today.

The message of the biblical Flood story is that when the world is on the verge of all hell breaking loose, it is more important than ever to listen for God's call to your life and follow it. Another message is that when the world is in the process of breaking down, it is useless to try to prop it up and save it. All you'll do is expend all your energy and resources in a losing battle. Sometimes the world needs to break down in order to be reformed into something new, and your role is to help usher in the new thing God is doing rather than maintaining an old way of life. It's like when a caterpillar's body breaks down and is transformed into a butterfly.

There is an interesting dynamic that takes place in the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly, actually, that is informative for following God's call in our time, and for our understanding of the myth of the Flood. *(Note: I write about this dynamic in my Pastor's Report for the Annual Meeting as well.)*

While in the caterpillar stage, all the caterpillar's cells and systems function normally and vibrantly – the “economy” thrives, the “social system” is essentially harmonious, and the main goal of the central nervous system is to keep everything operating as it has in the past. But when the caterpillar begins its metamorphosis, all its systems start breaking down – kind of like human civilization broke down in the Flood story. The systems break down so far, in fact, that the entire creature becomes a gooey mass inside a chrysalis that forms to hold it all in.

Yet, emerging within the goo are cells that are genetically similar to the caterpillar cells, yet are distinct in that they carry the coding for the butterfly that will emerge. This distinction is enough to trigger the caterpillar's immune system, which perceives these new cells as enemies and attacks them. The new cells continue to emerge, however, faster and faster, and begin to clump together with similar cells. Eventually the clumps themselves clump together and the butterfly's internal systems begin to take shape. At this point, the caterpillar's immune system can no longer keep up and becomes overwhelmed. The caterpillar's body becomes a nutritious soup for the growth of the butterfly.

In the Flood story, God works through Noah much like an imaginal cell that emerges inside a caterpillar whose body is in the process of breaking down into a gooey mess. Noah lives by a code that is different than the world around him – one that brings the world together rather than tearing it apart. It is a code that the world around him does not understand and even resists. Significantly, Noah saves the world not by literally going out and trying to bring the whole world together in peace and harmony, but by bringing together only a tiny fraction of the world – a fraction that God had specifically called him to embrace. What emerges when the flood waters abate is a world fashioned in closer alignment with God's vision, not the old world (dis)order. It is not a perfect world, by any means, but it is nevertheless a world that can take wing and fly.

The message I hear in the Flood story in our day is very much in alignment with the message I hear Jesus preaching in his day. In a world teetering on the edge of chaos and calamity, Noah built an ark, and Jesus built a church. Neither the inhabitants of the ark nor the members of the church were perfect. In fact, they had many of the same flaws of the old world order. Yet they also held a piece of God's vision for a new world order.

Each person had a slightly different sense of calling within God's new world, just as each imaginal cell plays a different role within the butterfly's genetic coding. Yet within their differences they each recognized a deeper unity that brought them together. Like imaginal cells clumping together, they formed a community that could not only withstand the stormy seas but would allow them to live by, and eventually spread, the code of heaven amidst the world's chaos and confusion.

I believe that Countryside Community Church is like a group of imaginal cells who have found each other and clumped together. On the one hand, our church is quite similar to other churches: we have similar programs; our worship style looks familiar to many in the Protestant tradition, and so on. On the other hand, what clumps us together is a new vision of the emergence of God's Realm on Earth.

In this new stage, human beings actually practice Jesus' Sermon on the Mount rather than merely preach it. We do so because we sense that our very survival is predicated upon following God's call to truly love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, pray for those who persecute us, give generously to those in need, and do away with the self-righteous condemnation we harbor toward others.

Our commitment to relocate to the Tri-Faith campus is not the only way we reflect this new "imaginal" pattern deep in our cells, but it is the most publically visible one. And, the Tri-Faith Initiative represents a new stage of development that is far bigger than we are. The Tri-Faith Initiative is, in essence, three "clumps" who have recognized the imaginal pattern in each other and are further clumping together. Could it be that these three "clumps" are helping to form a great ark that will carry humanity along to the next stage of its evolutionary journey?

The one thing I am certain of is that imaginal cells – in caterpillars or human civilizations – do what they do simply because they have the image of the new reality within them, not because they have a hunch about the success or failure of their endeavor. As a church of "imaginal cells," we will continue in 2017 to bear the image along, clumping with others who also bear the image and are attracted to it. And we will continue to prepare our community and ourselves for the day when we may stretch our wings and fly.