The deluge and after

This spring, I was new to the Midwest—and the cataclysm of a biblical flood was not on my agenda.

by Eric C. Garner in the October 2024 issue
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Flooding of the Blue Earth River, following the Rapidan Dam failure on June 24, in Rapidan Township, in Minnesota (Wikideas1 / Creative Commons)

Natural disasters, like people, are decidedly particular. A person’s distress tolerance will frequently reveal their regional origins. As someone who’s spent most of his life in California and Colorado, I am prone to downplaying concern to people who are less familiar with earthquakes, fires, and mudslides. However, as a recent transplant

to a Minnesota river valley, I am a foreigner when it comes to the power of floodwaters. My anxiety went off the charts when the historic Rapidan Dam threatened imminent, critical failure a week into my pastoral call with a new church.

Flooding is common in Minnesota's river valleys, typically resulting from snowmelt compounding through the various tributaries to the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers. But last winter was a "lost winter" for Minnesota: the effects of climate change left the state bereft of snowbanks and ice-covered lakes. The lost winter itself was the culmination of several years of sustained drought, so locals feared yet another dry spring would follow.

Instead the Great Plains region experienced its heaviest rainfall since 1908. It was not snowmelt but saturated water tables that filled our news broadcasts and social media feeds with images of flooded towns and fields throughout the Dakotas, Iowa, and Minnesota. Mankato, the town I now call home, had 14.7 inches of rain in the month of June, more than triple the average. Calling it a rainy month would be a lesson in understatement.

Here, at the end of an especially wet spring and a record-setting June, the rivers could no longer contain the glut of water filling the region. On June 24, the Rapidan Dam was compromised. Sitting on the Blue Earth River, one of the tributaries of the Minnesota, the Rapidan Dam is a 114-year-old structure, constructed on sandstone bedrock that has been eroding for decades. As the torrent of June waters beat against the sandstone, the dam threatened to collapse, which in turn would inundate the Minnesota River with another two feet of water, raising it well above its existing record of thirty feet. What would we do in the event of such a deluge?

Like most Americans, I had never heard of the Rapidan Dam before June 24. Heading into the church office on one of the few sunny mornings since I'd first preached here two Sundays prior, I was completely unaware of the dangers fomenting upstream. I might have instead been mulling the words of Jesus: "Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them" (Luke 17:26–27). I was reveling in the joys of a good and beautiful world, but a flood was brewing.

The Bible spills relatively little ink about flooding. If a California and Colorado boy is more concerned with earthquakes and fires in an arid environment than the dangers

of water damage, then surely this was even more the case for the Israelites of old. Perhaps that's why the one flood that most of us remember from scripture is decidedly cataclysmic and entirely removed from the daily fears of a people living on the edge of desert and wilderness. The Genesis flood is world-ending; the biblical writers see it as the break in continuity between an old world still clinging to the vestiges of God's creational intent and the sad march of history described by Gerard Manley Hopkins: "And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; / And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil / Is bare now." The flood, rather than washing away human brokenness, only lays it out all the more bare. Eden is gone, but the Fall remains.

The cataclysm of the biblical flood, however, was not on my agenda that day in Mankato. I was blithely going my way, not considering the danger upriver, when a church administrator came into my office and told me that the Rapidan Dam was about to fail; a flood was coming. Downtown had been underwater just a few days earlier because of the rainfall, so what would this mean? Even if the levies held, would rising sewage cause a sanitary emergency? What would become of the people poorest equipped for weathering the storm?

The tale of Noah, his ark, and the flood is difficult to parse and easy to ignore. It's for children, or conversely, it's terrible for children. It demonstrates God's mercy, or perhaps it paints God as a monster. Is it appropriate to save animals over humans? Perhaps they're the only ones worthy of salvation. Because of these theological concerns, I have been deeply challenged by the flood narrative. We all, in a way, are Noah—each of us confronted with floodwaters, tasked with the moral burden of discerning how to survive. Whom will we rescue along the way, and what piece of the old world will we try to preserve through cataclysm and storm? How will we reconcile our lives with God in the aftermath, knowing what we have lost while trusting in a sign of promise once the waters have subsided?

In the case of the Rapidan Dam, the Minnesota River, and the people of Mankato, we were all spared the worst of the deluge. In the end, the dam held, relieved by water finding another path, cutting a channel through a neighboring shore. Many watched in horror as this act of relief claimed a neighbor's house and store, lost to the crashing torrents. We had wet basements and failed sump pumps; we had closed roads and long delays as the community jointly prayed and planned for worst while hoping for the best. There was a cost, but we have all been preserved in our arks to find dry land once more.

While it is true that the Bible does not have all that much to say about floods, the story of Noah is not the only water narrative. At the very end of the strange prophecy of Ezekiel, we are treated to a recapitulation of the Genesis flood. But here, rather than cataclysmically destroying the earth, it heals it. Where Genesis 7 seems to wash away the last traces of Eden, Ezekiel 47 reveals that the truth is that Eden was in fact buried in silt that has yet to be removed. In Ezekiel, the floodwaters do not pierce the boundary of the firmament but rather flow freely from the doors of the reconsecrated temple. The stream of water floods the land until there's a river that cannot be crossed, transforming all that it touches. Eventually this vision concludes with a promise echoed later in the finale of Revelation:

> On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing. (Ezek. 47:12)

If scripture reveals us all to be Noah, then I believe it also invites us to be the temple of Ezekiel's vision. As the church, we are meant to flood the world with the worshipful healing of God—undoing cataclysm and renewing Eden. We are all tasked in our particularity with helping to preserve something in the deluge of our lives and then helping it to find new life once the waters have cleared.

My new family at the First Presbyterian Church of Mankato have done just this, buoying me and many others in the midst of the recent floods. They have avoided complaints about their own damp basements and turned their attention toward those who've fared far worse. They've stood alongside their neighbors, offering still, small comfort where it is needed most. Food is shared with the hungry, and housing is offered to those needing lodging. As a church, they're seeking healing and restoration for the community and the land upon which we all rely.

In the midst of all the rain and the threat of flood, the church's building was not unscathed: its basement, too, was submerged in water. But that's just how it's going to be if Ezekiel's vision has any practical implications. We're going to get wet along with our neighbors if we have any hope of standing in solidarity with them to bring God's healing. The restorative flood of the temple forces us to look outward to the world, developing empathy for the consequences of the flood upon others as we

grapple with its effects upon us. We all contend with the flood, but none of us need do so alone as we are emptied out of our church buildings onto the streets with our neighbors, whom God loves.

Not every grief is a cataclysm, but it will always provide us with an opportunity to make sure that our neighbors are not washed away. For those at risk of being lost to the torrents of this life, we become the vessels and arks of God’s love.