READ: Genesis 9:20-25 (Common English Bible)

“Noah, a farmer, made a new start and planted a vineyard. He drank some of the wine, became drunk, and took off his clothes in his tent. Ham, Canaan’s father, saw his father naked and told his two brothers who were outside. Shem and Japheth took a robe, threw it over their shoulders, walked backward, and covered their naked father without looking at him because they turned away. When Noah woke up from his wine, he discovered what his youngest son had done to him. He said, “Cursed be Canaan: the lowest servant he will be for his brothers.”

REFLECT:

Does anyone else think it odd that the story of Noah and the Flood is one of the first Bible stories we tend to teach our children? Far from the stories of Jesus healing the sick, Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt, or Jonah sitting in the belly of a whale, the story of the Flood is one of apocalypse—the world ends! Countless men, women, children, and animals drown! Yet Noah is a mainstay of Sunday Schools everywhere. On a certain level, it’s understandable why: in addition to being one of the most dramatic and suspenseful stories in the Old Testament, it’s a useful tool for teaching the importance of living kind, righteous lives like Noah and trusting in God the way his family did while on the Ark. The story of the Flood is also an easy way to teach children how God always keeps God’s promises—you can point to a rainbow as proof! So we clean up the story, sidestepping the human suffering and focusing on the happy ending.

But there’s another part of the Noah story that nobody really tries to sanitize because nobody really tries to discuss it anymore: the Curse of Ham. After the Flood, after the world has dried up and the animals have returned to the earth, Noah and his family begin building a new home. Noah abandons his previous responsibilities as shipbuilder and sea captain and becomes a farmer, a toiler of the land. One of the first things he does as an ex-sailor is plant a vineyard, make wine from the grapes, and get blackout drunk. So drunk, in fact, that he ends history’s first bender passed out and naked. When his son Ham finds him, he tells his other two brothers about their father’s sorry state. These two brothers then take a garment, hold it between them, and walk backwards into their father’s tent to clothe his nakedness without seeing it. After waking and learning what his sons did, Noah curses Ham. Or more specifically, Ham’s son—Noah’s own grandson—Canaan. Turning then to the two sons who covered his nakedness, he praised them and doomed his grandson Canaan to their perpetual slavery. The story of Noah then ends.

What exactly did Ham do to justify this perpetual slavery of his ancestors? The answer is…we’re not sure. There’s a long history of Jewish and Christian scholars trying to reverse engineer Ham’s supposed transgression, some saying it was sinful in Biblical times for sons to see their fathers naked, others identifying absent details and suggesting he castrated his father. But
personally, I don’t think there was a rational reason for Noah’s curse, because I don’t think Noah was acting rationally. I think Noah was traumatized, and in his trauma lashed out at Ham over a trifling matter in a way that would hurt him the most, by hurting his son. Think back to the realities of the flood—the suffering, the death—and consider that Noah witnessed it all firsthand. Do you think he ever looked out on the flooded world and trembled at the thought of the waters never receding? Do you think he ever wondered if he deserved to survive at all?

I’ve been thinking about Noah, trauma, and survivor’s guilt a lot lately. In a way, we’ve all lived through our own Flood recently in the shape of COVID-19. What was Noah’s family living on the Ark but a literal quarantine? COVID might not be flooding cities, but millions have died from it. In its own way, the resulting societal trauma has been just as devastating. I’ve seen friends and loved ones—good, kind, generous people—transform into hungover Noah’s, desperate to relieve their trauma by ripping and tearing into bystanders and fellow congregants over things as simple as mask mandates. By the grace of God, this pandemic will blow over one day. And once these floodwaters recede, what next? Will we try to reconcile with those we’ve hurt? Will we try to repair our broken communities, re-knit our divided congregations, revive our lost friendships? The stakes are too high not to try, lest we—just like Noah—doom ourselves and our loved ones to a perpetual slavery of hate and resentment.

RESPOND:

1. How has this scripture or meditation spoken to you? Pray: “What would you have me hear, O Lord?”

2. What one specific act do you intend to take, an attitude to change, a person to see, or prayer to pray? Pray: “What would you have me do, O Lord?”

PRAY:

Lord, forgive us our selfishness and ugliness. Help us to always see your sacred image in others and treat them with love and compassion. Guide us in our trauma and hold us in your arms until the floodwaters recede and the rebuilding begins. Amen.