

In our Bibles, the story of Noah begins not with what we have heard read today. The story of Noah does not begin on the day a beautiful rainbow appears in the sky. But of course it doesn't. Anyone who has ever seen a rainbow knows that for there to be a rainbow there first had to be rain, and for there to be rain there had to be a darkening of the sky. Rain doesn't fall from the sun, but from clouds. In the case of Noah, it was many clouds, and a whole lot of rain. I'm not going to give us a weather report this morning. Who among us doesn't know at least the cliff notes version of Noah and his ark? Anyone who was ever 3 and in Sunday School has heard the story. It probably involved some pictures of a kindly looking old man with a full white beard, carrying a staff and gently leading a couple lions and a couple giraffes up a ramp and on to a big boat, like they're shipping off on a Disney cruise. In the Bible I had when I was a child, the lions were smiling. Snug and tight on board, the rain then began to fall, just as God said it would. For 40 days and nights it poured, until on the 41st day Noah stuck his head out the window of the ark and noticed it wasn't raining anymore, and the land was drying out. So, Noah led the animals off the ark just as he had led them on, with the lions still smiling.

This is how we've come to know the story and to tell it to our children. But we know better. We might not want to think about it, and even less to admit it, but we who have witnessed the 18th school shooting in just 46 days—who have started to use words like inevitable to describe such tragedies, who have said in fear and ignorance, “What can we do? Nothing is going to change,”—we know better. We know that lions and giraffes and old men don't just get on a boat together to get out of the rain, any more than school children huddle together in a closet to get out of the way of gunfire. Such things don't just happen, which is just another way of saying, such things don't have to happen. They don't have to be inevitable.

They certainly weren't for Noah. The clouds, the darkening sky, the pouring rain, there is no version of the story out there that can get around the fact that God was behind it all. “I have seen the wickedness of humankind, how there is no corner of the earth it hasn't touched and how every inclination of the heart is evil. I regret,” said God, “I regret that I

decided to make human beings at all, that it has caused so much pain. I will wipe them away—all people and animals and creeping things and birds of the air.” If you remember what was said about God at the time of creation, then what is said here will sound eerily familiar. In Genesis chapter one it’s said, “So, God made the birds of the air and every creeping thing and all the animals which move upon the land and sea, and God made humankind to rule over it all with care.” But now God is walking it all back as if to try and make it look like none of it ever happened in the first place. There’s just one problem, one kink in the plan—Noah. Noah has found favor in the sight of the Lord. We’re not told what it is that Noah has been doing to make him stand out from literally everyone else on the face of the planet. But when the lights go out, it’s not hard to find the one person holding even a flicker to the dark. When all the news is hopelessness, it’s not difficult to hear the one voice crying hope. That must have been Noah.

What must it have been like for Noah? When God tells him, I’m going to send a flood, the likes of which no one has ever seen, to kill off everyone and everything but you, did Noah say, it’s about time. Or did he try to talk God down like Abraham would many years later, when God decided to destroy the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham negotiates with God. “Suppose there are fifty righteous in the city? Will you not spare the city for the sake of 50?” And God agrees not to. So, Abraham tries again. “Suppose there are forty-five righteous in the city? Will you save the city for 45?” That day Abraham talked God all the way down from 50 to 40 to 30 to 20 to 10. But when God could not find 10 righteous people, God rained down fire, turning Sodom and Gomorrah into nothing but a heap of ash.

I suppose there are times when it is necessary to start over. Gardeners tell me that if you want to see new growth in the spring, first you have to cut away any dead growth. You have to trust that the act of destroying is actually the act of creating anew. I have found, however, that this is true only if we have been careful enough in the process to spare the innocent. For when we destroy the innocent we destroy the potential for life. We are saying, we don’t care about what you could become still. Whenever I speak with a couple who is having to think about divorce and they have children, always they will say, we just don’t want our children to suffer. We don’t want them to think it’s their fault. We want to make sure we do everything we can to spare the innocent.

Listen, I don't know why God chose to flood the earth once upon a time, any more than I know why Nikolas Cruz chose to open fire on an entire school and kill 17 people this past Wednesday, but I can tell you there is a difference between the two and the difference is that God spares the innocent. But who are the innocent? As David declares in Psalm 51: "Indeed I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me." We come into this world with blood on our hands. We go out of the world with blood on our hands, and in between our hands are bloody.

This past Thursday, Joe Black, Rabbi to the Colorado State House, offered a prayer on the floor of the Senate. I share with you just a few lines of his prayer.

We are guilty, O God.

We are guilty of inaction.

We are guilty of complacency.

We are guilty of allowing ourselves to be paralyzed by politics.

The blood of our children cries out from the ground.

The blood of police officers cut down in the line of duty flows through our streets.

We do not appeal to You on this terrible morning to change us.

Only we can do that ourselves.

Our enemies do not come only from far-away places.

The monsters we fear live among us.

May those in this room who have the power to make change find the courage to seek a pathway to sanity and hope.

May we hold ourselves and our leaders accountable.

For only then will our prayers be worthy of an answer. Amen.¹

Who are the innocent? On a day like today it might seem easy to figure out who is guilty and who is innocent, but to read the story of Noah is to see that it's not easy at all. That even Noah, for as much as he is spared the fate of dying with the guilty, he is not spared the death of the guilty. In reading the story as written in our Bibles, we don't think about this, about what it must have been like for Noah sitting on that big boat, listening to

¹ From his blog, www.rabbijoeblack.blogspot.com/2018/02/opening-prayer-for-colorado-state-house.com

the rain fall, but also hearing the shrieks of men, women, and children gasping for air, as the sound of dead animals, like drift logs, bumped up against the outside of the boat. We don't tend to think, and even less to preach, about this part of the story, and maybe it's just as well. Jewish scholars and rabbis, however, have long cut no corners in saying that it's essential to our understanding of the story that we be able to imagine what must have been. In the Bible, once the storm is over, Noah waits on the boat until a day when God tells him, "Go out of the ark, you and your family, and all the animals you brought on board with you." So, Noah goes. Just like that—Noah goes. Like it's no big deal that all the trees are lying on their sides with their roots sticking in the air, or that the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean have now switched places, or that everywhere you step you're stepping over corpses, and who's going to bury them all and say a good word over the dead? I mean, can you imagine Noah getting off the boat just like that? Earliest Jewish teachers couldn't. They imagined that after Noah's wife and children and all the animals got off, Noah stayed on board the ark. He sat in a corner with his knees tucked up against his chest, thinking about whether he even wanted to rejoin the world, about what it was going to take to live back out in the world again, thinking about whether he could really trust a God who spared his life but just barely.

How am I ever going to sit through another rainstorm without thinking the worst is happening again? How am I going to cope living with the memory of all I have lost? God might favor me now, but what if I slip up tomorrow? Who are the innocent really?

These are not difficult questions for me to imagine Noah asking. After all, how am I going to drop my kids off at school for another day without thinking the worst might happen? How am I going to cope living with the memory of all that has been lost? God might favor me now, but I could slip up tomorrow. It could be me holding the gun. Who are the innocent really? Fortunately for Noah, he is not alone, for God shares his questions. God knows that in this world terrible things are going to happen again. It's inevitable. And yet, it doesn't have to be. God places a rainbow in the sky as a reminder, and a reminder not so much to Noah as to God, that having hacked off the world once before, we should never think we are beyond doing it again. God puts the rainbow in the sky as a restraining order against God, and as a promise to us, because God knows full well that before our time on this earth is up we're likely to give God a thousand more reasons to want to kill us than

to love us, but God will love us. God will look at that rainbow and remember it is better to love.

Who are the innocent? There's a story about a man, maybe you've heard about him, he lived a long time ago, and in his life time he was the kindest man you'd ever meet. He took care of the poor, fed the hungry, never turned away a stranger, spoke the truth, but in the end was killed as an enemy of the state. His accusers nailed him to a cross and hung him up right between two thieves. People would walk by and say, "Now what's he doing up there? I thought he was innocent." And they'd throw insults at him. But one of the thieves said, "I know I am guilty. But this man is innocent." And turning to Jesus, he said, "Jesus, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus said, "I tell you that today, you will be with me in paradise."

Who are the innocent? It turns out that in the end the innocent are more than just those who have been killed or who have survived. In the eyes of God, they are also the ones who give hope to the guilty. Amen.