

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

The story of Noah's ark 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 and found on a tablet dating back from about that time found in the Tigris-Euphrates river.

Almost every culture on earth includes an ancient flood story. Details vary, but the basic plot is the same: Deluge kills all but a lucky few. The most familiar story is the biblical account of Noah and his ark. There have been many such stories from a variety of cultures: The Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh, Ancient Greeks and Romans had Deucalion and Pyrrha, Irish legends talk about Queen Cesair and her court, European explorers in the Americas were startled by Indian legends that sounded similar to the story of Noah.

One tool that Biblical storytellers often use to pack meaning into their stories is to load them with language and structure that evoke memories of other stories. In our case, the storyteller has told the flood story in ways that trigger memories of the creation story we find in Genesis 1.

Noah's story is that God has an infinite number of ways of calling us back to the harmony that God intended for us. In our story today, 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. 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. 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.

Judgment is not something God revels in, takes pleasure in, especially according to the flood story. God does not chuckle gleefully as he 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. At some point God must declare evil and do something about it.

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.

What God termed "very good" in creation is something God has chosen to not abandon, but chose to enter into covenant with, so 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: between God and humanity, and covenants: between God and Adam and Eve; God and Noah; God and Abraham; God and Moses; God and Ruth.

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, in effect, 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. 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 responsibility for 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 a promise of deliverance from the waters of chaos and death.

The covenant or promise, was the sealing of the newly-restored relationship between God and all of God’s creatures. God enters into an

eternal covenant with all creation without requiring anything in return. God is 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, yet God enters into the covenant with us, seeking 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 goodwill toward the creation, even though God’s judgment will continue.

There is a beautiful parable about God’s rainbow, called “The Bow Committee” that may help to answer the questions: “What does this story say about God” and “What is God like?”

In the days of Noah, when the rains began to fall upon the earth, the angels in heaven wept for humanity. God called a meeting of the angels and said to them, “This is a sad day but it is not the end of the story of

humanity. When the flood waters recede, I am going to make a covenant of peace with them. On that day I will promise never again to flood the earth. But I will need a reminder of this solemn promise. Something I can see and they can see after the rain. So I will choose seven of you to design this symbol.”

So God chose seven of his most artistic angels and they got to work. Pretty quickly, they agreed that the symbol should be a bow. They had observed that the human beings laid their weapons on the ground whenever they made peace with one another, so it would make sense for God to lay a bow down after every rain as a sign of peace. They agreed it should be a big bow whose bottom touched the earth and whose top reached the heavens. Where they disagreed is what colour the bow should be.

Each thought the bow should be a different colour. After they had gone around and around arguing amongst themselves, they decided to bring in an eighth angel to decide between them. So they called in a wise old archangel, and one by one they made their case to him.

“The bow should be red,” the first angel said, “For red is the colour of blood. This flood was caused by humanity’s violence toward one another and toward the creation. But just as the shedding of blood brings destruction, it also brings salvation. When humanity begins anew, they will need to be responsible for administering justice and for making

atonement for their sins. When they look to the sky and see this red bow, they will be reminded that God is just.”

“The bow should be orange,” the second angel said, “For orange is the colour of fire. And God is a jealous God, a consuming fire whose anger burns when his children do wrong. When humanity begins anew, they will need to fear God and walk in the way that is right. When they look to the sky and see this orange bow, they will be reminded that God is righteous.”

“The bow should be yellow,” the third angel said, “For yellow is the colour of the sun. And just as the sun is dependable to rise in the east and set in the west, every day, so God too is dependable. For even when humanity completely abandons God as they have, God does not abandon them. When humanity begins anew, they will need to know they can depend upon God’s promises. When they look to the sky and see this yellow bow, they will be reminded that God is faithful.”

“The bow should be green,” the fourth angel said, “For green is the colour of grass. And God is the creator of all life. Even in this act of destruction, he is bringing forth new life because God is ever forgiving. When humanity begins anew, they will surely sin again. But even when they do they will only need to repent and God will give them new life. When they look to the sky and see this green bow, they will be reminded that God is merciful.”

“The bow should be blue,” the fifth angel said, “For blue is the colour of tears. And God weeps for humanity as a parent weeps for their children. Even now, as the waters fall, God is grieved for what must take place. When humanity begins anew, they will need to know that God has a loving heart and feels their pain in the midst of suffering. When they look to the sky and see this blue bow, they will be reminded that God is compassionate.”

“The bow should be indigo,” the sixth angel said, “For indigo is the colour of... well... indigo. It is a colour deep and mysterious that comes from rare and exotic flowers. In the same way God is mysterious and wholly other. We cannot pretend to know God’s ways for God’s ways are higher than our ways and God’s thoughts higher than our thoughts. When humanity begins anew, they will need to treat God with reverence and awe. When they look to the sky and see this indigo bow, they will be reminded that God is holy.”

“The bow should be violet,” the seventh angel said, “For violet is the colour of the royal robes. And God is the King of creation. This day, though sad, is a display of God’s ultimate sovereignty over creation. When humanity begins anew, they will need to obey God and bring honour and glory to God’s name. When they look to the sky and see this violet bow, they will be reminded that God is Lord.”

The wise old archangel listened to and considered the arguments of the seven angels. Then he spoke. "Of course each of you is right. God is the just, righteous, faithful, merciful, compassionate, holy Lord. God is all these things and more. The bow should be all of these colours."

The angels, agreed with the wise old archangel and, frankly, they were embarrassed that the idea hadn't occurred to them sooner. So it was decided. They would make a bow that was red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. "Now that, that is settled," said the archangel, "Would you permit me to make a final suggestion?"

The angels asked him to continue. "In addition to making the bow all of these colours, the bow should be made of pure light. For God is the light of the world. When humanity begins anew, they will be tempted toward darkness. They may look for God in the things of this world which are terrible and terrifying or even in their own dark natures. But when they look into the sky and see this bow of pure light, perhaps they will be reminded that God is found not in darkness but in light".

And so it was. The angels designed a bow whose bottom touched the earth and whose top reached the heavens. It was a red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet bow made of pure light. They brought the design to God and God said that it was very good. And so it is.

To this day, after the rain, we sometimes see the bow and we are

reminded that God is the just, righteous, faithful, merciful, compassionate, holy Lord, who is found not in darkness but in light.

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 futures of a less than perfect world; is open to change in view of experience with the world and doing things in new ways. As long as the earth remains, there will be springtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, day and night.

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 exist, and it is primarily the divine commitment to promises made, that they need to hear over and over. Whatever dwells in our hearts that keeps us from hearing and seeing the harmony of all life in God's care, and the beauty of all creation, God will not give up on loving us into restoration.

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of promise, you set a bow in the sky to remind us that you will never again forsake your creation. Make us ever mindful of your promise, so that we might honour our covenant with you. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.

Amen