

Readings

Genesis 6:9–22; 7:24; 8:14–19; Psalm 46 (or Deuteronomy 11:18–21, 26–28; Psalm 31:1–5, 19–24)

Romans 1:16–17; 3:22b–31; Matthew 7:21–29

One (I hope, final) illustration for you, based on my experience in the current housing market: The cheapest deal you will find on a home anywhere around, but particularly in Evanston, is the one in which you purchase a unit that requires rehab or reconstruction. More than one realtor has said to Corinne and me when we have taken tours of their homes for sale, that we should be thinking not of the current condition of the property but of what it will look like, after we have had a chance to tear down walls and revisit living spaces. I think of this as the Noah concept of home buying: destroy it in order to save it.

It has put numerous properties within the reach of our finances, but I am not interested in exercising the power of the hammer for the sake of the preservation of my next domicile. I pretty much just want to be able to move in, to be faithful to the original designer’s intent, or to the intent of the architect, or whoever rehabbed it last, but I have no desire to start over from scratch.

If there is one problem with the story of Noah and the Flood, it is the implication it offers, that God went to the extreme of gutting the earth, like some sort of divine property flipper! The implication is that, somehow, God is going to throw a fit eventually and overthrow the powers of the earth in order to reassert divine power. Literally, according to this perspective, the Deity must breach faith in order to establish faith. Appalling. I’ll get back to that in a minute.

Suffice it to say, the modern meaning of faith often misses entirely the point of *faith*. Some big names in the fields of philosophy and theology have made some pretty strong cases against religion with books that have titles like *God is NOT GREAT*, *The God Delusion*, and *God’s Problem*. These authors do not turn out to be ultimately compelling to me, because they tend to miss the point of faith entirely.

Most of these authors seem to think of faith as a thing unto itself..

People will sometimes speak of *the* faith, meaning their religion; the great hymn, “Faith of our fathers, holy faith, we will be true to thee till death,” written during the persecution of the Catholic Church in England in the 1500s, refers to such an understanding.

We may speak simply of “faith,” with no definite or indefinite article, to mean some existential reality that is a part of us, which in some way can cause other existential realities to arise, as in, “You’ve got to have faith,” or, “I have no faith in that to occur.” In such cases, we are conjuring more the meaning of “believing” or “belief” than of “faith,” *per se*.

For, when you get down to brass tacks, neither of these understandings is even necessarily *like* the understanding of faith that Jesus was talking about when he was using the metaphor of laying a proper foundation for a house. Neither corresponds with the inner well-being that carried the legendary Noah out onto a sea of troubles... or, as the story goes, a sea to end all troubles.

Though Jesus may have said to any number of persons, “Your faith has saved you,” or to his disciples, “Have you no faith?” (to our ears, seeming to refer to an inward

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existential reality) and may have called the throngs of his non-supporters “this faithless generation” (possibly meaning people without proper religious piety), the depth of meaning of the word *faith* in both those cases – and in the case of the parabolic rock and sand foundations and what was in Noah’s heart – has much more to do with an activity on the part of human beings, and even more importantly of God, than it has to do with a concept for us to wrap our minds or our hearts around.

The word, *faith*, used this way, is *faith-fulness*. Many take that to mean “a fullness of believing,” but a closer application would be our concept of *trueness* – as in “proper alignment” – or *trustworthiness*, as in the recognition that someone or something will not fail. *Faith* is the realized goal of *being faithful*.

It is most often a reaction, though sometimes we will venture to be pre-emptive with it. If we recognize that a certain goal is worthwhile, we might be persuaded to take the initiative with faith.

But faith is not conditional. Else, it is not faith. We cannot approach some person or some event faithfully and say, “But if the effort does not succeed or does not produce the results that I want, therefore I will not continue to support it.” The whole point of the story of Noah, from the aspect faith (and, particularly, the faithfulness of God) is that God realizes in the end that creation must be approached without conditions. And, incidentally, the reason why I consider that “Noah and the Flood” cannot possibly be factual, but must be referring to something deeper in the pious consciousness, or else, is offering us some insight into the reason why God allows evil to exist in our present reality, is that the idea of God *learning*, as God does in this story, is anathema to the idea of God being entirely faithful.

Our God cannot approach Creation conditionally, and still be God. God – in the account of Noah and the Flood – by overwhelming the earth with water effectively relinquishes power, because God exercises power. There is no faith in the act of opening

the sluice-gates of heaven and allowing the waters to bubble up from underneath; in fact, there is exactly the opposite.

The apostle Paul saw the good news of Jesus the Messiah, to be that God had found a way around exercising power in order to establish effective power. You will notice that Paul almost never referred to Jesus’ teachings, and never attempted to expound about events in Christ’s life prior to his trial and execution. He left such things to the other apostles.

Paul spoke most profoundly about the death of Jesus, because in that death he recognized the depth of faithfulness that God has exercised on behalf of the world. Though John the Baptist had preached that the good news was that the Messiah was coming, and Jesus preached that the good news was the liberation of God’s people – and both these are aspects of the good news from God – Paul realized that the good news also had to do with the decision by God not to use the Messiah as Israel was expecting: to trounce the powers and the principalities of the pagans. The good news was in the story of how the Creator had elected to be assassinated by Creation rather than *vice versa*. Power was revealed in earthly weakness – Jesus’ dying. Faith was revealed in the inexhaustibility of the life of God – literally, in the faith of God.

I am not ashamed of the gospel, [Paul professed in the first chapter of Romans]; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith...¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

Because of God’s faithfulness to us, we should be faithful as well – to God, certainly, but (following the example set forth in Jesus) to other human beings and to all Creation. Jesus put his life on the line, set aside any authority he had, his life of teaching, even life itself. And all that was justified – visibly justified – by his resurrection. Faith proved fruitful; faith is true power.

Paul insisted that, if all of us would just be faithful in the way that Christ was faithful, we will be resurrected too, we will make real the promises of God, we will come to know the

faithfulness of God, we will become an expression of the faith of God. In the third chapter of Romans, Paul continued this argument:

There is no distinction,²³ since all have sinned, and [everyone] fall[s] short of the glory of God.²⁴ [All] are now justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by blood, effective through faith. God did this to [demonstrate how righteous God is], because in divine forbearance God had passed over the sins previously committed;²⁶ it was to prove at the present time that God is righteous and that God justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

As to that last phrase, what the New Revised Standard Version and virtually every other widely published version of the English language Bible has translated, "faith in Jesus":

Richard B. Hays, currently professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School, was in 1988 composing his doctoral dissertation on a phrase of Paul's – especially in the letter to the Galatians but here as well – which has been translated traditionally as "faith in Jesus." Hays was confused about this translation, because the actual phrase translated accurately into English is "faith of Jesus."

Very adeptly, without denying the authority of the traditional understanding that a "faith in Jesus" has the power to save a soul, Hays was able to demonstrate that a person having "the faith of Jesus" is someone who is truly expressing the gospel. And that the gospel, the good news, is not only that Christ died for our sins, but that Christ's death demonstrates the faithfulness of God. In other words, a person expressing a willingness to put his or her life on the line for the sake of others, with confidence in the promise of God, that destruction will not have the final word, but that life will, is a person who is

recognizing God's faith and conveying that faith forward to others.

That is the kind of person who is acquitted of any sinful wrongdoing, or as Paul puts it, is "justified." That is the kind of person who knows what fullness of life means, who finds peace. That is the kind of person who practices faith.

Some Christian academics scoffed at Hays, accused him of picking nits and splitting hairs. Some even suspected him of heresy... until they read Hays' analysis more deeply and were able to acknowledge for themselves that the traditional language of "faith in Jesus" had been allowing some more lazy believers for centuries to skip a necessary step in the process of being faithful, by allowing them simply to give lip-service to a faith that

demands more than lip-service; it demands a true depth of knowledge... that power is not power unless it can be set aside, and that faith is not faith unless it is faithful.

The good news of Jesus Christ is that the very Lord of the universe having set aside all the power of

the universe in order to let a creation continue. There are no do-overs in this existence, only the promise of new life that will be. And it is upon this promise, as it was made visible in the dying and resurrection of the Messiah (*which are themselves together the ultimate expression of the faith of God*), that our own faith becomes possible. This promise is our rock and our foundation, our very present help in trouble. This promise is exactly what those who are discrying faith in our day and age are missing about the person of God.

The rains may come, but we will not be washed away; our faith in God's promise, like the faith of Jesus, will keep and preserve us. It is through God's faith demonstrated for the sake of our faith that we also may live by faith.

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In a world that disparages faith, with so many voices claiming that if God exists then God is not faithful because God does not do our bidding, or else that God is not faithful because God does not change reality to make the world more pleasant, it can feel like cold comfort, to know that the good news is, God has shown solidarity with us by dying with us rather than fixing things for us. But that is the good news.

And great, good news it is. For our God is not interested in clearing everything away in order to restore or rebuild. God would appear to have a vested interest in preserving us, in saving the world!

God is interested in working with what is here, *who* is here, in order to help us to know life and know it abundantly.

By faith. Amen.