

Genesis 6-9: Floods and Covenants
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Pastor Lauren and I are in the midst of a sermon series titled “Beginnings,” and we have been preaching through the first stories of the Bible. In week one, I preached on the Creation stories in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. I say stories, because there are two different creation stories asking and answering different questions about what it means to be human and in relationship with God. These two stories were linked together by the editors of the Bible.

Similarly, with the flood story there are two stories from the same two traditions, but this time they are chopped up and mixed together. It’s like the editors couldn’t decide which story they liked better or they knew that if they chose one story over another, someone was going to be really mad, so they mixed them together in a salad bowl and plopped it in there. If you read Genesis 6-9, the flood story from beginning to end, you will notice that the story is redundant, and there are details that don’t fit together. For example, Noah is instructed to take into the ark “a male and a female of every kind of animal and bird to keep them alive.” Then Noah is also instructed to bring in 7 pairs of ritually clean animals and one unclean, and 7 pairs of each kind of bird so that every kind of animal is kept alive.” That’s not the same. We are also told that the water from the flood doesn’t go down for 150 days. Then we are told that after 40 days plus two weeks everything is dry. Not the same.

I mention this because as we are talking about religion and science out there, people often get tied into knots over these stories. This week I was doing some work for my other job, touring Niagara Cave with colleagues to learn about the geology from the driftless zone, the karst region and why it is so susceptible to water contamination. When you start the tour you

hear about the rock that is hundreds of millions of years old and you see fossils, and I asked my colleagues, “what do you do with this information when you don’t accept evolution and the age of the earth? One colleague talked about growing up with this kind of Christian worldview and leaving it behind, and another talked about how many school districts still don’t teach evolution or teach it thoroughly because of community backlash.

If we are reading our Bibles carefully, we will notice that this is not the one story God wrote about the origins of the universe. Rather, what we have are human stories, stories written by people about what it means to be human and our life with God. Science and religion aren’t in conflict and it is important for our church to keep saying that out loud. And, there is meaning in this story that we should listen to that is helpful for our lives with one another.

To understand the flood story, we need to know the stories that have come before it.

In Genesis 2, Adam and Eve are created to be gardenkeepers, and for connection, relationship. God doesn’t want human beings to be lonely.

God tells Adam not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or they will die. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve disobey God’s instruction, they eat the forbidden fruit. They are afraid, but they don’t die at God’s hands as God had said. They are punished, and their descendents too, but there is grace and mercy. God changes God’s mind.

In Genesis 4, Adam and Eve have children, Cain and Abel. Cain murders Abel. God is horrified. Human beings are made for connection and relationship. What is this violence about? God confronts Cain about it. Cain mouths off to God (what, am I my brother’s keeper or something?). God places a curse on Cain. This isn’t going well.

Adam and Eve have another child, Seth. In chapter 5 we read of the ten generations between Adam and Eve and Noah. In chapter 6, we are told that the sons of God, the members of the heavenly court are attracted to the human beings, and the human beings are having children with the gods. This is not acceptable to a God who likes everything in order, in its proper place. For God, good fences make good neighbors when you are making a creation. But everything is messed up. The creation is unraveling and God just wants to start again.

As the floods story begins, we are told, “the earth was corrupt in God’s sight. The earth was filled with violence.” God doesn’t want violence, we learn. God is grieved by this violence. This is something we should pay attention to. God created human beings so that they could be in relationship with one another, God doesn’t want violence. God doesn’t want Cain and Abel happening over and over again.

God decides to do something. God decides to respond to this violence, but with violence. This may trouble us, but as human beings, it is hard to blame God for this. We have our own issues here. I heard a statistic on the radio that said that it used to be that most firearms were purchased for hunting, now most firearms are purchased for self-defense. We feel an increased need to arm ourselves in case violence is done to us. The instinct to respond to violence with violence is strong.

God comes up with a plan to wash out all the human beings, all the animals, all the creeping crawling things, except for Noah and Noah’s family. Noah’s a good boy. He’s blameless.

God tells Noah the plan, and instructs him to build an ark, and to bring in his family and two of every kind of animal into the ark, and food for everyone. We are told that Noah does as

God commands. This is the first time in six chapters of stories of human beings, in ten generations of stories of human beings, that we are told that a human being obeys God. It's no wonder that God is a little frustrated.

Noah and family and all the animals are shut up in the ark. The windows that hold the rains up in the sky are opened and the water gushes down. The water from the deep burst forth, water from above and below creates a flood. The ark bobs along on the waters, rising above the heights of the mountains and then settling as the waters recede. All the creatures are extinguished, except for those who were in the ark.

Everybody gets out of the ark, and God speaks to Noah of a covenant. My Bible Dictionary says that a covenant is a "solemn agreement." It's a promise. It's like a contract. We have a covenant with one another as a church. It is our solemn agreement, our promise, our contract. God promises... not to do that again.

We are told that God is grieved by the violence of the earth. God is grieved by the destruction caused by the flood. God promises Noah and human beings, and all the creatures, that God won't try to solve the problems of creation like that again. God puts the bow in the cloud as a reminder. The word bow in Hebrew, Kesheth, means both bow for shooting and rainbow. There is no separate word for rainbow. God puts this weapon that has been made beautiful, in the clouds, as a reminder to do things differently, not to turn to violence again.

What happens in the flood story is that God changes God's mind. God decides never to give up on the world again. God will have to turn to something besides violence to heal the world. This God promises to be with us, to not give up on the world. To do that, God will need another method for healing the world. So, a few chapters, Genesis 12, what we will read next week,

God's going to call a people, the descendents of Abram and Sarai. This people will be blessed to be a blessing. They will partner with God in the task of blessing the world. And, of course, we are that people.

I think the themes in this story are fascinating. If God can change God's mind, then what are we waiting for? Are there places where it would be beneficial to change your mind, where it would be beneficial for us to change our minds? Are there places in our lives where it is too painful to keep doing the same thing again and again? I've been reading about the healing potential of mindfulness again, and so much of that practice is about shifting our perspective.

As much as God has created us for relationship and connection, God doesn't want violence for us. God doesn't want us to be violent with one another, and puts a bow in the clouds to turn from this course of action. There are plenty of places in the scriptures where God does violent things. Remember, these are human stories about God. And, there are these amazing stories where we see God turning from violence, where we hear Jesus turning from violence (it's at the center of the story of the cross) and instructing disciples to do the same. I think this turn from violence is the stronger theme in the Bible. It is certainly the one consistent with the great command to Love God and neighbor.

How can we be a community of people that is resisting violence in all forms, violence from weapons, violence from words that become weapons. There is so much that destroys and wipes out. How do we speak and act in ways that speak the truth in love, pushes fear to the side, and builds people up.

Finally, in this story, God makes a solemn promise not to give up on us, not to give up on the world, not to give up on human beings and animals and creation together. This is important

for us to hold onto when the floods come. Literal floods, like when 40 inches of rain falls in Southeast Texas like it did a few weeks ago. Or the other floods that life brings, when the waters are up to our neck (as we read in Psalm 69) and we are struggling to stay afloat due to sadness or anxiety. God will not give up on us, in the flood or after. The powerful love that is at the heart of all of life, promises to be with us. We are invited to trust in the promise. To live this story. To live this truth. To not be afraid. Like Noah, to obey this good news.

Amen.