

My good friend Katherine, whom some of you have met - she facilitated our session retreat last year - once got the bright idea that we could raise money for the church youth group by having a large garage sale, to which the whole church would be invited to donate their *stuff*. The youth group would keep the proceeds from the aforementioned sale. So for several weeks ahead of time, we allowed the congregation to bring their junk, I mean their treasures, to the church. There was a designated collection point, a disused Scout hut, where the sale would eventually be held. Now, this congregation, I have concluded in retrospect, was either lazy or they didn't read the instructions, because for about the same period of time, Katherine would arrive home every day to find that someone had left some junk, I mean a treasure, sitting in front of her garage door. And, I would arrive at my office to find the well-meaning custodians had let someone into my office and they had deposited their junk, I mean, their treasure. On the Friday before the sale, the parents of the youth and I met in the Scout hut to price the merchandise. Finally, on the morning of the sale, were all ready to go. The door was to be opened at 6 a.m.; you know how much I like that time of day. At 5:30, still bleary, holding my coffee cup, we arrived to find there was a line, waiting at the door, of folks just antsy to paw through the detritus of other people's lives. After a day of dickering and dealing with the sort of people who frequent garage sales - it is a unique breed - we tallied up our total, which came to just under a couple thousand dollars that we had raised for youth missions, minus of course, what we needed to spend to haul off the remaining treasures, and by that I really do mean *junk*. When the final reconciliation was done, the parents and I looked at each other. Katherine said what was on all of our minds. "Ten people, working like dogs for weeks, to earn \$2000? What do you say next year, we all just write a check for \$200 so that we never have to do this again?"

I recently asked some folks what circumstances would cause them to say, "*Never again!*" For the most part, responses I got were ones that would give one hope for humankind, things like: *never again* compromising one's integrity, or sacrificing one's sense of self. There was a nod to nonviolence. And one of my minister friends felt inclined to push this in another direction. He brought up the movie *Staying Alive*. It went downhill from there. Let's just say at the end of the day, the conclusion that I had drawn was that it is a very good thing that it's Lent, because there are some things some of you need to give up. There really are circumstances in life that cry out for us say, "*Never again.*"

I think we know them perfectly well, and there can be a certain amount of lip-smacking satisfaction in calling out those circumstances that need to be labeled with the final "*Never again.*" I guess there is something very deeply satisfying about speaking prophetic words, those *Never agains!* that address the brokenness of what is there squarely in front of us. There is, undeniably, power in naming things. Some things need to be named.

There is also something very helpful about knowing whether what is being said or done is in fact actually helpful, as we declare our *Never agains!* In the church where I was raised, there was a Sunday school wing that was largely below ground; it was a rather dark and dreary place. The parents got the great idea to put murals on the walls to brighten the space up a little bit. It really

was a wonderful idea. And so from the top of the stairs down to the bottom of the basement, the animals marched two by two, down to the Ark. I loved it; the kids loved it. The animals were fantastic. It was only as an adult that I began to question what sort of message we were sending to the children by painting the walls with the story of the Ark, because, well, you know what happens! One day, I was wringing my hands over what to do for a children's lesson. A kindergarten teacher turned to me and said, "You do know that you can't protect children from the stories of the Bible, don't you? If you do your job right, they're going to learn them."

"Yes," I replied, "but what does this story teach them about God?"

The kindergarten teacher weighed her thoughts for a few moments and then she said, "It teaches them that God is holy, and they're never too young to learn that God is holy."

I suspect that at least a few of our adult consciences rebel against the idea of the story of Noah's Ark, don't they? Every living thing, minus a few on a boat wiped out by flood? If our consciences don't rebel at that, perhaps they should. There is something about a God who would clean up creation in quite such a way that isn't exactly cuddly. No one's going to confuse this particular God with being overly familiar. I don't think so! And yet, and the end of this story there is this bow, hanging in the sky.

The story, I think, tells us two important things. The first is that God's holiness is not a trivial thing. And second, it reminds us why God created humankind. Read back over the stories of creation - there are two of them. In the first one, God is very, very orderly. For the first three days of creation, God created places. Then, in the second three days of creation, God made things to go *in* those places. There was a place for everything, and everything was in its place. Repeatedly, in this version of the creation story, every time God got done making something, God would kind of sit back, look and say, "That's good."

There are two times, though, in that story, where God does not immediately say, "That's good." The first is when God is done, making the dome, that is, what will separate the waters that are above, from the waters that are below, so that everything in creation resides in between. There's the sky that holds out everything else; and there're the waters below. The second time that God paused and didn't immediately say *This is good*, is when God created the human being. In the midst of this orderly and beautiful creation, God places a particular creation made to reflect the image of God, made out of the overflowing of God's love, the overflowing of God's very self. In that particular moment, the only creature that God forms out of the dust of the earth with God's own hands, that's the only creature that God does not single out in creation to say it is good. God, rather, waits a few minutes and looks at the whole of creation, and says that that is very good. That is because, you see, the dome, and the human, will fail. The human will fail to live up to the image of God that is its birthright. And then, the dome will fail to hold back the waters. It is a stark telling of the story. But God is holy.

For the ancients, the very foundation of creation on which the whole earth rests is God's holiness that expects creation to function in particular ways. There are in Genesis stories of sin. Then there are stories of this great flood washing away all of creation. And then there are more stories of sin. Two stories of sin occur before the flood. Two stories of sin occur after the flood. It is as

though the whole narrative is designed to show us how and why God should despair of humankind. And yet in the midst of these stories of sin, the two before and the two after the flood wiped out everything in between, there is the covenant marked in the sky with a rainbow. And God says, “*Never again!*”

How God says *never again* is really important. God could have said it like that group of parents in a dusty Scout hut, who looked at what they had done, registered disgust at the outcome and thought of ways to never do it again. There was sin before the flood, there’s sin after the flood, nothing has changed. God could have then said it, registering hopelessness that humanity could never change. I have often wondered if God’s reticence in declaring the newly born human being “very good” indicated God’s foreknowledge that the human would fail. God could have said *never again* about needing humanity at all, because God doesn’t need us! God is complete in and of God’s self. Humanity does not complete God. God is God sufficiently. We are not “mini-me’s” who complete God.

Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the way that God says *never again* is something of a mystery. God doesn’t have to have us. God is complete. God is holy. No other portion of creation fails God in quite the same way that the sin of humankind does. It would be so easy for God to say *never again* to us about us. You know what wrath is. Wrath is the overflowing of God’s love when it is denied. The wiping clean of creation with the flood could be seen as the wrath of God on creation, which of course it is. God could have just left it there, wipe it out, be done, call it a day, walk away.

Creation had gone wicked. That’s what the Bible says. It was wicked. Walter Brueggemann pithily puts it, “Both the world and God have been denied their real character.”¹ What he means it is that creation has refused to be the creation, for the purposes for which God created it. And with that sin, God is denied God’s holiness. What a mess!

What a mess! God could have walked away, and yet God decided to find another way. God made covenant that *never again* would God use destruction to clean up creation. *Never again*. God would find another way. It’s a covenant, and what that means is that when God makes a promise, God keeps it. God, on the one hand, will not cease to be holy and cry out against wickedness, but neither will God destroy what God has made. It’s a terrible tension put right in the middle of creation. God will need to find another way to change the course. In the first epistle, Peter puts it so simply what God decided to do. Peter writes, “For Christ also suffered for sin, once and for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.”

Theologian Karl Barth says that the covenant with Noah was when God definitively said that God will forever be on the side of humankind. That means that God is on our side. That’s not something to gloat over. It is something to approach with fear and trembling, because - never mistake this - it is the *holy* God, who is on our side. It is the God who will stop short of nothing less than *holiness* for us.

We will celebrate baptism in just a few minutes, and invariably parents worry about whether or not their children are going to cry during baptism. I’ve never seen a parent who didn’t have at

¹ Brueggemann, Walter. *Genesis in Interpretation*. (W/JKP: Louisville, 1982) p76

least some anxiety about this. I had a minister friend a few years ago who said it's the ones that cry that get it. They know what you're doing to them. They know that you are sealing them into a life in which God will settle for nothing less than holiness.

God's *never again* opens the door for our own *never again* moments, because God is holy, and God has set us on a path in an expectation of holiness. We are called to live those *never again* moments. Yes, it is lip-smacking fun to pontificate about what somebody else ought to do *never again*. It's much harder work when you have to make sure that that *never again* becomes a reality. It's much, much harder work when you have to form community around the idea that God is holy, and God demands holiness from us.

You know, it's my job to poke and prod you. You asked God for a pastor, and God called me here. The rules of the Presbyterian church basically give me tenure, and here's why: I'm expected to prod you, push and pull you, into the holiness that God is calling for from each of us. Sometimes that means I ask you to give a lot of money. We certainly are doing that with this campaign, but much more often and much, much more importantly, my job is to tell you to be the *never again* that you know is needed in your own life, in your own circle of friends, in your own deeds and misdeeds, and even finally, after you have dealt with all of that, to be the *never again* that is needed for other people. That is hard work.

You may have noticed Drew is not here today. He is not on vacation. He is in Memphis. He and Ellen are there on church business; they are representing Morningside and the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta this morning, at this very hour. Drew is preaching at the Idlewild Presbyterian Church at the ordination of a woman named Lucy Strong. Lucy is the new Presbyterian campus minister at Agnes Scott, a ministry that Morningside had a strong hand in shaping through Drew's first two years with us here on our staff. Lucy will, in a few weeks, marry her partner Sarah. It is a season of extraordinary celebration for her in her life, but there is a fly in the ointment.

Normally, when a minister is to be ordained in his or her home church, the calling Presbytery (in this case the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta) asks the home Presbytery to ordain him or her on their behalf. It's not at all uncommon. I was examined for ordination in the Whitewater Valley Presbytery, and they in turn asked the Presbytery of Charlotte, where my home church was, to ordain me. It's common because folks want to be ordained in the communities that have loved them and led them into ministry. But Lucy's Presbytery declined to do so. Drew and Ellen are members of the commission from the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, who have traveled to Memphis today to ordain her, so that she may serve in this Presbytery. I'm incredibly proud of them for going, and I'm incredibly shocked that they needed to.

Sometimes you have to *be* the *never again*. I make no bones about how proud, how almost sinfully proud, I am of Morningside's work to be an inclusive congregation in a world that seems far too often to fracture along ideological lines. We stand and say, "All are welcome." And we say that at not one end of the political spectrum or the other; we are a heterogeneous congregation. We say it, not one at one end of the theological spectrum; we are a heterogeneous congregation. We are not just liberal or just conservative; we are not that, theologically, politically, or in any other way. I hope that is us being the *never again* to attitudes of exclusion

and judgment that so many of us encountered along our way to this place. But I know there is more. There is more for us to do as a congregation, and there is more for you to do individually. There are so many places in life where we need to be the *never again*. There are so many places where we need to say *never again*. The reason the babies cry is that we're baptizing them into a job that is never, ever finished. It will go on and on and on. The world will continue to need for people say *never again* to the places where God's will for wholeness, for *shalom*, for kindness, is missing. It goes on and on.

What a comfort it is to know that God is on our side, but you remember the way that Abraham Lincoln turned that on its head: The deeper question is not whether God is on our side, but always, whether we are on God's side.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.