

Week 3, Sunday: The Flood
Genesis 6:9 - 8:22

For Journaling or Discussing with Another:

Read Genesis 6:9-22

- What in the story surprises or intrigues you?
- Differing cultures have differing stories of creation's origin and many cultures have some story of a great flood. Different Christian traditions read and interpret the Bible differently and faithful Christians may have different thoughts and belief about what "really happened" way back then. Whether or not there was a man named Noah who built an ark and filled it with animals, what real and abiding truth do you perceive this story telling us about God, about humanity, and about the creation?

Read Genesis 7:1-24

- Many scholars believe that there are at least two versions of a flood story that were woven together. Thus, there are discrepancies within the story. For instance, in one place Noah is told to gather two of every creature (6:19) and in another place seven pairs of clean animals (7:2). Likewise, at one point the flood is said to last for 40 days (7:17) then later for 150 days (7:24). My suspicion is that the "7 pairs" instruction was added later, at a time in Israel's history when animal sacrifice by priests was deemed a prerequisite for righteousness. Thus, with seven pairs of clean animals, Noah would be able to sacrifice properly and be deemed righteous. What do you believe makes one righteous?
- In this story, God looks upon the wickedness of human beings and is so troubled that God decides to start over, wiping out every person and every land creature with the exception of those on the ark. Why is this story so prevalent in the decoration of church nurseries; and how do we communicate stories like this to children?

Read Genesis 8:1-22

- How do you think the flood experience impacted God; what might God be feeling?
- At the beginning of the story, God looked upon the wickedness of his human creatures and decided to wipe them out and start over with Noah and his family. The starting over has begun, however God already seems to know that Noah's descendants will fare no better since "the wickedness of the human heart is evil from youth (8:21)." What is God to do with us?
- Why do you think we reference the Flood Story at each baptism? (ELW, page 230)
- Do you sense the hand of God in the Covid-19 pandemic (for blessing or curse)? Why or why not?

Week 3, Monday, Fruitfulness

Scripture: Genesis 9:1-7

God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life. Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind. And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it.'

Reflection: God is starting over. Having wiped out all but Noah's family in the flood, God is now commanding the human creatures to repopulate the earth. "*Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth.*" With a world population nearing 8 billion, perhaps we can now check this commandment off our human to-do list. Still some religious traditions use these words as a basis for their prohibition of family planning and for their insistence that sexual activity is primarily for the producing of children. Our tradition sees it differently.

In proclaiming the resurrection of Christ, we are declaring that God is active in creation; this includes fields of science and medicine. For generations, people prayed to God for an end to plague and a host of other population slowing illnesses. Now through the miracle of scientific advances, we have conquered so many diseases! In the year 1900 the average life span across the world was 31 years, now it is over 70 (according to Wikipedia). Even as we face new threats, like Covid-19, we remain optimistic that a vaccine will soon be developed. Not coincidentally, at the same time as we have developed vaccines, medicines, and treatments to extend life, we have also developed birth control techniques, and more modern theological and scientific understandings of human sexuality. There is great mystery in being created a sexual being. We know that touch, whether sexual (healthy, mutual, non-coercive, loving) or non-sexual aids human connection, feeds souls, and offers us a glimpse of God's love for us.

Here is a theological premise that may guide all our reflections upon scripture. *All of scripture is the Word of God, but not every word is meant for me/us, at this moment.* "Procreate!" is the word of God for Noah and his family and has been the Word of God for many others down through the ages; but it may or may not be the Word of God for you.

To Ponder: How might the words, "Be fruitful," be intended as the Word of God for you this day?
... whether or not you ever have children.

Prayer: Take my life that I may be consecrated, Lord to thee.
Take my moments and my days, let them flow with ceaseless praise.
Take my hands and let them move, at the impulse of thy love.
Take my feet and let them be swift and beautiful for thee.

(*"Take My Life, That I May Be,"* text by Frances Havergal, ELW #685)

Week 3, Tuesday: Reminders

Scripture: Genesis 9:8-17

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.'

Reflection: You probably already know that there is a rainbow at the end of the Noah saga, but have you ever noticed the purpose it serves in the story? It serves as a reminder, not so much for us, but for God. Having been so hurt and angered by human behavior, God had sent the destroying flood. Now a starting over is beginning, but the problem has not been solved. The flood may have wiped out most of creation, but it did not drown out the sin lying deep within human hearts.

Noah and his family will begin a repopulation of earth, but the wickedness that flows out of the human heart will not be contained. God is aware of this. Who knows, perhaps there may come another day when in anger or frustration God might entertain the thought of again wiping the slate clean. So God puts the rainbow in the sky as a reminder to God's own self that wiping out all but a few is an unsatisfactory solution. God will have to find another way.

For Christians, Jesus is the other way. In Jesus, God enters the human drama. Then, instead of wiping out humanity in order to deal with the sin lying deep within the human heart, God takes the human sin into God's own self. On the cross, a part of God's own self gets wiped out. Later God will give us a sign: the waters of baptism. In these waters there is still to be a drowning; a daily drowning of the old, sinful, selfish creature in us. Yet, in these waters there is connection to the risen Christ who forgives, cleanses, clothes us with righteousness, and leads us into life.

To Ponder:

- What serves as a reminder for you of God's love and calling upon your life? A cross around your neck? A meal-time grace? A remembering your baptism every time you shower? Something else?
- Anything you might add?

Prayer: In the cross of Christ I glory, tow'ring o'er the wrecks of time.

All the light of sacred story gathers round its head sublime.

When the woes of life o'er-take me, hopes deceive and fears annoy,

Never shall the cross forsake me; lo, it glows with peace and joy.

(“In the Cross of Christ I Glory,” text by John Bowring, ELW #324)

Week 3, Wednesday: Oppression

Scripture: Genesis 9:18-28

The sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was peopled. Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backwards and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, 'Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.' He also said, 'Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. May God make space for Japheth, and let him live in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave.' After the flood Noah lived for three hundred and fifty years.

Reflection: You may or may not know that this passage was used for hundreds of years, (and by white-supremist groups still), to justify the oppression of African peoples who are claimed to be descendants of Ham, willed by God into perpetual slavery. This is such a gross misuse of the text! But that begs the questions, “What are proper uses of scriptural texts?” and “How are we to distinguish between proper and improper uses?” Here is a way; look at the text through the lens of Christ (his life, example, teaching, and way of the cross) then make your best reverent guess.

For example, with this particular text we may ask, “Does God will the oppression of certain groups of people now?” Turning to the witness and example of Jesus, we answer “No.” When Jesus encountered those oppressed and marginalized (women, those with ailments, foreigners), time and again he provided welcome, healing, and release. So too did the apostles after the resurrection; including Paul who wrote, “In Christ there is no slave or free person, but all are one in Christ.” (Galatians 3:28)

We may ask, “Did God really desire the enslavement of one whole ethnic group?” Maybe back then. Or maybe not. After all the Canaanites, those original descendants of Ham, were Israel's enemy and at times Israel sought to enslave and exterminate them. How convenient having a scriptural story giving them not only permission, but a mandate from God to dominate. As for now, in this new era marked by the death and resurrection of Christ, my best reverent guess is that I dare not use any passage of scripture to lift myself, my people, my nation over any another.

To Ponder: In our day, where do you recognize instances of the scriptures being used to give permission, or a mandate from God, to dominate? Where might Christ be calling you to speak or act in solidarity with those oppressed?

Prayer: Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is darkness, light. Where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love. For it is in giving that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life. Amen. (Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi)

Week 3, Thursday, Stewardship

Scripture: Genesis 10:1, 2, 6, 15, 16, 21

These are the descendants of Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth; children were born to them after the flood. The descendants of Japheth: Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras. The descendants of Ham: Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan. ... Canaan became the father of the Jebusites, the Amorites, the Girgashites, and the Hivites. To Shem also, the father of all the children of Eber, the elder brother of Japheth, children were born. The descendants of Shem: Elam, Asshur, Arpachshad, Lud, and Aram...

(If interested, read full genealogy in Genesis 10:1-32)

Reflection: Chapter 10 provides a long genealogy of Noah's descendants, and the genealogy will continue in chapter 11:10-31. Note the following:

- a) Repopulation of the planet is happening. God said, "Be fruitful and multiply," and God's word is coming to pass.
- b) We are preparing for Israel's foundational story, the call of Abraham, through which they will be defined as a people. These genealogical passages are "locating" Israel in time and place. They are also defining their neighbors, making a point to note that their traditional enemies, particularly Egypt and Canaan, are descended from Ham and are therefore in some way deemed inferior.
- c) In the genealogies of chapter 11 life spans are listed. We can see that whereas people were living 700-900 years in chapter 5, now it is shrinking from 500, to 400, to 200, to 119. It seems that the shrinking life span is one more bit of evidence from Genesis, even if metaphorical, that the pervasiveness of human sin is constricting life.

These all speak to the world in which we live now. We modern humans are also dealing with:

a) issues of population, b) relationships among nations, and c) life spans. Globally, how do we curb over-population and humanity's threat to the planet? In international relations, how shall we address very different values and cultural norms without losing our sense of shared humanity? And who shall have access to adequate health care?

Genesis does not answer these questions, but Genesis does locate the characters of God's story in the real world. Abraham, Moses, Esther, David were all born into this world at a particular time and place, and God worked through them. So too with you and me. In our time and place in the on-going story, we too have a part to play. We also are called to wrestle with issues of stewardship of the earth, relationships with those deemed 'foreigners', and the well-being of our neighbors.

To Ponder: Think back to the time and place where you were born and raised. How has that blessed you? How has that also shaped and equipped you for the part you are called to play in God's ongoing work of mending creation?

Prayer: I am weak but thou art strong; Jesus, keep me from all wrong;

I'll be satisfied as long as I walk, let me walk close to thee.

Just a closer walk with thee, grant it, Jesus, is my plea;

Daily walking close to thee, let it be, dear Lord, let it be.

("Just a Closer Walk With Thee," North American Traditional, ELW # 697)

Week 3, Friday: Listening

Scripture: Genesis 11:1-9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, 'Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Reflection: What's the problem here? Or to ask it another way, how is human sin once again getting in the way of God's intentions? Part of the problem is ego, that the people are turning away from God in order to "make a name for themselves," but there is more. They are also afraid of "being scattered abroad upon the whole face of the earth." Remember that God's intention for humanity is that they scatter in order to be care takers of the entire planet (Genesis 1:28). Afraid to disperse, however, the people are instead choosing to stick together, take care of themselves, and follow their own intentions.

It may seem at first glance that God's response is simply punitive; but note how God's creation of a diversity of languages is serving God's purpose of pushing humanity out into all the world. So too, we may now recognize that a rich diversity of languages in the world is a blessing from God to be celebrated.

Perhaps the root problem underneath the Tower of Babel story is not so much about speaking (that they all spoke the same language), as it is of listening (that they refused or could no longer listen to God). Christians see in the Pentecost story (Acts 2) a reversal of the Tower of Babel story; at Babel communication is confused, on Pentecost communication is restored. Note, however, the miracle of Pentecost is not that they all speak the same human language, the miracle is that they are now able to listen to God again, in community with others, each one hearing in the native language of each.

To Ponder: In our daily life, we continue to work with, live near, and get caught up with people who are seeking to stick together, take care of themselves, and follow their own intentions. They are us! How do you listen for God speaking?

Prayer: In Word and sacrament, you speak. In the beauty and mystery of nature, you speak. In the words and witness of others, you speak. In silence when our minds are stilled, you speak. Give me attentive ears, O God, and teach me to listen. Amen.