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University Public Worship

Stewards of the Earth

(Genesis 11:1-9; Ps. 148)

It was twenty-eight years ago this summer that I first experienced "up close and personal" the awe and majesty of a glacier. I was pregnant and hesitant about my balance, so I was less enthusiastic than my biologist husband at the idea of walking on the Athabasca Glacier. But once he had heard that a naturalist guided half day walks on the Columbia Icefields in the Canadian Rockies, he would not be deterred. So I watched my footing, tightly held his hand and listened to Peter LeMieux, our guide to the glacier share his love and knowledge of one of the most gorgeous places on earth. Peter was a natural teacher with a compelling and exquisite subject. The icewalk was one of the most memorable adventures we have ever had, and not surprisingly, it became an oft-told tale in our family lore.

So fifteen years later, when we went to Canada for the bar mitzvah of close family friends, we planned a return to the Rockies. "Wouldn't it be great," we thought, "if our teenage kids had the chance to experience a walk on the glacier?" Much to our surprise and pleasure, not only were the walks still being offered, but when we arrived, Peter LeMieux once again greeted us with his trademark enthusiasm and humor. We began as we had fifteen years earlier, at the toe of the glacier. But, strikingly and

distressingly, our starting place was much further away than it had been the first time. The glacier had receded about 700 feet in only fifteen years. So not only did we get to see a glacier "up close and personal". We also got to see the effects of global warming with our own eyes. The glacier was melting at a rate that was visible to the untrained eye of a casual tourist.

In the book of Amos, the prophet Amos claims, "*Ani lo navie, v'lo ben navie*—I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet."(Amos 7:14) To paraphrase Amos, "I am not a scientist, nor the daughter of a scientist." I cannot offer sophisticated explanations nor knowledgeable predictions regarding global warming on this week when we commemorated Earth Day. I can read only with a layperson's understanding of the scientific consensus on the cataclysm of climate change. But I do understand that our rapacious lifestyle endangers the world for our children and grandchildren. I know that there is little time to lose. And so I turn to religious sources, seeking their wisdom about our responsibility toward the earth.

We read in the first chapter of Genesis of the symphony of creation. Natural, pristine, flawless. God speaking and the world coming into being. The creation of Adam and Eve. Then, like a discordant chord, we hear of human problems. Eating the fruit of the forbidden tree. Exile from Eden. Sibling battles ending in violence. The pristine beauty marred by human imperfection. Learning to toil, live, and be buffeted by the world around them.

After the garden, the first humans experience violence. The world is filled with *hamas*, with lawlessness. And then came Noah. "God said to Noah, "I have decided to put an end to all flesh for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them. I am about to destroy the earth." Noah may be God's confidante, the one singled out to endure, but the appreciation is not unequivocal. Noah is described in Hebrew as *"ish tzadik tamim hayah bedorotav,"* which means, "a righteous man, he was blameless in his generation." What does it mean that he was "blameless in his generation"? Would he be regarded as blameworthy in a different generation? The rabbis think so. Given the company, he didn't do so badly, but were he to be with less violent people, he might not have stood out… They call Noah, a *tzaddik im pelz*--a holy man in a fur coat. Noah was concerned about his own welfare.

The Midrash teaches that "When Noah stepped out of the ark and saw the ravaged earth with no sign of life, he wept. "Oh Master of the Universe, why did You tear down all that You had built? Why did You not show compassion for Your creatures?" And God replied, "You foolish shepherd. Now, after the destruction, you come to me and complain. But when I said to you, "Make an ark for yourself for I am about to flood the earth to destroy all flesh", you did not plead for My creatures. How different Abraham will be. He will plead on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. And Moses, when I'm angry at the Israelites for the sin of the golden calf, Moses will offer his life to save them. But you, when you saw judgment about to strike the world, you thought only of yourself and all else perished. Only now do you raise

up your voice." Then Noah understood that he had sinned."[i] Unlike Abraham who would argue with God looking for righteous people in Sodom and Gomorrah, Noah does not challenge God on behalf of the rest of his generation. His was a relative righteousness. By the measure of his generation, a generation filled with lawlessness, chaos, brutality, violence and injustice, Noah was noteworthy. He separated himself from the violence surrounding him. He did not participate in the violence, but he did not try to stop it.

Rabbi Aharon Shmuel Tameret teaches that God enclosed Noah in the ark not only to save him from the waters of the flood, but also to punish him for closing his heart to the suffering of all around him. Humanity is found so wanting that God returned the world to watery chaos. The *mabbul,* the flood, was a reversal of creation, the undoing of all that God had made. Only the ark, the lone ark, with repentant remnants of the world that had once been, survived.

It is as if God said, "Take two," as if God gave the world a second chance "And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, "Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth," a repetition of the very blessing God originally gave to Adam. Creation is starting out anew after the generation of the flood.

God puts a *keshet,* a bow in the clouds. In Hebrew, the word for an archer's bow is the same as the word for rainbow. God places an archer's bow in the clouds. God

hangs up the bow of destruction and turns it into the rainbow of beauty and possibility. God offers a covenant to Noah, and the rainbow becomes an *ot brit*, a sign of the covenant.

One might think that in a world after the flood, a world in which the bow of destruction has been turned into a rainbow of hope, a world where violence has been repudiated, one might think that everything will be Eden once again. But alas, as the headlines of any newspaper reminds us, we are not living in Paradise II.

If only we could live without the heartbreak of senseless violence; If only we could live without easily available weapons too readily wielded to destroy promising young lives. If only we could know the safety of rainbows instead of the deadly impact of guns. In this, we echo the generation of Noah, the generation that assumed too little of what it means to be human. But lest we see ourselves as only allied with the generation of the flood, as only filled with violence, Genesis provides a different lens through which to see humanity.

In synagogues, when the story of Noah is read, the bookmark is not placed at the end of Noah's tale of survival and his society's destruction. Instead, the public reading continues and concludes only after the story of the Tower of Babel. The builders of the tower and city believed that they could build high enough to storm God's realm and roam freely in the heavenly sphere.

This generation--known in rabbinic tradition as the generation of the dispersion, is paired with and mirrors Noah's generation--the generation of the flood. If the generation of the flood assumed too little of what it means to be human, the generation of the dispersion assumed too much of what it means to be human. If the excess of the generation of the flood was violence and lawlessness, the excess of the generation of the dispersion was arrogance and superiority. As Rabbi Ruth Sohn teaches, **"**In the generation of the flood, people denied any limits on their behavior as creatures, any distinction between themselves and the animals. In the generation of the dispersion, people denied any limit on their behavior as creators--they were in God**'**s image, builders, and so they built, with no sense that they were themselves created, and that they stood in the universe as creatures before God.**"**

The story of the Tower of Babel is filled with paradox. The builders, so confident of their mastery, build a tower, intending to reach the heavens, the heights of human achievement; but when God peeks at their work and views the tower, God has to come down, to descend. Despite our best builders, we are nowhere near the heavens. The story begins with the ability of all on earth to communicate—and it ends with a babble of languages. The builders declare that they want to make a name for themselves, but at the conclusion of their achievement, they ultimately are unable to understand the names of one another. The builders build to prevent being scattered; but their project results in their dispersion.

In the covenant with Noah, God has promised not to destroy the earth by water. But as the old slave spiritual warns, "God gave Noah the rainbow sign. No more water, the fire next time." If there is to be a "fire next time", it will not be God's doing, but ours. It will be the fire of global warming, the combustion destroying the life-support systems of the earth, the rising heat that melts the glaciers.

Like our ancestors, the tower builders, we live as if there are no limits, divine or natural. We use the resources of the earth with abandon, we act, filled with an attitude of entitlement, convinced that technology makes us invincible, that there is no such thing as a building too tall or a resource too finite. We are not exempt here, at Stanford, from this conceit. After all, here is the birthplace of the technological revolution. We are adverse to limits. But the more we create, build, learn, discover, the easier it is to forget the Mystery at the source of it all.

Undoubtedly, science and technology has been and remains a source of much that is life-giving and healthy. Indeed, the more we know, create and use, paradoxically, the more dignity we have as human beings. As philosopher Rabbi Joseph Soleveitchik writes, "Man of old who could not fight disease and succumbed in multitudes to yellow fever or any other plague with degrading helplessness could not lay claim to dignity. Only the man who builds hospitals, discovers therapeutic techniques and saves lives is blessed with dignity. ...The brute is helpless, and therefore not dignified. Civilized man has gained limited control of nature and has

become, in certain respects, her master, and with with his mastery, he has attained dignity…[ii]

With the power of our human dignity, with a reminder of Mystery, can we learn to use our technology with humility, not hubris? Can we place our tower-building know-how in service to protection of the earth rather than its destruction? Can we be as God, not in the belief that we are the ultimate Creators, but by living out our covenant with the earth, understanding that our human dignity includes a concomitant responsibility to safeguard God's precious planet? As the psalmist teaches, **"***Hashamayim shamayim l'adonai, v'haaretz natan l'veni adam***"**—The heavens belong to God, but the earth is the responsibility of human beings.**"**

The generation of the flood assumed too little of what it means to be human. The generation of the Tower of Babel assumed too much of what it means to be human. The Midrash asks why the generation of the flood was destroyed while the generation of the Tower of Babel was merely dispersed? The answer, **"**The tower builders said to one another, **"**Come, let us build**"**. They worked together in peace and harmony. This distinguished them from the generation of the flood who committed violence against one another, causing their own destruction. The generation of the tower defied God openly, but because they took one another's needs into consideration, they were not destroyed. They were merely scattered. They were allowed to get the lesson right.

We, like the generation of the tower, have not only the chance, but the imperative to get the lesson right. Like the generation of the dispersion, we must work together; We must not be *tzaddikim im pelz*, righteous people with fur coats, concerned only about our small worlds. It is laudatory to live good and decent lives, but it is not enough. We cannot be warm in our fur coats if doing so leaves the world dangerous and unprotected. We have to take care of ourselves and of our families; And, we also have to take care of the world which sustains us. We must occupy ourselves together for the common good, for our planet, for our future. We must with all of our dignity and ability, labor together, making use of the extraordinary human ability to learn, to explore, to create. Not to make a name for ourselves which would eclipse God's name. Not for individual self aggrandizement. Not for limitless and defiant building. But rather, to be stewards of the earth.

When God created this world, the Midrash teaches, God created many worlds first. "Upon showing this world to the first human beings, God said: "I have created many worlds, but this is the last world that I will create. Look at my works! See how beautiful they are—how excellent! For your sake I created them. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to set it right. There will be no one to repair it after you." (Midrash Kohelet Rabbah, 1 on Ecclesiastes 7:13)

On this week when we pay homage to the earth that sustains us, let us act on our responsibility to prevent "the fire next time". Let us seize our opportunity to learn the lesson of the generation of the tower and get it right. Let us remember the covenant of Noah so that the earth endures. May we recognize that just as we have damaged the world and silenced many of the voices in the choir of Creation, so now we must fix it. This is the last world God created. There is no one else to set it right but you and me. There is no one else to repair it but us.

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[i] Quoted in Rabbi Ruth Sohn's Senior Sermon, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, October 1981.

[ii] Rabbi Joseph Soleveitchik, The Lonely Man of Faith, New York, 1965