

Genesis 6:5-8,13,17-22; 7:10-12,17-24; 8:1-3,14-17; 9:8-17

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.

And God said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive. Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them.”

Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him. And after seven days the waters of the flood came on the earth.

In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.

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. The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered; the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep.

And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings; everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. He 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. And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days.

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; In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry.

¹ This sermon owes much to Kathryn M Schifferdecker’s commentary at *WorkingPreacher.org*.

Then God said to Noah, “Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons’ wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.”

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Matthew 8:24-27

A gale arose on the lake, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, ‘Lord, save us! We are perishing!’ And he said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, you of little faith?’ Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, ‘What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?’

The Great Flood and Noah’s Ark are a familiar story. Children’s nurseries are often themed around this story. There are nightlights, bath toys, children’s bedroom furniture, and umpteen children’s books that show Noah’s Ark as a kind of idyllic floating zoo, with happy animals poking their heads out windows, and a kind of Santa-Claus-looking Noah presiding benevolently over it all.² We have very nice paintings of this story along these lines on our own walls downstairs.

The story works on that level. It’s a good story at that children’s level. But you all are grown-ups. There’s more to the story than that.

² Paraphrased from Kathryn M Schifferdecker’s commentary at *WorkingPreacher.org*.

Let's put this story in context. This is really the first notable event described in the Bible after Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel. Human beings were created; they disobeyed God. They were thrown out of the Garden of Eden, and then one of them killed another – killed his own brother!

This is a couple thousand years before the Ten Commandments and the Law, so God hasn't given people a lot of guidance here. The results aren't good.

“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.” God saw that human beings had evil in their hearts. Cities and warring bands of nomads conducted wars against each other for no reason other than to take riches and to destroy those of others. Within groups, social interaction was Darwinian at best – survival of the strongest and the nastiest, with the strongest friends. This is before the Bronze Age, before writing. But, in the absence of metal, let me tell you, stone knives and flint arrowheads are enough to coat the earth with blood.

God sees all this, and regrets ever creating human beings. God decides to do what I do when a project just isn't working. Whether it's a dinner burned beyond saving or a sermon that just doesn't get there, I throw it away and start over. Maybe you do the same thing.

But Noah isn't like most people in the world. Noah is a good man, and his family are good people. So God decides to use them as his starting point for starting over. God tells Noah that there will be a flood that destroys all life on earth, and that he should build a boat. God gives him detailed requirements for this boat, detailing materials, dimensions, and so on.

Then great rains come, and fall on the earth for a long time. Was the rainfall exactly forty days and forty nights? We don't know, and it really doesn't matter. Forty days and nights is a common way in the Bible of saying, “A long time, but not a year.” Moses was on Mount Sinai

for forty days and forty nights.³ Jonah gave the city of Nineveh forty days warning of their imminent destruction.⁴ Jesus spent forty days and forty nights in the wilderness being tempted.⁵ After Jesus' resurrection he spent forty days teaching his apostles before ascending to Heaven.⁶ This is why Lent is forty days, as we prepare for Easter, and Advent, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas.

There are geological records of great floods all throughout the Mesopotamian region of the world sometime between the years 4000 and 3500 BC. The Bible describes the waters as being fifteen cubits over the tops of the mountains. That's a bit over twenty feet, over the tops of the highest land they knew about. Cities and towns and even animals, wild and domestic, are wiped out, because there is literally nowhere to go to escape the waters. The waters stay there for a hundred and fifty days. Nobody can cling to a raft or an improvised floatation device for a hundred and fifty days. It is literally the end of the world as these people know it.

But God remembers Noah and the people and animals that are with him in the ark.

The waters gradually recede until the Earth is dry.

God tells Noah to leave the Ark, and bring with him all the creatures that he and his people have saved. Then God tells all the creatures to be fruitful and multiply. This is exactly the same thing that God said when God first created all these creatures, back in the beginning of Genesis.⁷ This is a new Creation. This is God starting over.

³ Exodus 34:28.

⁴ Jonah 3:4.

⁵ Matthew 4:2, Mark 1:13, Luke 4:2.

⁶ Acts 1:3.

⁷ Day Four: Genesis 1:22

And now we get to the point of the whole story, the reason why we tell this story, six thousand years later. God says to Noah and his family, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, ...I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

God promises that God will never again throw this Creation project away and start over. This promise is unilateral. God does not require anything from Noah and his family in return. God does not say, “I won’t destroy the earth with a flood IF you are good boys and girls, treating each other and the world I made with some respect.” God says, “I will not destroy all humanity. Period.” God voluntarily places limits on God’s own actions, and demands nothing in return from us.

God hangs God’s bow in the sky as a reminder. We call it a rainbow, but the text here is talking about a bow as in the weapon of war. God has unilaterally disarmed, hung up the weapon. God has no intention of being an aggressor or our adversary. God has promised never again to destroy humanity, and the bow hangs there as a reminder, both to us and to God.⁸

This is the point of this story. The point is not the destruction of the Flood. The point is God’s mercy, and God’s commitment.

At the beginning of the story, God is deeply grieved by humanity’s sin. Humanity deserved what humanity got. The original Hebrew uses the same word to describe humanity’s corruption and the destruction that the Flood does. The punishment they receive comes out of the crime. The people are not punished so much for their sins as by their own sins.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts for Preaching, Year B*, 193.

But God still saves a remnant from the Flood. God saves Noah and his family and the animals from the waters. Then God makes a covenant with the people, and not just the people. God makes this covenant with all the people and all the creatures that were saved from the Flood. With all life on Earth.

God does not make this promise because humanity has changed.

Humanity has not changed.

Human beings still do evil upon the earth.

The Hebrew people will make a golden calf and corrupt themselves by worshipping it while Moses is on Mount Sinai, getting the Law.⁹ Later, they will worship foreign idols and corrupt themselves, even in the land of milk and honey that God gave them.¹⁰ The Crusades will happen, people who claim to be following God's command slaughtering a million or more people in the name of God. The Holocaust will happen, where over six million people were murdered in the name of human-created racial distinctions.

The Flood did not change human beings.

The Flood changed God.

God decides to commit to this broken, corrupt, and sinful world.

God still takes evil very seriously. God's mercy is stronger than God's yearning for justice, but just barely. So God will deal with human evil in other ways. God will call an old couple named Abram and Sarai and bless them to be a blessing to all the peoples of the world.¹¹

God will call their descendants to be a "priestly kingdom and a holy nation."¹² God will call

⁹ Exodus 32:7.

¹⁰ Judges 2:19.

¹¹ Genesis 12:1-9

¹² Exodus 19:6.

prophets and priests, shepherds and vine-dressers, to proclaim God's judgment and God's mercy, and to call a people into covenant. Over and over and over again.

Human beings continue to sin and to rebel against God. Humans continue to fill the earth with violence. God judges, but God also redeems. Over and over and over again.

Finally, when sin and corruption have become so great that sending another prophet just won't do the job, God enters the waters Godself. Into the waters of Mary's womb, into the waters of the Jordan, to show us just how passionately God is committed to this creation.

This is the story told in Scripture. This is the story we'll be telling over the next year. And the story of Noah is a good place to start. This may be celebrated as a children's story, but it's not just a children's story. Like all the best stories, it is about life and death. It's about sin and redemption. Most of all, it's about a God who is forevermore committed to God's people. As God said through the prophet Isaiah, "For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed."¹³

Thank God!

AMEN

¹³ Isaiah 54:10.