

Preacher: Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: Genesis 8:20-22, 9:8-17

The story of Noah is often told as a children's story and can be found on nursery walls and toys for playrooms. I hope after reading the story of Noah's Ark this week in its full context, you realize that it is anything but a story meant for children. In fact, I've enjoyed hearing comments from those of you that have kept up with your reading this week in Genesis saying things like "this stuff is not kid-friendly" or "I feel like I'm reading a modern day tv drama with all of this violence and sex." The Bible is raw, real, and messy because it is about humanity and God's relationship with humanity. Why would we expect anything else from a story about humans? And this is just the beginning.

Pastor Tim and I had an Old Testament professor in seminary that would find the most disgusting, obscene texts in the Bible and read them for the class. She would then close the Bible and say, "The word of the Lord, thanks be to God"—a reminder that while we learn much about God and God's relationship with humanity, scripture is not always pure and innocent as we like to pretend.

In the West we like stories with happy endings, so we often soften the story of Noah and the ark to make it a story suitable for young ears. We like the picture of the ark on dry land after the flood with the smiling animals safely exiting the ark supervised by Noah and his family, with the rainbow draping the ark in the sky. But to paint this picture we gloss over the reality of death and destruction at God's hand. Definitely not a reality that I want painted on my nursery wall. That is more likely to be the cause of nightmares than of peaceful dreams.

When the story of Noah shows up in the lectionary (the three-year rotation of scriptures that some preachers use), the verses about God's decision to blot out humanity from the earth are completely missing. We prefer to ignore this part of the scripture so that we can skip to the end with God's covenant written on a rainbow. Or even worse, we try to convince ourselves that the people during Noah's time were more corrupt and more evil than humans today, justifying their horrible deaths and allowing ourselves to pat ourselves on the back for our righteousness. This story is so much more complicated and meaningful than we often allow it to be. So, let's set aside our nursery and childhood view of this text and read it through mature eyes.

Before the story of the flood, we read this strange introduction about sons of God taking human wives and their children were like demi-gods — mighty warriors called the Nephilim. This went against God's desire for humanity. In the next section of scripture, God explains that he is sorry he has made humanity whose hearts are inclined to do evil continually. Only Noah, a righteous man, had found favor in his sight, so he decides to let humanity continue through Noah alone. God tells Noah to make an ark that can contain his family and select animals to save them from the coming flood that will destroy the rest of creation — humans and animals alike.

Noah does as God commands. When it is completed God, causes the waters to rain from the sky and rise up from the earth for forty days and nights, which is the biblical way of saying "a long time," destroying everything in its path except those in the shelter of the ark. Eventually, scripture says that God remembers Noah, his family, and the animals on the ark so God causes the waters to subside. The dry land eventually appears and Noah, his family, and all the animals are able to leave the ark and start over. The first thing Noah does is worship God and in response to this God makes a promise. God says, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done."

The sign for this new covenant with humanity is a bow in the sky — the rainbow. God hangs his warrior's bow in the sky and says, "never again." Like a hunter puts away his weapon at the end of a season, God hangs up his bow to never again be used against creation. As long as the earth endures, God will never again use nature to destroy that which he created. This isn't because humanity has now changed in response to the flood. In fact, God acknowledges that the human heart continued to be inclined toward evil. This did not change after the flood. The flood, as horrific as it was, seems to have changed God, even if humanity refused to change. So, God commits to a future irrespective of humanity's response. God will not do something like this again.

Notice, however, that God never says anything about keeping humanity from destroying ourselves. If humanity does not survive, it will not be because God has destroyed us. It will be because humanity is inclined to do evil things and destroy one another. Rabbi Joshua of Kutna explains that the rainbow is a half circle because the half circle represents God's promise to us — that God will not destroy us. The other half that we cannot see is to be our promise to God — that we will not destroy ourselves.¹

So, God resolves to bear with humanity as we are, knowing that we will still be inclined toward evil. God makes an unconditional covenant. There is nothing that we can do now that will cause God to renege on his commitment. God promises to stay in relationship with all future generations, unconditionally. But let me be clear — this doesn't mean that God is happy with the way creation is now. The flood tells us that the creator of the world is grieved to his heart when viewing the way humanity destroys creation. The reason God flooded the earth was because it had become something God didn't intend. It was filled with violence. And even though God commits to never destroy creation again, God knows that creation will continue to be inclined toward evil. The same evil that had overcome the earth before the flood still exists after the flood.

God's forgiveness is readily available, but it comes at a great cost for God. God burns with rage at the way we flippantly take and destroy life, even as God offers grace and forgiveness. We cannot read any story of God's grace and love without also acknowledging God's anger and ache at the reality of humanity's destruction of the world and one another.

Now before we leave worship thinking that there is no hope — that there is no point in striving toward righteousness because all are inclined toward evil — let me remind you what we read in the opening to Genesis on the first day of our readings this last week. "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.... God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good."² God made us intrinsically good. When the first humans ate of the fruit of the tree, humanity was given knowledge of good and evil. Humans are no longer simply dependent on God and God's provision in the garden. Humans could now choose for themselves between what is righteous or that which was evil, a choice that had previously been God's and God's alone to decide. We still have that choice today. God gives us that freewill to make choices rather than forcing us to be righteous.

The story of Noah's Ark and God's Bow doesn't allow us to have a simple understanding of faith and faithfulness. We are not told that because of the flood all is right with the world. In fact, shortly after flood waters have subsided, we find Noah drunk and naked and shamed by one

¹ Rabbi David Wolpe, "Off the Pulpit" e-newsletter, November 2005.

² Genesis 1:27, 1:31a (NRSV)

of his sons. Instead we are told quite the opposite. Much is wrong with the world, the mystery of evil is great — nevertheless, let us have faith, be righteous and praise God.

God did not set the bow in the cloud so that Noah would see it, or even for our purposes, but primarily so that God himself would see it. It was a sign to God and we can, therefore, thank God today that God's covenant depends not on what we see, on our senses and on our feelings, on subjective emotions that change with the seasons, but on firm, unshakable and unmovable realities: We believe today in a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God.

A preacher named John Miller once shared that he collected arks. He had all kinds of arks, one as a hat hanger, a kitchen stool, wall hangings, coasters and more. To explain why arks he said, "I collect arks [because they represent] God's determination to never give up on us. The flood may not have effected any change in humankind, but it did effect a change in God. From this moment on, God will approach humanity with unlimited patience. From this moment on, God will approach humanity with unconditional and unlimited love. From this moment on, God promises to never give up on us no matter what we might do. When we are down and feeling like life has reached an all-time low, we have God's rainbow to remind us that God will never abandon us. When we have blown it and have totally messed up, God's rainbow reminds us that we are redeemable in the eyes of God and worth saving."³

In that sense, maybe it is okay to have an ark on a nursery wall or to tell the story of Noah to children. The bow God hangs in the sky is the everlasting covenant that God makes with all future generations that such devastation will not come at his hand ever again. We can trust that God's grace will be there when we need it. God will never give up on us again. As sure as the sun and the rain will bring a rainbow, so is God's covenant with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ John C. Miller, "The promise of God's unconditional saving love," a sermon preached at Westminster United Church, Calgary, March 12, 2000, cadvision.com.