

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee
March 5, 2006

Covenant of Life Genesis 9:17

The novel *The Thorn Birds* tells the story of a priest who struggles throughout his ministry with his conflicting desires to be with the woman he loves and to be faithful to his vow of celibacy. The last scene of the story brings to the priest a revealing moment of truth. He has been very successful in his career with the church, advancing to the rank of Cardinal. He knows he is very ill and death is near. Suddenly he realizes that he has deceived himself for all these years into believing that he was torn between his love of God and his love of a woman. The truth is that he has loved neither. Loving has always been secondary to his obsessive sense of personal ambition.

In that moment he understands what others had recognized for a long time. He lived to climb the professional ladder. Though he succeeded in his career as a church politician, he failed in the most important test of his life. He failed to become the man of faith that God had called him to be. He spent a lifetime fighting the wrong battle. The issue was never whether he could perfectly keep his priestly vows, but whether he could learn to serve God. He dies with the knowledge that he is like the thorn bird which swoops into the thicket where it impales itself on a large thorn.

Scripture does not gloss over the truth that we are often our own worst enemies. We are prone to choosing death over life without realizing the consequences of what we have done. The story of the flood in the ninth chapter of Genesis tells of a people who are tragically confronted with the result of their self-destructive choices. For the Old Testament people the flood was a very potent image. It was the waters of chaos which hovered over the world before creation. These waters represented everything which threatened human life. God's work of creation was specifically directed to tame these chaotic waters. Only when the waters were gathered into one place to form oceans could human life be sustained.

The people of the Old Testament lived in fear that the destructive waters of chaos might be unleashed again. Like the people of New Orleans they understood that the most frightening aspect of such a disaster is not the physical damage done by the water. It is the destruction of the social fabric on which we all depend. It is the damage done when hospitals cannot care for their patients; when police and firefighters cannot follow through on their responsibilities. It is the damage that follows when large numbers of people are evacuated to places where there is no provision for food, water, sanitation, or safety. It is the breakdown of social structures which feeds the biblical fear of the waters of chaos.

The story of the great flood in Genesis represents this nightmare come true. But the biblical writer does not see this as a random disaster. It is the direct consequence of a human community which chooses death rather than life.

When the flood ends, the survivors receive a message from God. The message comes in the form of a covenant. This covenant is not just for Noah and his shipmates. It is God's promise to all people that human destructiveness will never again prevail. God's commitment to create will win out over the human will to alienate and destroy.

The most surprising aspect of this promise for Noah and his friends is God's selection of the rainbow as the sign of the covenant. For Noah the rainbow is not a positive image. It is a sign that is associated with the destruction wrought by the waters of chaos. It is a sign that functions like the mushroom cloud does today for those who live in fear of a nuclear disaster. God takes Noah's symbol

of mass destruction and makes of it a symbol of hope. When Noah sees the bow in the sky he is reminded of the covenant of life.

It is the covenant of life that inspired a French lawyer named Claude Brousson. In the years before 1685 he defended many Huguenot friends against lawsuits which sought to harass them into giving up their faith. Then in 1685 Louis XIV burned down the Protestant churches and deported their ministers. Brousson fled to Switzerland where he began the study of theology. He completed his studies and was ordained to the ministry. Instead of serving a refugee congregation he chose to go back to the wilderness of his native country. There he traveled from one end of the country to another preaching to people who had no ministers. These gatherings were called “Churches of the Desert” and they met in isolated secret locations. He distributed booklets giving people direction on how to survive in the midst of persecution. He lived underground, going from one safe house to the next, trying to keep a step ahead of the authorities. Brousson knew that he would eventually be caught, tortured, and executed, but he was determined to do what he could to equip people to serve God in the wilderness. Everywhere he went he preached a message of hope as he called people to live joyfully as sons and daughters of God.

In Mark’s gospel we read that Jesus makes the same journey. When he was baptized he went directly into the wilderness. In the wilderness Jesus is fully immersed in the destructive chaos of the human experience. He goes into that chaos to be God’s symbol of hope. He goes to tell the good news that the chaos does not have the final word. The final word is God’s covenant of life. The power of that covenant is reflected in a poem written by Torrie Lawson, a 4th grade student at the MAX School of New Orleans:

It hurts to see the city this way
With water lines that won’t go away
But it will be back some day
No matter what they say
New Orleans will be the Big Easy again
But until then we just have to keep on keeping on
The city needed Katrina believe it or not
We needed to cleanse
And that’s what we got
When people ask if we should rebuild
I say why not
The levees just need to be sealed
Katrina is now gone
But we MUST keep on keeping on
(www.npr.org, March 2, 2006)

“God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established...(Genesis 9:17).”