

Genesis 6:5-22, 8:6-12, 9:8-17

100% Chance of Rain

September 9, 2018

Rev. Kelley L Becker

*Title Slide

⁶At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made ⁷and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. ⁸Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; ⁹but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. ¹⁰He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; ¹¹and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. ¹²Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more.

You may have noticed when you came in this morning that the song “Rise and Shine-Arky, Arky” was playing. It’s a cute little children’s song about the story of Noah.

The Lord told Noah

There's gonna be a floody, floody

The Lord told Noah

There's gonna be a floody, floody

Get those children out of the muddy, muddy, children of the Lord.

I can’t help it...when I think of Noah, that song pops into my head.

The story of Noah and the Ark is one of the stories I call the BIG stories of the Bible. It’s colorful, loud, full of dramatic imagery, larger than life. Because of these things, it’s one of the most well-known Hebrew Bible stories, in fact, it’s a story that even people who don’t know much

about the Bible tend to know. Maybe we can thank Vacation Bible School for that.

Noah's story is perfect for VBS...

*It can be acted out by children wearing animal masks and tails, with a backdrop that includes ominous rain clouds on one side and a rainbow on the other.

*The story lends itself well to typical VBS crafts, using paper plates or popsicle sticks. None of them end up looking like the pictures on the screen.

* And snack time is easy...anything with animal crackers goes.

At the end of the day, as children, what did we learn was the lesson in this story of Noah?

(pause for answers)

It is good for children to learn that God keeps promises and that doing things God's way is the best way. There is so much more to this story, though. So, today we are going to revisit Noah's story and see what it has to teach us in 2018 on a rainy Sunday in northeast OK.

First, it's important to note, there are two flood stories in the Hebrew Bible. The stories span chapters 6-9 in Genesis. We generally read the two stories as one story and pretend not to notice the inconsistencies. It is significant (and fun for Bible nerds) that it is possible to separate the text into two continuous stories, taken from two sources that scholars have named J and P. The fact that there are really two separate flood stories in Genesis causes the story to come across as repetitive or even inconsistent if a reader isn't aware they are reading two stories.

For example, one difference between the stories is in how they refer to God. In English translations, one story refers to God as "God," the other refers to God as "the LORD."

Let's take a look at the verses in chapter 6 where God's observations about the state of the earth are explained.

Verse 5, is from the J source:

*"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."

Verses 11 & 12, are from the P source:

*"Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. ¹² And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth."

Both explain how God saw what was happening, yet there are slight differences in these verses. But if we didn't know they were two different stories, we would probably chalk it up to the author repeating himself.

Other differences between the two stories include:

In the J source, it rains for 40 days and nights, and the water recedes for 40 days. In P, the whole process adds up to a calendar year.

In the J source, Noah releases a dove. In P, he releases a raven.

In P, Noah is told to save two of each species of animal, a male and a female on the ark. In J, he is to save 14 (seven pairs) of each species of the pure animals (animals that may be sacrificed) and only two of the animals that are not pure. This is important because that story ends with Noah making an animal sacrifice—so he would require more than two of each animal or he would make a species extinct!

These flood stories are only two of the various flood stories that circulated in the ancient Near East. It is important for us to understand that none of these stories is a historically accurate account, backed by facts. But instead, they are myths told in oral traditions to teach some

truth or truths about God and God's relationship to human beings. So, the question before us is what might these stories teach us today?

Let's start with the verses I highlighted regarding the different names for God. As I said, those verses explained to the audience God's assessment of how things were going with what God had created. Now, keep in mind, just a few chapters ago, God created human beings in God's image and declared them "good." But now, it is clear to God that human beings tend to behave badly...even more than behaving badly, human beings even *think* badly. In a nutshell, God's dream for the world was not becoming reality...things are going south in a hurry.

Let's review-God made human beings, called them good and immediately the first human beings did the one thing they were asked not to do. Subsequently, they were expelled from paradise and told from this point forward they would have to work the ground to survive and it would be hard work. Next, these imperfect human beings became fruitful and multiplied, welcoming Cain and Abel into the world. Cain killed Abel and lied to God and was even sassy with God, "I don't know where he is. It's not my day to watch him." (that's a loose paraphrase) Abel's blood cried out to God from the ground and Cain was cursed from the ground, which meant that when he tried to farm the land, the land would not produce.

Cain went his own way and eventually had children. Adam and Eve had Seth, a replacement for Abel. All of their children and children's children had children. They thought and did things that were not in keeping with what God had in mind for the world. And then, along came Noah, who had a close relationship with God and demonstrated so by doing what he was told (imagine that). Noah was told what he must do to save his family and all creatures that had been given the breath of life and he did it. In exchange, God made a promise, a covenant with Noah.

*⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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.” ¹² 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: ¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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.” ¹⁷ 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.”

Covenant is important in the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. A covenant is a partnership, held together by a promise. This covenant between God and Noah extends beyond Noah to “every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” The many repetitions of key words and phrases in the description of the covenant emphasize God’s specific promise and the inclusiveness of the recipients, assuring listeners and readers that nobody is excluded, there is hope for the future no matter who you are. Note that God is the subject of the action in the covenant. “I make,” “I have set,” “When I bring,” “I will remember,” “I will see,” and “I have established.” God makes the covenant, God sets the bow in the clouds, and God remembers the covenant.

What did you learn about the rainbow as a child? I learned the rainbow is supposed to remind us of God's promise. But really, the story says the rainbow is to remind God of God's promise to us. Remembering the covenant is God's responsibility. This means the covenant is as good as God is and has nothing to do with our what we do...it is solely dependent on God. Based on what I know about human beings, that seems like a very good thing.

Definitely a good thing, but I've been wrestling with something this week. In wiping out all the human beings except Noah's family, in wiping out all the animals except the ones in the ark, in symbolically cleansing the earth of all that was bad, what changed? Noah and his family were imperfect human beings and after the flood, they still were. The saved animals weren't different...they were still lions and tigers and bears (Oh, my!) and bats and mosquitoes, blech. The earth itself was still the earth, dry land, water. The sun and moon were still in place, giving way to day and night. According to the perspectives represented in the story, the only thing that changed was God. The covenant reflects the change in God.

God created the world dreaming of only goodness. Through the flood stories we are told God realized goodness was not ruling the day, evil was. The flood, which, if you think about it, was basically the creation story backwards, undid creation...wiped the slate clean in order to be recreated. Except, God's mercy wouldn't allow a totally clean slate. God saved Noah and his family. God saved the animals. The earth, was washed clean, but not destroyed. You see, God's mercy came with a cost...to God. In not destroying absolutely everything, God made the decision to work with human beings, in spite of our tendency to get it wrong.

In his book, *Genesis*, writer and theologian Walter Brueggeman writes, "The flood has affected no change in humankind. But it has effected an

irreversible change in God...It is now clear that such a commitment [to the creation] on God's part is costly. The God-world relationship is not simply that of strong God and needy world. Now it is a tortured relationship between a grieved God and a resistant world. And of the two, the real changes are in God."

How does that sit with you? Do you like the idea that at some point God changed? Is that even possible from *your* perspective? And, while we're at it, what about the idea that God was somehow surprised by the crappy behavior of human beings that led to the flood? Do you believe God really didn't know how the ones created in God's very own image would act?

There...that should make for some lively lunch conversation!

Through the covenant, God promises that this change in Godself is a forever thing. No matter what happens, God will not be the one that ends the world. The world might end because human beings can't get along and the wrong person has access to the nuclear codes. The world might end because we won't take care of our water sources, air quality, and the other creatures we share the earth with. But the world will not end because we have disappointed God. God has committed to stay in with forever.

In the weeks to come, as we work our way through God's Story (which is Our Story), we will see again and again that God keeps God's promises and human beings, in general, don't. We will come across some heroes and some villains, maybe even some people we thought were heroes, but who did some less than heroic things, and lots of people just like us who don't always do the right thing, but end up being reflections of God's love and mercy anyway. These stories, written down by people just like you and me, reflect their perspectives, their culture, and the time period they lived in throughout hundreds of years. But they have something to say to us in our time and place.

The story of Noah and the flood is foundational in that it tells us that our God is a God that can be counted on. We have been extended a promise that no matter what, God will not give up on God's dream of goodness, of wholeness, for all creation and specifically, God will not give up on us. How will we respond to this promise? I believe we have to try to live into that promise, becoming people who are reflections of God's desire, always working to bring about that world God has been dreaming about forever; that world we want for our children and children's children.

Perhaps the rain this week has given all of us a metaphorical clean slate. And maybe this time we can be the ones to change. Amen.