

Healing the World  
Based on Gen 8:1-12 and Luke 3:21-22  
Rev. Dr. Nicole Wilkinson  
Cape May Presbyterian Church  
May 29, 2022

After the flood, after God, angry and disheartened with humanity, has made it rain for weeks and weeks until all life on land has died, there is a renewal of the world, a starting over. The waters recede and somehow seeds propagate and life re-emerges.

The story of the flood is surely not to be read literally or for its attention to practicalities. To ask only one of a hundred unanswerable questions about it, what exactly are the lions eating this whole time? Did Noah take extra antelope on board for that purpose? For that matter, what are the elephants eating? Do you know how much grass those things consume? If the whole ark were stuffed with grass, it still might not be enough to feed two elephants for 40 days and nights.

But given the disregard for practicalities, given all the story's improbabilities, it's striking how long in this story, it takes the earth to heal. God does not flip a switch or says a word to make the flood instantly end. First it has to stop raining, then the waters begin to recede, then months go by and the ark hits land, then more months before they can finally get out of the boat and stand on dry land again. There's a long process through which life returns to the world outside the ark.

When the human beings see that the boat has gone aground, that the waters are receding, Noah sends out the dove, and that first time, it just comes right back. Because there is simply nothing out there; in all the world, there is nowhere but the ark, and water. A while later they send out the dove and it comes back with an olive leaf. Somehow the seedling of a tree has come to life--things are growing, life is stirring. The last time they send the dove out, it does not come back. Because the dove is too busy living to return—it's out there building a nest, doing its part to remake the world.

The dove and the olive leaf it brings are a sign to the human beings on the ark, the only human beings left in the world. The tree and the dove are returning to life, Noah and his family realize—we can too.

Both the dove and the olive branch are symbols of peace for us, but it's not peace-making that's happening in Gen 8; unless it's a peace between humanity and God. In the story, the dove and the branch represent hope, life, renewal, and healing.

The olive branch became a symbol of peace, I'm told, because in the early cultivation of the olive it took years for olive trees to bear fruit. So it was believed that anyone who planted olive groves must be expecting a long period of peace. There was time to watch and tend while the tree came to fruition.

And so this was meant to be a sermon about healing and peace and the relationship between the two. It was meant to be a sermon about how the fate of all life is intertwined with the fate of humanity, how all the world begins to heal when we human beings begin to heal and how human beings are healed by the healing of all life on earth.

Then Tuesday happened. A fourth-grader dialed 911 on her cell phone as she crouched on her classroom floor, and whispered into the phone, please come now. Nineteen children and two of their teachers were killed, and 17 others, including the shooter's grandmother, were shot and wounded.

How do we talk about peace, about trees sprouting leaves and birds making nests, not to mention the actual rainbow-- how do we talk about humanity beginning again in a new and better way, how do we talk about healing the world while we are looking at the world's terrible wounds and they are so fresh and so very deep?

I tried turning to the gospel lesson for help. In the gospel, the holy spirit descends on Jesus like a dove after his baptism, and the voice of God announces—you are my son, beloved. Your being makes me glad.

Surely God says the same to each of us as we are baptized, or indeed as we are born—you are my child, beloved. Your existence pleases me.

In one sense it may be comforting to know, that each of those children, the wounded and the dead, each young person was and is known and loved and seen by God. In another sense we must admit, we must confess, that God grieves and rages at the suffering, the broken lives and the broken bodies of those beloved, cherished children.

We cannot grieve with the community of Uvalde as though they were beset by natural disaster. This was not a hurricane or a fire; there was nothing natural about

it. It's not natural for an 18-year-old to go looking for an elementary school to shoot up. It's not natural for him to take his hurting heart and his barely grown self to the store and buy not just a gun, but two assault rifles, at least one of which he paid off in installments. And if it isn't natural, it also isn't that the shooter was evil. He was not possessed by demons or driven by video games. He was deeply confused, isolated, angry, and he was armed. Friends, we armed him.

We cannot seek to heal the world, to comfort the grieving, to honor the dead, and at the same time put military style, rapid fire guns into the hands of lost young men.

The symbol of the olive branch reminds us that there's more to peace than just the absence of war. There is growth and sustenance, harvest and plenty. There is healing and years of careful growth and attention. That's how peace happens—attention, cultivation, nurture, care.

Imagine a world that has just begun to heal. Not a perfect world, necessarily, but a healing one. A world where the number and severity of wildfires are decreasing, and the number of acres of forest around the world is rising. A world where the polar bear has less trouble finding enough ice on which to raise its young. The olive trees have had time to grow and bear fruit again and the birds have more places to build their nests and protect their fragile eggs.

In that world, the only bullet holes in the walls of the local school are historic. There is no blood on the floor of any classroom. There are enough places and people to give attention and care to the addict; enough affordable place for the orphan and the outcast to find counseling and protection. Both homelessness and crime are declining in that healing world, because we are learning to take care of one another. In that world, why would be it ever be ok to sell an assault rifle? Who would ever need such a weapon for any good purpose? How would that kind of weapon contribute to the healing of our national wounds? Who could it ever legitimately be used against, in a time of peace?

Friends, we need to find a way to live in that world, a world that is healing, a world where we partner with the God who loves all people, to do the work that makes for peace.