

God's Promise in the Sky

Genesis 9:1-3:7-17

Summer Series on Characters

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The other night as we completed our Worship Team meeting, Shereen and I stayed to chat and when we walked outside – boom, the most amazing rainbow! I get excited about the deer, especially the little ones, but this rainbow truly lifted me out of a two week slump. Last week we read the creation narrative – the two pieces that describe the creation of humanity. Today's story like last week's has been mis-used by fundamentalist Christians who seem determined to ruin the power of narrative theology and insult our intelligence by insisting on a literalist approach. And as the confirmands learned last year and all of need to remember: we are not Bible literalists. We are all interpreters of scripture.

We believe that there is amazing and authoritative truth in the Bible, but we do not believe that these oral tradition stories were ever intended to be examined scientifically. We do not believe that God needs us to contort ways of explaining how Ecuadorian Galapagos tortoises or Alaskan Polar bears or Australian kangaroos and koalas found their way to Mesopotamia to board the ark. Nor are we compelled to suspend all reason and try to figure out how Noah's family fed the two elephants 150 pounds of vegetation each day. Nor do we need to worry that a boat made of wood of this size (there is an exact replica in Kentucky as you can see) would not likely stay afloat for forty days.

Nor do we need to be disturbed or reassured that there is an early flood story similar to our Genesis story among the Babylonians in the Epic of Gilgamesh. We simply need to believe that there was a tragic flood of major proportions and the people of God were trying to understand it. Like us in our times of natural disaster, they were seeking to make sense of this large-scale, yet likely regional tragic event experienced by their ancestors. They had no way of understanding weather on a global scale. This story was based in real experience and was passed down from generation to generation.

So we are not calling this story fake, but rather a real story whose purpose to help the people of God understand God's love, God's call to faithfulness, and God's covenant promise to care for them and protect them. Where was God?

That's the question they were asking and we should be asking? Where is God when we are deluged by a flood beyond our control? Can we still count on God, when the flood waters have come up to our necks, figuratively speaking? When we are facing a dangerous diagnosis, when our country is in a dangerous season of political posturing, and when global warming threatens to bring the flood waters high over all the coastal banks of this peninsula of Florida, does God care about us? When we face adversity, when tragedy hits, we sometimes wonder where is God. We also often blame ourselves for our disasters, thinking if we only had done this or that.

Sheryl Sandberg in her book "Option B" describes how she and others have faced adversity, built resilience, and found joy, despite horrible suffering. One of the stories she tells of Wafaa, a Syrian refugee, feels like a flood of grief. Wafaa's husband was arrested and killed four years ago. Her sixteen year-old son was killed while playing soccer just outside their apartment just before his father's arrest. She considered taking her life, but she was pregnant with her sixth child, and that life keep her going. She fled to Istanbul with her brother and two youngest children, leaving three older children behind. After reaching there, her daughter called to say that the daughter's two year old son had been killed by a sniper. Yet little by little Sandberg reports Wafaa is finding occasional joy again, despite the devastation of refugee life, of injustice that has torn apart and uprooted 65 million people from that part of the world, yet Wafaa is able to find a little normal she says when she can cook and care for her children. Love is what heals us of our fear and grief.

Having now spent preparing for the reading of scripture, let us now hear the end of the story of the Great Flood with the promise of God.

Genesis 9:1-3;7-17

God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fertile, multiply, and fill the earth. 2 All of the animals on the earth will fear you and dread you--all the birds in

the skies, everything crawling on the ground, and all of the sea's fish. They are in your power. 3 Everything that lives and moves will be your food. Just as I gave you the green grasses, I now give you everything. 7 As for you, be fertile and multiply. Populate the earth and multiply in it." 8 God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 "I am now setting up my covenant with you, with your descendants, 10 and with every living being with you--with the birds, with the large animals, and with all the animals of the earth, leaving the ark with you. 11 I will set up my covenant with you so that never again will all life be cut off by floodwaters. There will never again be a flood to destroy the earth." 12 God said, "This is the symbol of the covenant that I am drawing up between me and you and every living thing with you, on behalf of every future generation. 13 I have placed my bow in the clouds; it will be the symbol of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the clouds, 15 I will remember the covenant between me and you and every living being among all the creatures. Floodwaters will never again destroy all creatures. 16 The bow will be in the clouds, and upon seeing it I will remember the enduring covenant between God and every living being of all the earth's creatures." 17 God said to Noah, "This is the symbol of the covenant that I have set up between me and all creatures on earth." (CEB)

We've just read the wonderful end of the story, but let's be reminded of the whole story and the faith lessons we can draw from it.

First, the human condition of sin was passed down from the first humans, known as Adam and Eve and multiplied in successive generations. This leads to divine anguish. We might even say a flood of God's tears. Forty days of God's weeping in disappointment and frustration, because God wants us to choose life and love. What to humans can look like divine punishment is to God grief over the natural consequences of sin. (Celia Brewer Marshall, Interpretation Bible Studies)

Second, what made Noah and his family different was that they were listening to God, following God's guidance, even when it looked silly to others. As it says in 1 Corinthians, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom." And in Proverbs, "Do not rely on your own understanding, but trust in the Lord with all your heart."

Third, when we are in the middle of the storm, it is always good to remember that as much as we feel we are drowning in sorrow, God is always faithful. God will bring an end to the rain and to whatever trouble is going on in your life. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God's mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. (that comes from the book of Lamentations, the book of tears.) You can count on the great faithfulness of God. We need to hear in this story God's desire to see us live faithfully in the covenant of loving relationships that God intends, for when we do not adhere to God's ways, life becomes very destructive, even disastrous. That's what God wants to avoid – the pain we bring on ourselves and others when we do not live in loving, respectful relationships. But a faithful interpretation of the whole of scripture teaches that God is always for us.

Fourth, the rainbow is the physical reminder of God's fresh start with us. The text says the rainbow will be a reminder to us and to God as well, that the covenant of love supersedes all else – that destruction is not the way of life. God uses the great beauty of the earth to remind us that no storm in life, no matter how horrible, will be ultimately destructive. The whole purpose of the story of Noah and the Great Flood is to remind us to live in covenant faithfulness with God. It is the repeated story of the Hebrew scriptures that God promises love and asks of us love in return – love of God and love of neighbor. Jesus summarized it for us and showed us what that covenant looks like, when it's lived out. He demonstrated God's love and made sure we understood that God loves the whole world, not just a particular people.

At least seven of us heard Dr. Tim Jennings speak yesterday or Friday. He's a psychiatrist who authored the God-shaped Brain. "We have power over what we believe and what we believe has power over us."

A harmonized, healthy faith, he says, understands God by keeping scripture, experience, and science in conversation with each other. It keeps the tradition of the church, while also being the church always reformed by the Spirit of God, according to the Word of God. And a healthy Christian faith weighs everything believed about God against the witness of the life of Jesus Christ, who was God in our midst. Your view of God as a loving God is crucial for your mental health, Dr. Jennings, says.

So we have to kindly disagree with anyone who says that God wants to wipe off the face of the earth any who disobey God's commands. It makes no sense to say, "God loves you and if you don't obey God, God will kill you." That kind of fundamentalist, narrow-minded way of thinking is harmful whether we see it in Christianity or in Islam or in any other faith. God is love.

And my final point is about how to care for people in the storms of life. When we or anyone else is experiencing a disaster like the writer of Psalm 69 with which we opened this service, who said: "I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God" we need to avoid offering cheap rainbows. "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade." "God will never give you more than you can handle." Or the worst: "I know how you feel." No you don't.

So just build an ark of support to help them survive the flood of trouble. Be there. Be helpful. Invite them to talk when and however often they want. Don't try to fix their problems. Just listen. Notice that even the God of all creation does not step in to rescue us from our messes. Just be present and loving. Give them space and grace to face their real feelings, build resilience, and eventually find joy again, bit by bit, as Sandberg would say. Wait with them for the rainbow which is surely coming, because God's loving promise will never fail.