

We live in a pluralistic world. We are taught to be accepting of others- their gender, their points of view, their religious beliefs. I think this has given rise to a number of trends in current culture. Many people now no longer associate themselves with a specific religion, though they still claim to believe in God. It's become common for people to create their own custom spiritual beliefs - taking bits and pieces from all the world's religions. We can argue whether this is healthy or not but it does tend to beg the question, "What makes Christianity unique?" What makes Christianity different than all the world's other belief systems? Many people will say, "Aren't all the world's major religions the same after all? Aren't they all worshipping the same god in different ways?"

Lots of things make Christianity unique, and dare I say, more authentic than other faiths. One of those things we come across today in the way we understand the story of Noah's ark. But before we get to that, we have to understand some unique things about Judaism too, and the way they understand Noah's ark. The story of Noah is the oldest recorded story in existence. Every ancient culture from the middle east has a

story about Noah. The story differs from culture to culture, but the Jewish version, which we have in our Bibles, has one highly unique teaching. It is this teaching that makes Judaism unique among all the world's ancient religions. We know this uniqueness so well I'm afraid we overlook it.

In every other ancient religion of the world the gods didn't actually like humanity. But the gods needed humans to do the work they themselves didn't want to do. The God of Israel actually likes or enjoys humans so much that he freely interacts with the people of planet earth. The Bible's version of Noah's ark makes this distinction. Today we read the covenant God makes with Noah. A covenant was like a contract. In Hebrew a covenant was literally "to bind". So it is a binding between two parties.

Did you notice how much humans are required of this covenant? None. Nothing is said of what human beings should do. God is the subject of every part of the covenant. God promises to never do it again. God expresses sorrow and regret. (In 6:6-7 we read that God is grieved by what God has done.) God promises to commit to the future of this imperfect world.

And very importantly for us to understand in many ways - God promises limits on how God will deal with evil.

God tries to find a new way to deal with the problem of sin and evil. In the past God dealt with sin and evil by wiping things out. Now God promises to do things differently. God limits his wrath upon people. Divine judgment still exists, yes, but it will be limited.

Many people cry out for God's judgment on situations. Many people cry out for God to eradicate evil. The Noah's ark story tells us that God will not simply just stamp things out. God did it once before and was grieved by doing it. God will not do that again. It is important to remember when you cry out to God when bad things happen and you want justice, that God has voluntarily put limits upon Godself for doing it.

And that brings us to the uniqueness of the Christian understanding of this too. This uniqueness is a very important part of the core of Christian beliefs. God is the judge of this world. But God will not judge from afar throwing fire and brimstone upon the bad. God will judge the world from within the world itself, and not do so to destroy it, but to redeem it. Hence the cross of Jesus. Said differently, in the covenant

after the flood God decides that rather than forever having cycles of destroying things to blot out evil, God decides to take the brokenness of creation into God's own heart and bear it for the sake of the world. That is a uniquely Christian way of understanding the world. We do well to take that to heart.

God comes at this by some surprising ways. In our gospel reading we have Mark's version of the testing of Jesus in the wilderness. We easily imagine a battle between Jesus and the devil. It seems like a nail-biter, and even though we know the end, we still hope that Jesus will hold up to the tests. That is indeed a fair way to look at it. But let's also look at it from the opposite point of view.

Do you know the game Angry Birds? Pigs have stolen eggs from the birds and the birds get back at the pigs by launching themselves from slingshots to destroy the pigs buildings. Playing it is a mix of luck and understanding of physics. Well let's apply the Angry Birds idea to our gospel. We start with the baptism of Jesus. We usually imagine a dove floating down from heaven and landing upon Jesus. You'll remember when I've preached on this before that that isn't an entirely accurate understanding. Jews made no distinction between doves and pigeons and so you could just as truly say the Holy Spirit

descended like pigeon rather than a dove. And the pigeon doesn't descend onto Jesus peacefully. Imagine Angry Birds again. In verse 10 we read that the heavens are torn apart - it is violent - and the Spirit descends like a dove *into* Jesus - not *on* him. But the Spirit isn't done. As if the impact of the Spirit into Jesus continues to carry him onward right into the wilderness. The text reads that the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness.

Yes, Jesus was tempted by Satan, but let's remember a few things about the wilderness. The wilderness was where scapegoats were sent. The wilderness was where evil spirits were believed to dwell. The wilderness was a dangerous and unstable place of Satan. But, driven by God's angry bird ripping through heaven slamming into Jesus and pushed into the wilderness God has now made an invasion into hostile territory. God has not stayed back and away from bad places. And God has not delicately and furtively tiptoed into evil realms. God has blasted into the realm of evil with a force that rocks it to the core.

Throughout the rest of the gospel of Mark we see that all the evil spirits know exactly who Jesus is. They know him

because he's invaded their territory with power they cannot overcome.

God is dealing with the world's evil, not by wiping it out wholesale. God is dealing with the world's evil by engaging it firsthand. He is doing it for the sake of the world he loves and has covenanted with to save.

One final thing before we leave these texts today. Was Jesus the only one baptized by John the Baptist? No. Many people have long speculated as to why Jesus had to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins if he was sinless in the first place. But consider it this way. By being baptized Jesus enters into solidarity with the people of the time and us too. Do you see how God has chosen not to come from outside and obliterate bad? God has chosen to come in and through us - not only in the form of Jesus but also in the way he connected his life to the lives of people.

If you think of God as a righteous judge who stand above you ready to strike you down, think again. Consider what the Bible says. God is standing beside you and striding *with you* to work on the world. God wants to be a partner with you, not overpower you.

Maybe this isn't how you'd go about saving the world, but it is God's way of saving the world. It preserves your purpose and dignity and shows just how much God values the true person you are. Amen