

## **“Noah and the Flood”**

Genesis 6:5-8; 7:6-10; 7:23-8:3

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Last Sunday we started our summer series on the theme of water, and we began right where you might suspect, in the beginning (!) with the book of Genesis, chapter 1. In the opening verses we hear this: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless and empty, and darkness was over the surface of the deep – and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” In the very beginning, before God’s creative voice speaks anything into existence, the Spirit of God is active and present - hovering like a mother eagle over the surface of the waters. God separates the waters, creating the seas below and the skies above - and by doing this room is made for the plants and the fish, all the animals and the humans to thrive. God creates everything and calls it all good, and rests on the 7th day.

But when we begin to turn the pages in the early chapters of Genesis, we find out that things do not stay good. The first humans, Adam and Eve, choose not to listen to God, and their disobedience results in separation from God - they are tossed out of the Garden of Eden by their Creator. With their relationship in trouble, Adam and Eve do what some couples sometimes do - they decide to have kids. “Yes, that will solve all of our problems!” But their first child who is named Cain becomes jealous of his little brother named Abel and his anger leads him to murder Abel (Genesis 4.1-8). Such violence results in more separation, and God’s judgment falls on Cain who moves further away from Eden to the land of Nod (4.16).

As the generations multiply during the following years, things go from bad to worse - time and time again people chose evil over good, and as the Apostle Paul will say later in the New Testament, the wages of sin are death and separation. This morning we will take a look at how God responds to this ancient human problem, the problem of sin and its effect on all of creation. Our story picks up with our reading of Noah and the Flood, selected verses from Genesis chapter 6, 7 and 8. Let us listen now for God’s Word:

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.

Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters came on the earth. And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood. The flood continued forty days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. The waters swelled and increased greatly on the earth; and the ark floated on the face of the waters. God blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark.

But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were

with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, and the waters gradually receded from the earth. At the end of one hundred fifty days the waters had abated.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

I love bumper stickers, and when I am spending time on the road I love to see what messages are being broadcast on the back bumpers or back windows of the cars that I pass by. When we moved to Asheville twenty years ago from Atlanta, I began to notice that there were a lot more stickers on cars here in the WNC mountains, when compared to metro Atlanta. Whether it was the red, white and blue “Power of Pride” stickers that popped up after 9/11, or the “Keep Asheville Weird” stickers that seemed to be everywhere, bumper stickers have long been an interest of mine. I believe they express not only the opinions of the drivers but something about their personality, their character - what makes them unique or interesting. If you had to design your own bumper sticker and put it on the back of your car, I wonder what yours would be?

One morning as I was driving from Burnsville to Spruce Pine, I saw a bumper sticker that caught my attention. It simply said, “But God.” Nothing else, just these two simple words: “But God.” When I got to the office my curiosity was (peeked) piqued - so I turned to google to see what I could find! I discovered that the “But God” bumper sticker was sponsored by Christians who believed that the heart of the gospel could be expressed in these two simple words, “But God” (see book of that title by Casey Lute.) If you read through the Bible there are many occasions where hopelessness, darkness, and death are ruling the day. And as you are reading along in the sentence you come to a simple three letter word “BUT” and then everything changes! And when God follows the simple word “BUT” it really is a game changer - though sin, despair and hopelessness are real, they do not have the last word - God does. As the old hymn says, “I once was lost BUT now I am found, was blind BUT now I see!” So whenever you are reading the Bible look for these BUT moments, because something important usually is about to happen.

That certainly is the case with our passage for today. Before we get to the first BUT we hear how bad things have become, and we are not just talking about just a few bad apples - the wickedness of humankind was great throughout the earth. Eugene Peterson puts it like this in his translation called The Message: “God saw that human evil was out of control. People thought evil, imagined evil—evil, evil, evil from morning to night.” You might be wondering. “How can this be? Didn’t God just create everything including humans and called it all good? How can it go from “good, good, good” to “bad, bad, bad?” Clearly God gave humans the freedom and the ability to choose good over evil, and unfortunately the first humans and their descendants chose to go their own way and not listen to the One who gave them life. Generation to generation sin was passed down, but what is most important to notice is how all of this affects God. In response to human sin, God doesn’t lash out in anger or a desire to get even - no, we are told that God takes it all in. We read that “the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him in his heart.” This is how a parent feels when a child that has been loved and nurtured turns away down the wrong path - it literally breaks your heart. And yes, as a parent we can feel anger that we have been taken advantage of, or we may even regret having children in the first place, and feel like lashing out in anger and judgment.

But the amazing thing is this: this is not what God does! Just when we think humanity has lost all hope, and that everything is going to be wiped out permanently, we come to the first big BUT in our passage. “But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.” This is the moment of amazing and surprising grace, the moment when we see how God is choosing to respond to human sinfulness. Though God could have acted differently, God responds “not as an angry and vengeful judge, but as a grieving and pained parent, distressed at what has happened” to the world that has been created (Fretheim, [New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume I](#), p. 389). Though the consequences of human sins can not be avoided - the flood waters do come and destroy many things - in the story of Noah and his family God takes a decisive action to save not only humanity but every animal and bird, too! Biblical scholar Terry Fretheim puts it like this: Noah’s story emphasizes not a God who decides to destroy, but a God who wills to save... [a God] who promises to stand by the creation... a God who commits to the future of a less than perfect world.” (Fretheim, p. 395).

Though we like to think of Noah and the Flood as a happy children’s tale with all of the animals marching into the ark by twos, the godly family being saved on the boat during the months that followed the rain, and the beautiful rainbow that comes at the end as symbol of God’s promise never to destroy again by water - though we try to turn this into a feel good children’s tale, we can’t avoid the reality that this is a story of destruction, too. The waters of the flood have long symbolized the forces of chaos in the world, and the damage that they can bring to our lives. A group of us spent time last week in Canton, NC helping with the recovery efforts on going there. On August 17 of last year, Tropical Storm Fred brought heavy rains to the already saturated Western North Carolina mountains. The Pigeon River which runs right through Haywood County brought deadly floods to the Canton and Cruso communities, damaging hundreds of homes and resulting in 6 deaths. We spent last week working with two women, Rhonda and Vicky, both of whom had survived the flooding. We laid flooring in Rhonda’s bathroom and fixed the plumbing in her shower. Unfortunately, Vicky’s home was damaged beyond repair and with the help of a backhoe and volunteer operators we removed it from her lot and helped her to connect her RV to the waterline. Vicky’s neighbor Jim told me about the day of the flood, and how the waters came just a few inches from his camper, and how homes were literally picked up and washed away. Though Vicky’s home did not wash away, it was ruined by the mud and the resulting mold caused significant health problems for her.

On a positive note, I was impressed by the resiliency of the people we met in Canton, and the resolve of the church leaders in the area to work together and to do their best to help in the recovery efforts. But on a negative note, it was depressing to realize that many like Vicky and Jim and Rhonda do not have the resources to move out of the floodplain. Just as the floods caused damage there in 2004, and again in 2021, the likelihood of future catastrophic weather related events is only increasing. As the earth continues to get warmer and warmer, and storms get more frequent and severe, many of those who are most vulnerable in the world continue to suffer. In countries like Guatemala and Haiti where infrastructure is not strong, the people there suffer in tragic ways. Like in the days of Noah, human sin has real consequences for all members of creation. As fires and other climate disasters rock our world, many species are approaching extinction. Plants and animals, fish and reptiles and human beings - we are all part of an interconnected web of life. Our health depends on the temperature of the seas, the health of the riverbeds and the life of the ozone dome that makes living possible on planet Earth. You see, since we are creatures made in God’s image, we should care for all of God’s good creation. Such care should not be done as a form of exploitation or ruthless dominion over things, but instead our care should be an expression of God’s steadfast nurture and love.

And so this brings us to the second and final BUT in our passage. After the many days of rain covering the world we read this: ***“But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark.”*** But God remembered - not just Noah and his family, but all the animals of the earth! This act of remembering is part of God’s re-creation. Just as we read last week in Genesis 1 about God’s Spirit blowing over the waters of the deep, we now read that “God made a wind (or spirit) to blow over the earth, and the waters subsided”... the rain stopped... and the waters gradually receded from the earth. In this way God gives humanity another chance, and promises to remain steadfast and loyal in spite of our rebellion. God takes the path of vulnerability and grief - willing to suffer in his own heart “and bear it there for the sake of the future of the world” (Fretheim, [New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume I](#), p. 396).

Bible scholar Kathryn Schifferdecker ([Working Preacher: Flood and Promise](#), September 9, 2018) has made the important point that as we read through the story of Noah and the Ark, we see that the flood really does not cause humans to change. Sin and evil remain after the flood. In fact, right after they get off the boat we read about Noah’s son Ham who sees his drunk father naked and instead of keeping it on the down low, Ham calls his brothers to make a spectacle out of Noah’s situation (Genesis 9.18-25). In the book of Exodus the people of God make a golden calf and corrupt themselves (Exodus 32:7). Throughout the Old Testament we read how the people “turn away from God again and again to worship other gods” instead of the Lord.

But while human beings are not changed by the flood, Someone else’s heart is changed, and that is God’s! You see, in the story of the flood God is moved to make a radical commitment to fallen humanity, promising never to give up on creation. Though humanity continues to fill the earth with injustice and violence, we see God as a Judge but also as a Redeemer, forgiving the people over and over and over again. And Shifferdecker closes with this beautiful reflection:

“[F]inally, when human sin and corruption [became] so great that they threaten to overwhelm the world again, it is God who enters into the waters — [this time] into the waters of a woman’s womb, into the waters of the Jordan, to show once and for all that God is passionately committed to God’s creation.” Jesus is God with us, Emmanuel, the One who brings God’s love to us in the flesh.

Friends, in this story of the flood we are reminded that we simply cannot save ourselves. The waters of sin and chaos are all around us, and without God’s saving grace we would be lost. But the good news is that we belong to a God who dives into the waters with us, One who loves us with a love that will never let us go.

Thanks be to God, now and forever. Amen.