3rd Wednesday in Advent
Rolling Meadows - 1965

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IN NOMINE JESU

Genesis 7: 23 Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark.

THE FLOOD AND THE FINAL JUDGMENT

What is it - really - that stirs us so in the story of the Flood? Is it the total destruction of the world, which is so weirdly parallel to our own conceptions of an atomic catastrophe? Or is it the seemingly problematical unsettledness of God, Who, after all, found everything wonderfully good at the end of His creation, and now allows His creation to be blotted out? What kind of a God is this who repents and then simply obliterates His bankrupt work and drowns it in a gigantic flood? What kind of God is this who allows innocent trees and flowers an animal creatures to perish because of human guilt? Do we not have here a prelude to the equally strange bankruptcy of Bethlehem - where God allows His own beloved Son to be born in a barn and laid to rest in a manger; and the bankruptcy of Calvary - where God seems to sink into suffering, impotence, and utter ungodlikeness?

The great catastrophe of the Flood tells us that here the 2nd day of creation is being revoked in an awesome, dreadful way. We remember what was said on the 2nd day of creation: And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament and separated the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament...And God called the firmament Heaven. We have her the picture of the clouds, the seas, and other vehicles of moisture on earth comprising a kind of heavenly ocean. The first thing God does with these menacing powers is create order. He separates the waters above the firmament from the waters beneath the firmament; He establishes boundaries for the seas and lets the dry land appear and thus wards off chaos from the dwelling place of His children. And yet the power of destruction, as represented by the heavenly ocean, continues as before to lie in wait. The potential downfall of the world is, so to speak, always threatening. If ever the boundaries which God established between the waters disappeared, if ever the dam between the upper and lower seas burst, then the threatening floodgates of chaos would break loose and pour in upon us. And this is just what happened in th Flood.

The powers of destruction are still present in the midst of creation. Th atoms need only to be split, the bacteria let loose, hereditary factors monkeyed with, genes tampered with, and poisons need only to be distilled. The point is that we live solely by the grace of God, who has fixed the bounds of destruction. The dreadful secret of the world revealed in these first chapters of Genesis is that man is capable of renouncing and cutting himself off from this very grace which holds in check the power of destruction. At first, at the suggestion of the serpent, he desired to be like God, and already he had overstepped the first and essential boundary. Adam is thus driven out of the peace of the Garden of Eden an compelled to suffer death, the boundary of his finitude. He must realize that he is only man, that he is dust and ashes, and the gates of mortality go clanking dow before him. Then comes Cain's murder of his brother - then comes the anguish of a bad conscience - then comes unrest and never-ending flight. So the descent goes o and on. Corruption spreads like a prairie fire until finally God intervenes and calls a halt to it, and the mighty force of the Flood breaks loose.

It is always the same old story! Yet we must not imagine that man alway renounces God ppenly and purposefully. Very seldom do people actually make the gesture of a clenched fist raised to heaven. Nor does man need to be an overt atheist or antichristian. He can manage all this much more secretly. No sooner does he worship his own power - boasting that he can hold the world in order and balance by his own abilities and military potential and political intelligence - than he has already renounced God's grace and breached the dam that holds the heavenly ocean. When he imagines that he can free men from need and fear by means of a welfare state or great society, he is already declaring himself independent o this sustaining grace pressing the buttons which set off the secret signals of catastrophe. Above all, when we are people who calmly tolerate the routine business of the church's baptizing, marrying, and burying, but otherwise go on stubbor ly worshiping our anxieties and succumbing to prosperity and its self-indulgence and superficiality; when we are people who do not see our neighbor in his need and thus lose our own souls - THEN and PRECISELY THEN we too are playing fast and loos with that grace which guards the dikes of ruin.

The Bible proclaims loudly and clearly that our human history too will proceed in this direction and finally be ship-wrecked! It is for this very reason that Scripture has so much to say about the end: the end of corrupt mankind in the Flood, the end of the godless, the end of the world, when the stars will fall and the moon become like blood, the end of time in the Last Judgment and the return of the Lord on the clouds of heaven with all of His holy angels.

One thing must noted here however! The catastrophe of the flood does no play the chief role in this drama, any more than the far country plays the main part in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The Flood and the far country are merely the dark ~~wings~~ news that surrounds the real action. The real action is that God remembered Noah - just as the father remember his son who was wandering in the far country. God remembered the one faithful one who held fast to the grace of God. For this one faithful one He held in readiness the ark, the place of refuge and safety. The account of how one survived the catastrophe by resting upon the Everlasting Arms, and how he then was given a new world and once more saw the dawn of a new chance and a new beginning, in other words, how the words Let there be were spoken once more — this is the real theme of this story. For God can never be a God of the end of things. He always bestows beginnings. God is positive. His mercies are new every morning. One must only learn to see! And faith is nothing else than seeing that this is so. Everything in life depends on getting this poin of view - that God has a purpose ~~of~~ for Noah, for you, and for me - no matter what the circumstances which surround our lives may be - whether we live in the midst of floods and reverses or success and happiness. God keeps faith with those who are faithful to Him, and He knows how to preserve and guide and grant undreamed-of security!

Our faith in God does not mean that we shall always have clear pictures of how God is guiding our lives. In many cases it will be true that What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand. Did Noah understand what was happening when he was ordered to build the ark while the sky was bright and clear? Did he grasp the meaning of this terrible catastrophe? The very time

when we can no longer understand a catastrophe like the Flood or even the rushing streams and deluges in our personal lives - when we are troubled and tempted by them - this is the time when this very anxiety, this temptation, this dread, can become raw material for our faith. The more we learn to say in such times of disquiet, Yet will I trust in Thee, the closer will we come to the heart of God. As those who do not know, we trust Him who does know. As those who do not know why He does what He does, we believe that He knows to what end He is doing it. That is why the great believers of history - like Noah, Abraham, Isaiah, Jeremiah, St. Paul St. Augustine, Luther - have always been sorely tried men, people who were in deep waters rising to their throats, and often plunged into the abyss of darkest despair and perplexity. And this was precisely the reason they possessed a rich store of raw materials from which faith could be formed.

This is the story of survival with God - the story of what happens to this man Noah at the hands of God! If Noah had looked only at the elements and let his eyes gaze upon the vast and watery wastes, he would have perished of mortal dread. His eyes would have found no resting place and even the time would have seemed endless and immeasurable. He would have been like the sinking Peter, who lost sight of his Lord as he attempted to walk upon the water and, left all alone with the elements, saw nothing but the waves, and therefore sank like a rock. Noah however, simply held on to God's promise that He still had something in mind for him. He also knew that no ark could ever help him once he last his hold on the Hand that held him above the Flood. I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord - it was by that kind of certainty that he really survived.

Now we can understand the importance of Bethlehem, and Calvary, and the empty tomb. For it is in this Child of Christmas that God deals with us, has His history with us, that personal history through which He binds Himself to us and gives us a relationship with Him that survives death. For what can separate us from the love of God which is in this Jesus? Can anything be mightier than His love? Can there be any sin that redemption is too weak to forgive? Can death be mightier than the life that God would give us?

Faith sees that the Hands of the Infant in the Manger are the Hands that hold up the universe - the Hands that also hold up the ark of our lives. Those Hands are reaching down into the bursting wreckage of our own perishing lives. So we pass through the throes of death, just as Noah came through the floods. We are survivors, because we are in league with the Prince of Life. This is the immortality of the patriarchs and prophets and disciples. And if we did not have it we would be of all men most miserable.

So Noah steers across the endless Flood and his heart is at peace. He sees more than the waters. He knows that new life that will spring up deep beneath him. He knows the day will come when God once more will utter His Let there be across the wasteland and make all things new. And that is because God is always stronger than the powers of destruction. Not even man's corruption, which provoked the Flood, can ruin God's creation. Even though men today are trying to reconstruct it, even though they break marriages, destroy families, and turn things upside down - they will never smash it, because God is stronger than everything that rises up against Him. Noah was a happy, blessed man, for he did not anxiously wait for what might come, but waited for Him who most certainly will come! Amen.