

Noah and the Flood (*Genesis 6:5-22; 8:6-12; 9:8-17*)

The story of Noah and the ark is probably one of the best known stories in the Old Testament. It has its origins in ancient history, but the story itself did not take on its present form in the literature of the Hebrews until the time of a literary renaissance during the reigns of David and Solomon about 1000 BC. The writers of the story seem to have recast an ancient story told by the Sumerians and Mesopotamians which was found on a tablet in the Tigris-Euphrates River.

Almost every culture on earth includes an ancient flood story. Details vary, but the basic plot is the same: a deluge kills all but a lucky few. The story most familiar to many people is the biblical account of Noah and his ark. Older than Genesis is the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh, a king who embarked on a journey to find the secret of immortality. Along the way he met Utnapishtim, survivor of a great flood sent by the gods. Warned by Enki, the water god, Utnapishtim built a boat and saved his family and friends, along with artisans, animals, and precious metals.

Ancient Greeks and Romans grew up with the story of Deucalion and Pyrrha, who saved their children and a collection of animals by boarding a vessel shaped like a giant box. Irish legends talk about Queen Cesair and her court, who sailed for seven years to avoid drowning when the oceans overwhelmed Ireland. European explorers in the Americas were startled by Indian legends that sounded similar to the story of Noah.

Geologists have wondered what could possibly explain the prevalence of flood legends. This is the theory they are working on: as the Ice Age ended and glaciers melted, a wall of seawater surged from the Mediterranean into the Black Sea. During the Ice Age, the Black Sea was an isolated fresh water lake surrounded by farmland. About 12,000 years ago, toward the end of the Ice Age, Earth began growing warmer. Vast sheets of ice that sprawled over the Northern Hemisphere began to melt. As a result, oceans and seas grew deeper. About 7,000 years ago the Mediterranean Sea swelled. Sea water pushed northward, slicing through what is now Turkey. Funnelled through the narrow Bosphorus, the water hit the Black Sea with 200 times the force of Niagara Falls. Each day the Black Sea rose about six inches and coastal farms were flooded. Seared into the memories of terrified survivors, the tale of the flood was passed down through generations and eventually became the Noah story.

Many of the details described in the Genesis flood story are echoed in other ancient myths. The dispatching of a bird makes its appearance repeatedly in numerous

ancient flood myths. It derives from a practice among mariners in ancient times to take shore-sighting birds aboard and to release them in order to determine their proximity to land.

Ancient cultures across the globe used birds for the purpose of finding land and its direction within a navigable distance. Hindu merchants carried aboard several “shore-sighting birds” on their overseas voyages. These birds were used to locate the nearest land when the ship’s position became doubtful. This custom was also practised by the seamen of Ceylon, who were unable to steer by the stars. These practices were preserved in the ancient legends, in which birds were sent out by Utnapishtim, Noah and others to look for dry land.

The stories in the Book of Genesis originally tried to answer age-old questions such as: Why is childbirth painful? Where did people come from? Or why do people speak different languages? In Genesis, these stories have been refashioned to present us with a picture of humanity repeatedly shattering the relationship with God established in creation. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the Flood, Canaan cursed, and the Tower of Babble(Babel), all illustrate the spread of evil or broken relationships with God and with one another.

We are so familiar with Noah, that we think we know the whole story. What we tend to think of as the story is either of two common interpretations. The most popular interpretation is very much a children’s story of animals and rainbows. This is a story about God’s love for animals, about remembering God’s love each time we see a rainbow, even about the bright side of every storm.

The second common interpretation is a story that is most definitely not a child’s story. In this version, God is so angered by human rebellion that God floods the whole earth, wiping out nearly everything in a fit of divine rage. This is a story about a God whom you’d be crazy to want to have anything to do with, a God of wrath who is ready and willing to strike down sinners.

This makes for a most terrifying story, even before the digital special effects of the “Noah” movie a few years ago. In our rush to tame the story, to divert attention from the shocking fact that God wants to destroy *everything*, we focus on the animals (“two by two”) and make thematic nursery room wallpaper.

Neither of these interpretations is the whole story, and neither contains much truth. A truer story is that God has an infinite number of ways of calling us back to the

harmony that God intended for us. Our story today, in which God establishes a covenant with Noah and his descendants, tells us that God is “hanging up the bow”, putting aside forever the option of destruction and seeking us as God’s own.

Sadly, the creatures God has made, and especially the human creatures, are extremely violent, and growing more so since the beginning of time. The disobedience of the first couple, who put themselves rather than God at the centre of creation, sets up the disobedience of Cain; first the relationship between humans and God is damaged, then the relationship within the human community is damaged. Violence is made possible by the broken relationship with God. Cain’s descendant Lamech intensifies the violence by revelling in vengeful murder. What was so beautifully ordered in creation is now utterly disordered by violence.

By focussing on the theme of judgment, we miss the deep pain expressed in the story, that pain of course, being the pain at the very heart of God. The flood story is not one that is about a vengeful God, watching and waiting for a screw up so that God might smite the evil-doer, which is the image a lot of people have when we speak about the judgment of God. If that is the understanding of judgment that we bring to the flood narrative, then we miss the point.

Judgment is not something God revels in or takes pleasure in, especially according to the flood story. God does not chuckle gleefully as God throws lightning bolts at random sinners. Instead, the reality of evil and God’s judgment of it is something that breaks God’s very heart, just as children can break a parent’s heart.

The flood story stands as a testament to the tension that we humans see in the character of God, and the tension that we struggle to live within ourselves, namely the tension between righteousness and justice versus love and mercy. But at some point God must declare evil and do something about it.

But God does not fight fire with fire. Instead of destroying violence through more violence, God seeks the new creation promised in the covenant with Noah, which would then be enacted through the later covenants with Abraham, Israel, and brought to fullness in God’s work in Jesus. That is the substance of the gospel. The God who rules over us has turned toward us in a new way. In the flood, the biblical story makes its case for why evil persists in the world, where the Bible gives the answer to the great question of “Why doesn’t God just do away with it all?” And this is because God has chosen not to do so, but instead has committed God’s self to this creation.

So perhaps it is not so surprising that God would wish to do away with a project that has gone so badly awry. The entire cosmos is thrown into disorder, and humanity is so broken that God regrets having created it in the first place. "The Lord observed the extent of human wickedness on the earth, and he saw that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil. So the Lord was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth. It broke his heart."

Yet God's response to this realization is not one of anger or revenge. Rather God was sorry that he had made humankind on earth, and it broke his heart. God sorrows over the corruption of the beings that God made with such care and love, and God's heart, in striking contrast to the evil inclination of the human heart, is grieved by their betrayal. God is pained by the brokenness of creation.

God sends the flood, not as an act of revenge, but out of grief over the shattering of right human relationship with God. Human betrayal of God's intention has effects beyond human beings; human sin has emerged in the corruption of all the earth and in its destruction. "Now the earth had become corrupt in God's sight, and it was filled with violence."

That destruction is not total. God doesn't wipe away the creation entirely and then walk away. The flood is the means of re-creation. The flood itself is described as a reversal of creation, of the letting in of the waters being held above the heavens. In the deluge, the flood will destroy all that is under heaven; save Noah and his family, and the animals in the ark. The bleak picture of life being taken back is mitigated by the promise of the covenant God will establish with Noah. God washes the earth clean and both God and the earth begin again.

What God termed "very good" in creation is something God has chosen to not abandon, but chose to enter into covenant with in order that it might be redeemed and restored. And in this world, full of violence, this is good news. The entire Old Testament is the story of relationships: God and humanity and covenants between God and Adam and Eve; Noah and God; Abraham and God; Moses and God; Ruth and God.

So, all of creation is given a new beginning, a new opportunity to live in the harmony that God intended. However, this new beginning is also a continuation. God does not create new beings, but begins anew with a remnant of the beings created at the beginning.

But, there is a “yet” in the story: “Yet I will establish my covenant with you ...” God makes a covenant with the “righteous” Noah (son of the murderous Lamech! Neither our biological nor social context determines our identity), because there is always a “yet” with God in the primeval story as God now looks to continue the relationship with humanity in spite of their overwhelming violence.

Noah, after spending 120 years building the ark, is tasked with bringing animals onto the ark, for in the new post-flood world, their deliverance will be as important as humanity’s. “Each according to its kind,” really means “each according to its species.” Noah, representing humanity, is to keep these creatures alive for the sake of the preservation of the species. Likewise, human being are to continue their charge of the food supply for humans and animals, a task originally commanded in the creation story. Humanity is charged with creating and maintaining conditions under which all God’s creatures can thrive.

The covenant with Noah and all flesh fulfills the pre-flood promise God made “But I solemnly swear to keep you safe in the boat, with your wife and your sons and their wives.” The meaning of “covenant” is “promise,” a promise which is unilateral and unconditional. Covenant does not mean “agreement” here. It is sheer promise from God which describes this covenant as a divine oath. Nothing at all is said about what human beings should do. God alone takes on this obligation. The covenant here is described not so much in terms of an agreement as a promise of deliverance from the waters of chaos and death.

The covenant was the sealing of the newly-restored relationship between God and God’s creatures. And this is entirely God’s doing. God enters into an eternal covenant with all creation without requiring anything in return. God does so, fully aware that “people’s thoughts and actions are bent toward evil from childhood.” The flood has not cleansed the human heart of sin. But God knows this, and God enters into covenant with us anyway. Perhaps the divine heart that was so aggrieved by human wickedness that God sent a flood, is now moved by that same grief to seek another way to get through to us.

The sign of this covenant, God’s bow in the clouds – is precisely the bow of battle. Ancient depictions of a deity armed with bow and arrow are not unusual. To hang up one’s bow is to retire from battle. That bow in the clouds is the sign of God’s promise that whatever else God does to seek our restoration, destruction is off the table.

The rainbow is now filled with new significance for the future. In times of difficulty,

particularly conflict and war, this sign of divine remembering is one in which people can take comfort and hope. It is a sign that God will not use the bow as a weapon again. So the rainbow is a sign of divine good will toward the creation, even though God's judgment will continue.

The flood story focuses on God and God's commitment to the world. This God: expresses sorrow and regret; judges, but does not want to judge; goes beyond justice and decides to save some, including animals; commits to the future of a less than perfect world; is open to change in view of experience with the world and doing things in new ways; promises never to do this again.

What God does here re-characterizes the divine relation to the world. God softens the workings of divine judgment and promises an orderly cosmos for the continuation of life. God will never do this again! God is the one who has changed between the beginning and the end of the flood, not human beings. God decides to continue to live with such resisting creatures – not the response of your typical CEO!

This story shows that God changes in the divine way of relating to the world. God's eternal promise is more than simply promising to bring no more floods. The promise makes it clear that God brings the reign of the curse to an end, an eternal limit on the functioning of the moral order, and promises not to "destroy" the world again, by whatever means. "I hereby confirm my covenant with you and your descendants, and with all the animals that were on the boat with you: the birds, the livestock, and all the wild animals, every living creature on earth. Yes, I am confirming my covenant with you. Never again will flood waters kill all living creatures; never again will a flood destroy the earth." Come what may, the cosmic order will remain steady and regular.

That God still makes the promises God makes, means that divine suffering over human evil and violence will continue. This kind of divine response means that God has chosen to take the route of suffering relative to sin and evil rather than destructive power. For God to decide to endure a wicked world, while continuing to open up the divine heart to that world, means that God's grief is ongoing. God determines to take suffering into God's own heart and bear it there for the sake of the future of the world. The cross of Jesus Christ is on the same trajectory of divine promise. It is precisely this kind of God with whom sinful humanity has to do, and it is primarily the divine commitment to promises made that they most need to hear.

The meaning of this promise is that God will try everything else. God will seek us and seek us, despite God's knowledge of every sin, every grief, and every shame that

hides our vision of God's reality and of our own as God's creatures. Whatever dwells in our hearts that keeps us from hearing the harmony of all life in God's care, God will not give up on loving us into restoration and a new creation.

Amen.

Pentecost 14 Prayers of the People September 11 2022

(Creator God.... Hear our prayer)

Creator God, we thank you for the beauty of your Creation, and for giving us the privilege of caring for it. We confess that we have not cared for the earth with the self-sacrificing and nurturing love that you require of us. We mourn the broken relationships in creation. We repent for our part in causing the current environmental crisis that has led to climate change.

We pray for the poor, hungry, and neglected all over the world, that their cries for daily bread may inspire works of compassion and mercy among those to whom much has been given. Creator God ... Hear our prayer.

We pray for schools and centres of learning throughout the world, for those who lack access to basic education, and for the light of knowledge to blossom and shine in the lives of all God's people. Creator God ... Hear our prayer.

We pray for an end to the divisions and inequalities that scar God's creation, particularly the barriers to freedom faced by God's children throughout the world because of gender identity and sexual orientation; that all who have been formed in God's image might have equality in pursuit of the blessings of creation. Creator God ... Hear our prayer.

We pray for the health of women, children, and families around the world, especially for an end to maternal and child mortality, that in building healthy families, all God's people may be empowered to strengthen their communities and repair the breaches which divide nations and peoples. Lord, in your mercy ... Hear our prayer.

We pray for an end to the waste and desecration of God's creation, for access to the fruits of creation, sustainable food sources and fresh water supply to be available and shared equally among all people, and for communities and nations to find sustenance and security in the bounty of the earth and the water God has given us. Creator God ... Hear our prayer.

We pray for all nations and people who already enjoy the abundance of creation and the blessings of prosperity, that their hearts may be lifted up to the needs of the poor and afflicted, and that new and creative partnerships between rich and poor for the reconciliation of the world may flourish and grow. Creator God ... Hear our prayer.

We pray for the regions of our world caught up in violence and threats of violence: especially in Ukraine, South America, and the Middle East, which have resulted in millions of refugees and migrants who are seeking safety, and hope for a future for themselves and their loved ones. We pray for those supporting and caring for them, including Lutheran World Relief. Creator God ... Hear our prayer.

We pray for those suffering the effects of recent natural disasters: floods in Pakistan, China, the United States and Canada; forest fires in British Columbia, Northern Ontario, and Newfoundland; droughts throughout Africa, the western United States, and our prairie provinces. Creator God....Hear our prayer.

We pray for this congregation, our siblings in Christ: for those who are ill. or whose loved ones are ill, recovering from surgery or treatments, for those who are anxious about the future, for those struggling with their faith, for those who minister among us, for all Your people in this place. Creator God ... Hear our prayer.

We pray for the healing of the earth, that present and future generations may enjoy the fruits of creation, to restore and protect the world you created, and continue to glorify and praise you. Creator God ... Hear our prayer.

We pray for the people in the communities of James Smith Cree Nation and Weldon, and for all who are affected by this recent violent tragedy in which ten lives were taken, and numerous people injured. We mourn for those who have died and pray for your comfort to surround their loved ones. We pray for healing for those recovering from their injuries. We pray for those who are re-traumatized by this violence. We pray for those who are responding to the needs of these communities. Creator God ... Hear our prayer.

Gracious God, we give thanks for the life of your servant, Queen Elizabeth, for her faith and her dedication to service and her steadfast life of duty. Bless the people of the United Kingdom, Canada, and all the realms and nations of the Commonwealth and beyond as they mourn her death. May her example inspire us. Creator God ... Hear our prayer.

Faithful God, we ask that you bless King Charles III and guide him in his leadership, faith, and duties as you did his mother. Comfort him and his extended family as they grieve the loss of their mother, grandmother, and queen. Creator God ... Hear our prayers.

Creator God, fill us with your Spirit that we might work together to restore your creation, to be better stewards of all you have blessed us with in your natural world, to be able to hand on a safe environment and climate to our children and theirs. Let our care for creation be our act of worship and obedience to you. Your kingdom come, and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.