

A reflection for the first week of Lent

Waters of Death and Life

Death by water. Or death for lack of it. Whichever, they may well symbolize our deepest dreads. The biblical story of the Great Flood, with its harrowing destruction, is generally believed to include early Mesopotamian accounts of wide disaster. But the Hebrew and Christian traditions interpret it in the context of history made intelligible by God. It had moral and spiritual import, not only for the people but for the person.

Floods strip us of everything, even the land we stand on. We can only wait or go under. If we sink, we suffocate. We disappear. Water is one of those great impersonal forces of earth, before which we, even in our technological abundance, can find ourselves abandoned and helpless.

Water, despite its chaos, is also the promise of life. Water is sustenance and cleansing. It is refreshment, purification, and promise. Thus Noah, as the embodiment of Israel, the Church, and perhaps all humankind, is given a regenerating covenant in the midst of utter loss. “Never again shall there be another flood to destroy the earth.” Later, Isaiah will remind Israel of God’s eternal love and pity—the only anchor in existence for Noah and for all of us.

Jesus, too, knew the flood, the waters of death and life. And his going under in baptism became the first sign of his own death, his own passing through the chaos, his new covenant. His people would come to see the Church, born of the water from his side, as the realization of Noah’s promise.