

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
First Sunday in Lent
February 18, 2018

Out of the Waters, a Promise

Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

This sermon I am about to preach
will actually be the second sermon you've heard in this service today.
Don't you remember the first one?

The sacrament of baptism is a sermon in its own right,
a visible sermon,
the Word of God enacted
in the sprinkling of the baptismal waters,
a sign of God's gracious providence for [Elliott] [Claire]
and for all of us.

The sacrament of baptism makes visible
the **covenant** God has established with us in Jesus Christ.
Out of the waters, a promise is made,
a promise that is as new as the newborn's head
over which the waters flow,
and as ancient as the primordial waters
out of which God brought all creation.

Today we begin the first of a **series of sermons** reflecting on God's covenant with us.
During the Season of Lent,
the Old Testament readings walk us through the story of the covenant-making God:
the covenant with Noah,
and with Abraham,
with Israel at Mt. Sinai through the mediation of Moses,
and the new covenant written on the heart,
proclaimed by the prophet Jeremiah.

These are not the only covenant-making passages in scripture,
but they are the primary ones.

In these stories
we see God's persistent love for all creation,
and God's relentless pursuit of humanity,
and God's determination to remain faithful to God's children,
even as we repeatedly shows ourselves to be
utterly unfaithful, undependable,
unloving, and unworthy — over and over and over
and over again.

So today we begin
with the story of God's covenant with Noah
as the earth slowly emerges out of the waters of the great flood.

I remember once, when my children were a lot younger,
going to the library and
bringing home a video of the Noah's Ark story, an animated version.

Noah's Ark is a great children's story, right?
A gentle old man rounding up lots of cute animals
and leading them onto the Ark by twosies.

You know the children's song:
*el-e-phants and kangaroosies, roosies,
children of the Lord!*

The only problem is,
to make a movie about Noah's Ark,
you also have to tell the story of the Flood – which isn't so gentle or cute.
I turned off the video at the point
where we started hearing the screams for mercy
and seeing the arms and legs and faces
of drowning people thrashing in the water -
not so kid-friendly after all!

The story of the Flood is a tough one for us,
because we can't imagine that God would be willing to give up on
and wipe out the entire human race.

Was the world really all that bad?

Well, according to Genesis: **Yes! It was that bad!**

The first 11 chapters of Genesis
present a picture of a world that is hopelessly corrupt,
a population that has fallen out of fellowship with God
and is filled with violence.
What a stark contrast with the beginning of the story,
when God is beaming with pride and joy
over the goodness of a brand new creation.

But that goodness turns out to be only the first layer of an increasingly complex picture.
Because it comes first,
we can take the basic goodness of creation as the foundation of all that follows,
but immediately on the heels of this idyllic scene,
we are introduced to the brokenness of the human race,
through four stories about the sin and evil.

Consider how the story builds:

Upon the good foundation,
we have the disobedience of the first man and woman
who break relationship with God by failing to trust God's command.

Then, we have the story of their children, Cain and Abel,
and the embittering power of jealousy,
culminating in Cain's murder of Abel.

Then comes the story of the Flood.

Seeing the corruption and evil inclination of the human race,
the Lord grieves over what he has made,
determines to bring an end to the whole mess and start over.
All except for Noah and his family
who become the hope of the human race.

Still, after surviving the Flood,
we see Noah's family fall into serious discord and estrangement.
And Noah's descendants fall back into the same evil patterns,
culminating in their prideful aspirations
at the Tower of Babel.

For the thoughtful Christian,
all sorts of questions come to mind in these first 11 chapters of Genesis:

Where did the evil come from in the first place?
Why did God choose this one family to be saved - were they really that good?
Were all the other families really that bad?
What about the children who were swept away?
These and many, many other questions.

To deal with these questions,
we first have to understand the purpose of the Flood story
in the larger biblical narrative.

The story of the Flood, and really of Genesis 1 through 11,
are the origin stories, or the back stories, told by the people of Israel
to try to explain why the world is as it is.

The **deeper purpose of these stories**

is to provide the setting in which it makes sense for God to say to Noah:

With you, I will establish my covenant...

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.*

The whole of biblical religion
depends not on some elevated faith in human goodness or achievement,
but on the goodness and faithfulness of God.

God's promise to Noah in this story changes everything for the world.
The bottom line of the Flood story is this:

God intends to stick it out with humanity.

No matter how corrupt and disordered we may be,
God has promised never to give up on the human race.
That is incredibly good news, is it not?

Especially, because we see what happens
just as soon as Noah and his family find dry ground,
leave the ark and set up civilization again.

Sin returns, corruption bubbles back up:

disorder,

and eventually the desire of humans to be gods
that started the whole mess to begin with.

There is a great little **cartoon** of Noah,
after the rains have ceased,
standing at the railing of the Ark,
In front of him, perched on the railing, is the dove
who has just returned with the olive branch.
Noah is looking at the branch with a naive little smile.



Gen Genesis 9-11
YOU THROW THE CATS OVERBOARD AND I'LL
TELL YOU WHERE I FOUND THE BRANCH

Beside Noah, also sitting on the rail,
are two scruffy cats,
looking like a couple of schoolyard bullies.
The frazzled, disheveled dove,
with a sour look on his face,
says to Noah,
“You throw the cats overboard,
and I’ll tell you where I found the branch.”

The point of the cartoon is well taken.
Noah and the passengers on the ark have survived
the great flood,
but not much has changed!

So it is a good thing,
that the new order established by God after the Flood
depends not on the righteousness of human beings
who return immediately to their old ways.
but solely on the faithfulness of God to God’s promise.

If we can settle our minds from worrying
about whether the Great Flood actually happened,
or about how one man could literally fit all the plant and animal life
existing on the planet into one boat,
and if we can appreciate the Flood Story as just that — a story —
then we can begin to benefit from the power of its images:

**The story of the Great Flood
is a story about the dismantling of order
and the rise of chaos in the world,
chaos that threatens human life.**

Remember the creation story in Genesis 1?
God establishes the conditions for human, animal, and plant life,
by bringing the chaotic, disordered, formless waters
into order.

In that story,
God separates the great waters with a dome,
keeping some in the sky, and setting bounds for the waters below,
so that dry land appears.

The ancient Hebrews saw the water, especially the Sea,
as nothing less than the forces of evil and chaos,
forces that God must hold in check for the world to be inhabitable.

Remember God’s question to Job
*Who closed the sea behind doors...
when I made the breakers my limit for it,
and set up its bars and doors,
and said, “You may come so far and no farther;
Here your surging waves will stop?”*

Later the Psalmist, recalling the receding waters of the Great Flood,
saying,
*[The waters] fled at your blast,
rushed away at the sound of your thunder,
mountains rising, valleys sinking,
to the place you established for them.
You set bounds they must not pass
so that they never again cover the earth.*

The Bible portrays the order of creation as being constantly held together
by the powerful, merciful hand of God.
If at any point, God should cease to sustain the order of the world,
the waters of chaos would break loose and have their way,
and all life would be destroyed.

So this story of the Flood becomes for us
a story about the disorder of the world and of our lives
and about **God's promise to be faithful to us**
and to protect us, to save us from being overwhelmed
by the rising waters of chaos.

This should come as good news
in a week in which we mourn the death of 17 students and teachers
in yet another school shooting in our nation,
this time by a troubled youth with just one of the untold multitude of assault rifles
that have been legally sold to citizens in our country
over the past decades.

And in a week in which we learn just how America's enemies
are doing everything they can to erode our democracy
by sowing the seeds of distrust and division between us.

And in a week
when we have little need for national and international news
to convince us that the human race is still quite a mess,
since we all see it up close and personally
in the relentless dysfunction of our own families.

The human race remains trapped in our proclivity toward evil.
It was this grim reality that prompted God to flood the earth in the first place,
and this same reality that moved God to establish the cosmic covenant.
God chooses **unilateral disarmament**,
by hanging his bow in the clouds.
God establishes **a covenant of self-restraint**
revealing that God's heart
is bent toward forbearance.¹

Divine forbearance.

Perhaps that is a good theme for us to ponder during Lent.

And, in fact, we will ponder it on Wednesday nights,
as we consider how *Forbearance*
is the very character of Christ our savior,
the character that we are called to cultivate in ourselves.

For the cosmic drama continued
as Jesus came up out of the waters of his own baptism,
claimed and favored by God...
...and yet for our sake
entered a wilderness inhabited by Satan and wild beasts,
to show that he was ready and willing
to stick it out with humanity.²

As we embark on this 40 day journey with Jesus
let us set our eyes with him
on the hope of Easter morning,
when God's patience will at last pay off,
and God's covenant promise
will carry the day.

¹ William P. Brown, *Sacred Sense: Discovering the Wonder of God's Word and World* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015) 44-46.

² Wm. Loyd Allen, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) 30.