

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Genesis 9:8-17 (The Message)

⁸⁻¹¹ Then God spoke to Noah and his sons: “I’m setting up my covenant with you including your children who will come after you, along with everything alive around you—birds, farm animals, wild animals—that came out of the ship with you. I’m setting up my covenant with you that never again will everything living be destroyed by floodwaters; no, never again will a flood destroy the Earth.” ¹²⁻¹⁶ God continued, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and everything living around you and everyone living after you. I’m putting my rainbow in the clouds, a sign of the covenant between me and the Earth. From now on, when I form a cloud over the Earth and the rainbow appears in the cloud, I’ll remember my covenant between me and you and everything living, that never again will floodwaters destroy all life. When the rainbow appears in the cloud, I’ll see it and remember the eternal covenant between God and everything living, every last living creature on Earth.” ¹⁷ And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I’ve set up between me and everything living on the Earth.”

A priest was coming back to his rectory one evening in the dark when he was accosted by a robber who pulled a gun on him and demanded, “Your money or your life!”

As the priest reached into his coat pocket, the robber saw his Roman collar and said, “I see you’re a priest. Never mind, you can go.”

The priest tried to reciprocate by offering the robber a candy bar that he remembered was in his pocket.

The robber replied, “No thank you, Father. I don’t eat candy during Lent.

Now, I don’t know what you’re thinking; but, I’m thinking the robber in this story has gotten his priorities messed up. How can he take Lent seriously when he finds it okay to rob people?

Yes, we are in the season of Lent—that time of year when we consider giving something up for 40 days. The idea behind giving up something for Lent is based on the scripture, Luke 9:23, where it says, “Then he (meaning Jesus) said to them all: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.’” So essentially, the sacrifices we make during Lent are about self-denial, carrying our cross and following Jesus. It is something that’s done in a prayerful way, so that we can wholly renew ourselves in Christ.

As relationships go, humanity has had an up-and-down relationship with God as well as with his precious gift to us—his Son, Jesus. The scriptures are full of stories of humanity falling out of favor with God, followed by God’s redemption.

Today’s Noah story is just one such story. As “Bible Stories” go, the story about Noah’s Ark is undoubtedly one of the best. Children love this story. It is fair to say that most people, whether they are particularly religious or not, know at least the basics of this story.

Even though this story is well-known and loved, most people miss the main point. The details about the ark, the animals, the raven, and the rainbow are all important, of course, but while we give most of our attention to those elements of the story, we miss the central part of the tale, which is the revealing of God’s heart. This story is first and last about what happens inside God’s heart. It’s about Noah and his family, too, of course, but they should not be our main focus in the story.

Did you ever notice that Noah never says a single word in the story? God does all the talking. Only at the very end of chapter 9 does Noah say anything at all. But otherwise throughout the whole course of the story, Noah doesn’t utter a peep, nor are we given even passing glimpses into Noah’s thoughts or what may have been going on inside his heart.

Yet over and over again, we do get a rare but intimate look into what is happening inside God’s heart. God speaks, but even more than that, God’s thought process is described in great detail. What we see happening inside God’s heart is in some ways surprising.

I say this because we find that God changes his mind—his plan. God decides to follow a different path after the flood waters dry up. He says that he will never again send a flood like this one. Did God regret his

actions? Why did God decide he would never do something like this again? Is it because the flood cleansed the earth of all sin?

The simple answer to that question is “No,” of course. We know better than that. If we need proof that sin was extinguished from humanity’s behavior, even in the days and weeks after the flood, all we need to do is keep reading the stories in the bible. The evidence of sin can be found as soon as at the very end of Genesis 9. The last image we get of Noah is his sleeping naked in a drunken stupor in his tent. When his son Ham tries to help Noah with the aid of his brothers Shem and Japheth, things get ugly fast. It’s then that it’s recorded that Noah speaks. The first words we hear Noah speak are words cursing his own son!

We wonder, what did Ham do wrong? Maybe Noah was embarrassed. Maybe Ham should have quietly covered up Noah himself and not recruited help from his brothers. That may be the case, but Noah’s response still seems a bit harsh.

This tiny piece of the story was likely included to show that things had not changed that much after the flood. Humans were still prone to sin. Families still fell apart. Noah was a good and righteous man whose obedience throughout Genesis 6-9 stands in stark contrast to the evil of the larger world. But he wasn’t perfect, and neither was his family. Sin, evil and temptation continued after the flood even as they did before the flood.

But we find that God was aware of this reality even before the incident between Noah and his sons. God admitted as much in chapter 8:21 when he promised that he would never again send such a flood because one thing had not changed. Verse 21 says, “God thought to himself ‘I’ll never again curse the ground because of people. I know they have this bent toward evil from an early age, but I’ll never again kill off everything living as I’ve just done. Every inclination of humanity’s heart is evil from childhood.’” God himself knew that what was wrong with humanity at a very basic level and it was still there after the flood.

So, what changed? God did. We know this because in Genesis 9 when God makes his covenant with Noah and with all the other creatures, he does not say, “I will never again send a flood because I know you have all learned your lesson. Don’t get me riled up, don’t get my divine dander up or else! But since you know that now, I know you will be good people from here on out and so never again will I have any reason to even think about a punishing flood.” No, that’s not what God said. God knows full well all people—even good people like Noah—would continue to sin; but even so, God promised he would never react to humanity’s sinfulness in this way again.

Why not? Maybe the answer has to do with God’s overall attitude in these chapters. If we go back again to Genesis 6 we get insight into what was going on inside of God before he let loose the flood waters. We don’t find God’s heart full of rage and fury. No, God was hurt and greatly grieved. God is a wounded parent mourning for a wayward child.

Have you ever talked with parents whose son or daughter is rebellious? Most of the time what you detect in such parents is not anger but deep, deep pain and heartache. If parents genuinely love their children, then the response to waywardness is more often tears than tirades. The creation is not going God’s way in Genesis 6. And it hurts God. These chapters speak of holy sadness, not divine wrath. Tragedy and sadness fill these chapters.

There’s something else we cannot ignore in the story of Noah and that is the reality that there was an unbelievable amount of death. Think of it—all the animals and people not on the ark died. If God was heartbroken, what are we to make of this?

I think that at the very least we have to see it as yet another indication of how terribly serious human sin and evil are. **They bring death.** Sin and evil unmake creation. Whatever else we may make of the carnage of this story; it at least means this much: sin is desperately deadly. Sin cannot be wished away. It cannot be waved away. It cannot be chalked up as “no big deal” or something that God can just forget about. That’s why this story places God between grief and grace.

Both grief and grace are responses to human sin; but at the end, grace speaks the last, best word. God is not going to stop being offended and grieved by sin. But from now on, God says in chapters 8 & 9, grace is going to lead the way. God is going to find a way to see our sin without destroying us in that sin. God will find a way, in other words, to forgive.

This is where we see that the story of Noah points us straight to the cross of Jesus. Because the cross is ultimately the place where all the grief and grace of God meet in a startling way one dark Friday afternoon on a hill far away. Grief and grace are responses to our sin, but it is grace that wins.

In a way, it was a mini-outburst of grace that saved Noah even before the rains began. God provided the plan for an ark which Noah built to float on the same waters that brought death to others. Ever since God has been keeping his people safe through perilous waters: Moses in his little reed basket on the Nile River, the Israelites through the Red Sea and then the Jordan River, Jesus through the waters of the Jordan in his own baptism, and ultimately all of us through the waters of our baptisms.

That's why in a real way the Church is the ark now, bobbing around on this world's dangerous seas. As you know from your own experience, a common question people ask about this story is, "Do you think this ever really happened?" A good answer is to tell people, "It's still happening! The storm surge of sin still rises and threatens life." Most days, many people manage to miss seeing those dangerous flood waters all around us.

We all need grace every day. We need to know again and again that the Son of God died in our place so as to open up a fountain of grace that will never run dry. Now as much as ever, the world needs the gospel's rainbow of hope. As the church and we as individual forgiven followers of Jesus need to take that rainbow of grace and hope to the world.

We, too, grieve over how things go in this world. But even our grieving is done with the knowledge of God's overarching grace. It's our privilege as God's people to let that grace in us shine forth from us, displaying that rainbow of grace so that more and more may be touched by its holy radiance. God's faithfulness to us is undying as we know because of his grace. Never should we give up on ourselves because we sin, and neither should we give up on humanity. God's grace is what saves us. Hallelujah! Amen.