

God Chooses A New Path

A sermon by John Strommen on Genesis 6:5-9:17 September 9, 2018

Noah's ark! Such a cute story. Animals of every species, two by two. Like a big floating zoo!

This story has been homogenized and tamed for Sunday School curriculums, but of course, if you're really paying attention, it's a little dark. There was a pastor who once did a children's sermon on Noah's ark. She called the children to the front of the sanctuary and asked them to use their imaginations in thinking about the story: "What do you see? What do you smell? What do you hear?" One child answered, "I hear the people in the water outside the ark screaming for help." Now you know why we don't have a children's message today.

This story may end on a positive note, but there is that part about the flood that almost wipes out all life on earth.

So part of approaching this story the right way means asking questions. What are some questions you have about the story?

What was God thinking? Isn't this a little dark for God? Is God really that judgmental?

What do we learn about God in this story?

And how did Noah get all those animals on board and then keep the predators fed without using the other animals?

What were people doing that was so bad that caused God to destroy them?

Why did God decide to never do this again? Was God repenting? Did God sin?

Did this really happen? Was this history?

Let's start with the history question. Archaeology tells us there is no evidence of a global-wide flood at any point in human history, or an ancient ark that proves it. It's likely that when this story was first told it was partly based on the experience of local flooding in Mesopotamia, but not anywhere near how it's described in Genesis, where every mountaintop in the world was covered.

Now, some folks might be thinking, "Oh great, the pastor doesn't even believe this stuff! How are we supposed to believe it?" But I do believe it, that is, what it teaches us about God. It's just that in the Bible, truth comes in different packages. Sometimes it is conveyed through historical events, like Jesus' crucifixion, which all historians believe happened. But many parts of the Bible are non-historical stories, or poetry or liturgies. Now just because it's not history, doesn't mean it's not true. The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is not thought to be historical, but it is true. It's true, we believe, because it teaches us something that is important and true about our relationship with God.

The first chapter of Genesis is probably not very scientifically accurate about how the world was created, but it's basic point is not science anyway, but theology – namely, before there was anything else, there was God, who created the heavens and the earth.

So what does the story of Noah's ark tell us about God and about us?

The story today begins with a sober assessment of the human race. It says, “the wickedness of humankind was great,” their thought and hearts really messed up. As a result, the earth and “all flesh” was corrupt and violent. Yikes! This is pretty bad. Not just humans are corrupt, but the earth. There is an undeniable totality here. As though the folly of human beings somehow affected all living things and all the earth.

Can you think of any modern application of that idea? When we pollute or ravage the countryside without concern for the life there, there are serious implications for all life. Our decisions with what we do with the land, what we put in the air and streams and oceans, has huge implications for all of the earth. Just look at how the climate is changing all over the earth because of human activity.

Our violence and wickedness corrupts the earth because all of life is interconnected. Think of what we learn in the story of the Garden of Eden: humans were created to till and keep the earth, to be stewards of the earth, deputized by God to protect and nourish life on this planet.

Well, apparently we’ve been falling down in this regard for a long time. Not only were we not loving each other, we were not loving the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and our fellow mammals on land. And I don’t have to tell you that animals are a big part of this story! Notice how much God values the animals in this story. Sure, you’ve got Noah and his family who are spared from the flood, but you also have pairs of every species on earth. That means there were way more animals than humans that were part of God’s rescue plan! Somehow, our fate as humans and the fates of our fellow animals are hugely intertwined.

In fact, so intertwined are we created beings, that God decides to blot out humans and all living things from the earth. It is here the story gives us a glimpse into the heart of God. God is sorry he had made humankind, and even all living things. And it grieved him.

But here there are some important things to observe. This sounds like it’s all about God’s judgment on humankind, and yet scholars have pointed out something interesting. The same Hebrew word that is used to describe the corruption that human beings bring upon the earth – the moral ruin of people - is also the same word used to describe the destruction that results from the flooding of the earth. So there’s a connection between the immoral flood the humans bring with the flood of water that follows. The destruction of the earth is the direct result of the violence and corruption of human beings that fills the earth long before the flood waters cover it. In other words, as a modern saying puts it, “We are punished not so much for our sins as by our sins.” There are consequences to our behavior, no? That is how God made the world. The judgment for our actions is usually in the consequences of those actions. If someone drinks too much, God doesn’t have to punish that person. Headaches, broken relationships and Cirrhosis of the liver will be judgment enough!

So it’s not just that God gets mad and punishes someone, but that corruption leads to corruption.

That sad, in our story, God does wish to blot out human beings. And while he grieves, God does something remarkable: he hedges on his judgment. We know this because it says that God is impressed with this one guy called Noah, and God gets an idea. Maybe this doesn’t have to be the end of life on earth. “Build an ark, Noah,” says God. “Ride it out during the flood, and while you’re at it, put male and female pairs of every animal in that ark.” Why? To give creation a new start after

the flood. Remarkable depiction of God here. God builds in a way out of the total devastation. God essentially changes his mind.

Then after the flood devastates every living thing that is not in the ark, the waters start to recede and plants start growing again. Then God sends a rainbow, and with it a message: never again. Never again will I destroy the earth with a flood. The rainbow is a sign of my promise to you.

So not only did God spare Noah and the animals and kind of reboot things. Now God appears to repent of his actions. What is going on here?

Is it because people changed and learned their lesson, with Noah showing them the way? Then God wouldn't have to do that flood thing again?

We quickly learn in Genesis that God makes this promise not because humanity has changed. Immediately before and immediately after the flood, God expresses the same sentiment: human thoughts and hearts are inclined to do what is wrong. Humanity has not changed; they will still bring corruption on the earth. The rest of the Old Testament bears this out. The Jews are not faithful, they fail to take care of each other, and they neglect the poor and marginalized.

In the movie, "Noah," starring Russell Crowe, they really get this right. There's a wonderful scene where Noah is struggling with why God chose him and his family to survive. He asks, "Am I really any better than the people who are drowning? I am not. Why am I deserving of this responsibility to rebuild and replant?"

In truth, human beings are not changed by the flood. God is the one who changes. God decides to commit Godself to this broken, corrupt, and sinful world. God decides that from now on he is "all in" with his creation, as compromised and messy as it is. God will choose leaders and prophets and kings and even very marginal people to continually remind people of their responsibility and of God's goodness. God will send plagues to free them from slavery. God will send them manna in the wilderness. God will give them commandments to guide them, but God will never give up on them. And they are us. This story we call the Bible is the story of God's faithfulness to his people – and to us. To quote one of my favorite verses: "For the Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

Eventually, God in Christ will choose to wade into the troubled waters of this world. Then God changes some more, and so do we. Amen.