

In the West, we typically enjoy happy endings, or stories that end with happily ever after. And most likely that is because they help us to forget about rocky beginnings, or the hardships or the rain that comes, prior to our receiving joy, sunshine and rainbows. Today's first lesson, in fact, contains a happy ending...but to grasp its full weight, we need to be shocked by the story that preceded it. Let's start though.....with a hypothetical situation.

Imagine Mom and Dad are wandering the aisles of a toy store looking for the perfect birthday gift for their little one. After passing Baby Yodas, Super Mario Legos, Cabbage Patch Kids, and Barbies, they come across a horrific toy concept — the Concentration Camp play set complete with Holocaust action figures of Hitler, Nazi soldiers, and Jewish prisoners. On the shelf right next to it is the 9/11 Twin Towers 3-D puzzle, and next to that is a Bosnian Genocide paint-by-numbers book.

Of course these Atrocities of History Play Sets would offend and outrage any parent — and they absolutely should! But interestingly enough, many families and most Sunday school children's ministries have something for the kids that could fit quite comfortably into this genre of toys I just mentioned — the story of The Flood. The Big One that took place all the way back in 10,000 B.C.E give or take.

Think critically about it for a minute. A torrential flood of rain drowns everyone in the countryside save Noah and his family. Polls regarding the most feared ways one could die usually cite being burned to death or drowning as the top two responses. This wasn't a calm and serene end to Noah's neighbors; it would have been horrifying, torturous even.

Yet Noah's Ark is usually portrayed as a cheery children's story. Fisher Price Noah's Ark toys and church preschool rooms painted with blue skies, smiling animals, and a beautiful rainbow. Happy melodies that our kids sing in church:

God told Noah to build him an arky-arky. Build it out of gopher barky-barky. Then after the flood: The sun came out and dried up the landy, landy. Everything was fine and dandy, dandy.

Fine and dandy except for the corpses that floated off and landed somewhere to decay. Even the writers of our lectionary preferred to skip the gruesome realities of the Flood. Nowhere in our three year cycle do we publicly read that “the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, ‘I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created.’” Nor do we ever read the words found in chapter 7 of Genesis, “[A]ll flesh died that moved on the earth.”

That feels just a bit like a cover-up doesn't it, like we'd prefer to ignore the hard parts of Scripture. In fact, to some degree we might even want to get God off the hook for the whole Noah story. Some say the flood had minimal impact, i.e., it was local and not global. Some claim the story was merely a myth copied from the Epic of Gilgamesh. Or, like the lectionary writers, some just ignore the death of many in favor of the saving of Noah's family.

While there may be some viability to the way many narrow the scope of this story, one point still sticks out: It's in the Bible. We may want to get God off the hook for the death of many, but God is perfectly comfortable staying on the hook! God wants us to know that lives were taken and it was for a reason.

Of course there's an appropriate neutering of this story for our kids, but as adults, we must look at the full reality of this horrific event and ask, “God — why?” That's where today's first lesson focuses its attention. The short answer is that Noah's flood and covenant were kind of like a theological performance art.

“Performance art,” in case you aren't familiar with it, was a term coined in the 1960s, referring to a living, artistic expression that is embodied by the artist. It is public, unconventional, often shocking, and like most art, attempts to

communicate meaning and stimulate a reflection in its audience. In that sense, God, the Performance Artist, used The Flood and the Rainbow as a shocking historical event, captured in Scripture, as a theological display for the rest of history to understand what God is like and what people are like. We're not to overlook or minimize the tragic loss of humanity in The Flood; we're to contemplate it carefully.

Genesis 6 gives us some of the back story for why the flood happened — punishment for the wickedness into which humanity had fallen. But the event had a much larger purposes than that. It was a display of what God could always choose to do in the face of human depravity. God could choose to do a System Reset, a System reboot, leave the situation when things turned upside down and just start over. That's a very common human response to difficult or imperfect situations that take place in relationships, churches or even in the workplace.

But Genesis 9 is God's covenant that assures Noah, and us, that what God could do, does not equal what God will do! God makes a promise that while his sovereignty allows for the wages of our sin to be immediately judged and a punished, his mercy will not make that the rule. In other words, God's grace bridles God's justice.

So God, the Performance Artist, throws a rainbow in the sky. This visual cue is important for two reasons. First, it is a reminder that the entire world is under the blessing of God's common grace. This grace is extended to "all flesh" — a promise that disobeying, disregarding and even disdaining the Creator will not result in one's immediate destruction.

As an author, or a pastor scripts a sentence, if those words they wrote down are not portraying what they hoped to convey, they can simply delete the sentence and start over. The same is true for God as the Creator of all the people in this world. If that which is created does not please the creator, the creator might justly

decide to start over. Thankfully, the unmerited grace we discover in the powerful, and often breathe taking view of the rainbow, is that God promises too not immediately do so.

Second of all, the message of the rainbow is important for Christians to remember as well. It's a reminder of the redemptive message that God's grace bridles his justice; not just immediately, but eternally as well. That message is one that we see visually written in the skies as a reminder of what is spiritually written across our souls.

In case you're wondering, "Ok so what does all this mean?..." here's the call to action. As we remember the reality of God's grace covering his justice against us, we can more easily extend grace and mercy to others. We see events of injustice all the time — from the ones that are featured publicly such as: the killing of George Floyd back in early May –to the most personal such as: people who wound us emotionally or physically; to the most superficial such as: drivers who cut us off. We are quick to feel anger. We are quick to want payback. We are quick to want God's justice to make things right. We get angry, irritated, peeved, judgmental, and spiteful, and we want some kind of flood of destruction, retribution, or justice to take place.

And yet as we journey to the Cross during the season of lent we are reminded that when we anger God, instead of another flood, God gives us blood — the blood of Christ, the most evocative performance art of all time. We want retribution; God gives us a rainbow. We want a tsunami; God gives us an ark. We want a sword; God gives us the cross.

So God sends us now into a fallen world as performance artists ourselves with the rainbow, the ark, the cross, and the very love of Christ to mediate justice on behalf of others, even those who have sinned against us. It could either be – all Flood all the time, against those who don't perfectly follow God – or it could be all

grace all the time. God chose the latter.... but which does our sense of right and wrong point us **toward** most often?

For these reasons, God left the rainbow as a dramatic piece of performance art to be re-enacted time after time in water-laden skies. Rainbows should be moments of comfort to us. They should be moments of conviction. They should be reminders that Light lies behind all beauty. That redemption is always possible. That God's grace bridles his justice.

God enacted a one-time event that would echo a timeless message through the remainder of human history. After a costly loss, God can usher in beautiful redemption. This is quite often the way of God. God promised that when the bow is in the skies, God will remember this message and his promise to humankind. Which begs the question, will we as well? As we journey with Christ toward his crucifixion and death during the next few weeks ,we may find ourselves wanting to get to that happy ending on Easter morning, but let's allow Lent to take us to the cross first! Amen.