

PASSAGES I LOVE TO HATE: THE FLOOD

Fifth in the sermon series "Passages I Love to Hate"

Genesis 6:5-22; 7:17-24; 8:1; 20-22; 9:8-17

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Prayer

You are the God of all truth, the God of deep hiddenness. And so in your truth, let us know more of you, and in knowing you, know ourselves as well. Startle us again with your love and grace, and may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

More than one of you have come up to me in the past few weeks and said "The flood? A passage you love to hate? I can understand these others, about women and divorce and rape. But who could hate this story? I learned it in nursery school!" Or something like that.

And I'm with you. After all, for two summers I was a camp director of some of our Presbyterian camps, one in North Carolina, and one in Louisiana. One of my responsibilities was to lead the singing around the dinner tables after they had been cleared, and one of the all-time favorites was the one about the ark.

*The Lord said to Noah, there's gonna be a floody, floody,
Get those children out of the muddy, muddy,
Children of the Lord.
So rise, shine, give God your glory glory....*

The verses went on and on, ad nauseum, each one becoming more and more fun.

*The animals, they came, on they came on by twosies, twosies...
Elephants and kangaroosies, roosies.
Children of the Lord.*

When the kids got old enough to understand what went on with the birds and the bees and the other animals, we added another verse:

*The animals, they came out, they came out by threesies, threesies,
Elephants and chimpanzeezies, zeezies,
Children of the Lord.*

What's not to like about this story? It's cute, funny. Bill Crosby owes his career to this story:

"Noah, I want you to build an ark."

"Right. What's an ark?"

"I want you to build it 100 cubits by 50 cubits by 30 cubits."

"Right. What's a cubit?"

And if you want a few more laughs, rent Steve Carell playing "Evan Almighty," a modern day version.

But sometimes kids can see through the comedy and fun. My nephew Michael was with his parents (both Presbyterian ministers) at Montreat when he was 5 years old. The theme for the Kindergartners that week was Noah. Now, it tends to rain a good bit at Montreat, and every afternoon after the clubs, Michael was stuck inside, bored to tears. On Thursday of that week he was staring out the window and wanted to know why it was still raining because he remembered that God said it wouldn't rain so much ever again. "Ah," his mother thought. "A teachable moment!"

"Michael, there is a big difference between 4 days and 40 days." He was quiet and then he asked who it was that closed the door of the ark after the animals were on board. Was it Noah, or was it God?" "Why do you ask?" the good mother responded. "Because I want to know who killed all the people. Did Noah, or did God?"

And all of a sudden that five year old got to the heart of a question that makes this a passage one I love to hate. Did God close the door of the ark? As one person put it, "Did God participate in genocide?"

No, as much as we try to make this a children's story, it has rather deep theological implications of grave import. There was a poem written for children by Jacobus Revius, a 17th century Dutch poet:

*High and long. Thick and strong.
Wide and stark, was the ark,
Climb on board, said the Lord
Noah's kin, clambered in.
Cow and moose, hare and goose
Sheep and fox, bee and ox.*

Cute, isn't it? But then the tragedy:

*But the rest, worst and best,
Stayed on shore, were no more.
That whole host, gave the ghost.
They were killed, for the guilt,
Which brought all, to the Fall.*

That's the stuff of children's nightmares. We think we know it fairly well; a story about the human race which is disobedient. There is a beautiful creation, culminating in God sitting back, enjoying a glass of mint iced tea under the shade of a spreading oak and saying "Good, very good."

But right after that, there is betrayal in the garden, lies, murder, the whole works. It is no longer "very good." So God decides to start all over again, and comes up with the idea of a flood. God likes Noah, a righteous man who walks with God; and God still likes the rest of creation, so there's the ark and Noah's family and two of every species of animal Noah could find, and they hunker down there. And the rains come, forty days and forty nights. The sun comes out, God makes a new covenant with Noah, and lo and behold, there's a rainbow that would be a reminder to God of that understanding.

Now if that's the full story, then think of what kind of God we are faced with. A vindictive angry God who wakes up from a nap, and has regular coffee instead of decaf, and throws a fit. God reminds me of a tempestuous sculptor who wakes up one morning and doesn't like what she had done the previous day and takes a hammer and starts crushing it to pieces so she can start all over again.

Some of you might have heard of Jonathan Edwards, that fiery New England Puritan preacher of years ago, who, in his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" described the human situation as being like that of some loathsome spider tenuously stretched in a web dangling over the fiery flames of hell, precariously ready to drop at any moment!

That's not the kind of God I have bought into. As a matter of fact it is a God that I have rejected, a God who is constantly angry, fearful, terrible, waiting for us to fail. But we hear a lot of that in religious circles today, don't we? When Katrina hits and causes incredible flooding, we are told by some preachers that it happened because, well, New Orleans was a city of ill-repute and had gotten away from the ways of the Lord. Several years ago there was a flood in North Georgia and one of the schools, the Tallulah Falls school was flooded, and the preachers had an answer as to why that school flooded. They were teaching evolution, and God wasn't pleased.

And yet it's here, a part of our sacred story.

I think in order to hear the story in a deeper way, you and I will have to suspend our usual understanding of God. And we must question the basic assumption that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever; that God is unchangeable and cannot be swayed by what God sees. For the God of the flood is a God who changes.

It might help to understand how the ancient Hebrew writers understood God. They saw Yahweh in unabashedly human terms, a God of feeling and compassion, wracked by heart-break, torn by disappointment, grief stricken. That's a far cry from what many of us learned early on about the nature of God when we had to memorize parts of the Westminster Confession of Faith, which describes God as "infinite in being and perfection, immutable, eternal and

incomprehensible.” God for the ancient Hebrews was wholly different from themselves, to be sure, but also very much like themselves at the same time. Different in being, infinitely powerful and mighty, righteous and holy. But also capable of human emotions like anger, grief, wrath.

So God looks down and sees the corruption on earth, and the writer says: “The Lord was sorry that he made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to this heart.”

God is not *angered*, but *grieved*, not *enraged*, but *saddened*¹. And what happens from this point on is that the primary actor and the center of attention is no longer Noah, not humanity, not creation, not even the flood itself. Rather, it is the story of a God who changes his mind and enters into the pain of the human condition, suffers in that pain, and then repents, and finally promises never to forsake the creation again.

You see, there are two indivisible movements in this story. There is the flood, sent by God to blot out God’s veil of tears. Devastating, destructive. Horrible to imagine (especially those of us who have witnessed the power and devastation of floods.) But that is only half the story, which is where the redeeming social and theological value comes in.

After the flood, God provides for life to go on. God has compassion on Noah and his motley crew on the ark. And Noah, in gratitude to God offers up a fragrant sacrifice of burnt offerings. God is touched. The bible says “And God remembered Noah.” Which is to say, God has compassion on Noah. And in that compassion God, like a parent who sees the helplessness of his child, is moved in his heart with sadness and swears never to do such a terrible things again.

Nothing really has changed in this story to cause this change of heart. Nothing in the flood has changed anything, not the loss of life, nor any sign of repentance, nothing in the animals or the creatures or the trees. The only thing that changes is the heart of God who decides that from this time forth and forever more God will approach the creation with unlimited patience and forbearance. It is not because humanity moves toward God that the crisis is resolved. It is because God moves toward humanity.

Do you see what happens? Two things: God sees that we are hopeless. Even the flood didn’t change that. The first thing that happens after the flood with the sun shining and gardens flourishing is that Noah goes from the altar to the wine press and gets drunk and lies naked in his tent to the shame of his sons. He’s not any better than his great, great grandpappy Adam. The human creature is not changed.

But a second thing happens. Though we are hopeless, God will not give up hope in us. No more floods, ever, as a sign of God’s displeasure. God blesses creation once again. And as a visible sign of this covenant, God puts away the weapons of war. God hangs up the bow in what Walter Brueggemann has called “God’s unilateral disarmament.”

I always thought that the bow in the sky was a reminder to us. We see it and we feel good because we are reminded of God's covenant, God's promise. But no. The rainbow reminds God never to forget the covenant. No matter what, God will not cut off the relationship with human beings. God will love, no matter what. God will forgive, no matter what.

So much for the idea that the God of the Old Testament is a God of anger and judgment and the God of the New Testament is a God of grace and forgiveness. For here in the Flood story we see God learning through grief, that judgment without mercy is futile.

So when God's heart flames with grief and anguish for the people and all we do to each other:

- and God sees little children battered and bruised;
- and sees that the wealthiest nation in the history of the world kills its children more than any other nation;
- and sees the picture we saw this week in the paper of a child in a refugee camp in Kenya with eyes as big as his head;
- and sees politicians playing games with peoples' lives;
- and sees churches..."people of God"... that can't put aside their differences and work for the healing of the world;

God will look out and see the bow hung up in the clouds and God will remember the covenant, the promise not to destroy. God has changed.

I think I've learned that sometimes the rightness of our theology, the truth claims of our doctrines ("God is infinite in being and perfection...immutable..") sometimes get in the way of us grasping the nature of the biblical God. God has hung up God's bow. God is no longer our adversary. God is *for* us, passionately for us.

What does this mean for us?

- When the dark clouds lay heavy on the horizon and when the waves break over us and we feel swamped in the flood;
- when our history seems at an end and we grieve over the dim future for the human race;
- when our own personal story seems finished, and we don't know where to turn, and we feel so alone, so god-forsakenly alone, and we cry out, "Why hast thou forsaken us?..."

It is then that we are given to hear the words, "But God remembered Noah."

When, in the fearful imaginations of our hearts, we imagine God has gone away and forgotten us and will never return, then we are given the gentle grace of God's remembrance. God says "When the bow is in the clouds, I will look upon it and remember."

I could do without this flood story at first reading. But what I cannot do without is that God who has promised never to forsake or leave me, come hell or high water.

To that God be all glory, all praise and thanksgiving. To that God may the pleasing odors of our burnt offerings ever be raised. World without end. Amen.

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¹ This description, and indeed much of the theological commentary in this sermon, is from Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, "Interpretation" series, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982. P. 77.