

FALLEN HEROES SERMON SERIES

NOAH – Genesis 6:5-22

June 27, 2021

Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

There's probably no Bible story more beloved by children than Noah's Ark. What kid doesn't like boats and animals? I've seen baby's nurseries decorated with Noah's Ark-themed murals and stuffed animals and crib sheets and musical mobiles. There are lots of children's bibles that tell the sanitized version of this story with pictures of lambs and bunnies and giraffes making their way onto the ark two by two. When we first learn this story, we learn about how Noah obeyed God and God protected Noah and when the flood waters finally receded everyone lived happily ever after...well, at least for a couple days.

That's the version of the story we're told growing up. But the real story is a lot more complex and morally ambiguous than what we learned in Sunday school. For our summer sermon series, we're looking at some favorite stories from the Bible that may be a different than what we learned growing up. The series is called "Fallen Heroes" because not all the heroes we learned about deserve that title.

Here's what makes this so problematic for our story today. The fallen hero isn't Noah. Noah does everything God asks of him. He doesn't balk. He doesn't complain. In fact, he doesn't speak a word during the whole story. OK, after the flood he gets a little drunk, but let's cut the guy some slack. After that long trapped on a boat with his family, trying to keep the tigers and antelope separated while shoveling elephant dung, he deserves to cut loose a little. No, the fallen hero in this story isn't Noah. The fallen hero is God.

We don't spend a lot of time teaching our kids why the flood happened, because how do you explain to a five-year-old that God wanted to kill everyone because they were bad? How is that kid gonna feel about God the next time she is bad? There's a reason those nursery murals don't include floating bodies. We don't want to think about why the flood happened, only that it all worked out, so we tell our kids this watered-down version. But Genesis 6 is clear. God says, "I will blot out from the earth every human being I have created." How do we reconcile this version of God with our understanding that God is love and full of grace and mercy? This God is no hero.

As we seek to answer this question, we need some important context. First of all, we need to establish an important ground rule for our conversation. This is not a history lesson. This is not a science lesson. This story was not written to tell us how much water was used or how many days the flood lasted or how many animals went onto the ark (two of each or seven of each, depending on which chapter you read). This story is about God and God's relationship to humans. The only question we should be asking is, "What does this story tell me about God?" So whether this story actually happened or never happened at all is irrelevant to the author's purpose.

Second, this story didn't happen in a vacuum. At this time, there were other nations with other gods, and those nations had their own versions of the flood story. The most popular one was the Epic of Gilgamesh, one of the earliest known literary writings in the world. This poem tells the story of the Mesopotamian hero Gilgamesh and includes a flood story that shares many similar features as the one found in our Bible. The prevailing wisdom is that there were a bunch of different flood narratives out there, and what we have in the Bible is the Israelite version of that story.

The primary thing that separates our version of the story from other versions is the depiction of the deity. While gods of other nations were aloof, indifferent, even hostile to creation, the Israelite God was deeply involved. For example, one foreign version of this story has the gods sending a flood because humans were too numerous and noisy, sort of an extreme version of population control. It's as if the gods didn't want to be bothered by those pesky humans.

But not the Israelite God. In fact, not only did God care what was happening with humans, it was God's deep love that led to the events of the flood in the first place. When God created Adam and Eve, God had such high hopes for the pinnacle of God's creation. God made this lush garden and all these plants and animals, and then God made humans in God's likeness and said, "All this is yours. I did this for you." But, through their free will, they said, "No thanks." And one way or another, we've been saying, "No thanks" to God ever since.

Listen to God's words in the prophet Jeremiah: "I thought how I would set you among my children, and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful heritage of all the nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me." God had such great expectations for us! It's so painful to have your expectations destroyed, isn't it? Have you ever ordered something and it looked one way in the picture, but looked completely different when it arrived? I've eaten my share of fast-food hamburgers in my day, and they usually look like they were put together by someone wearing a blindfold, nothing like the picture on the menu. You know that feeling of, "Oh," that feeling of letdown? Multiply that feeling times a bajillion and that's how God felt about God's creation.

Genesis tells us that God created us to be in loving and obedient relationship with God, yet Genesis 6 says, "The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually." Our sin had reached a critical mass. There was no coming back from how destructive humanity had become. If I were God, I would have left humanity to completely destroy itself and found another planet to start over. But God loved God's creation so much that God would never give up on us. So God finds a righteous person, Noah, and starts over.

That starting over is a true re-creation, a re-telling of the original creation story. If you remember, Genesis 1 tells us about the chaotic waters that covered the earth until God's spirit hovers over them and brings order. In Noah's story, God once again introduces the chaos of the waters, wiping the slate clean and starting fresh with plants, animals, and humans. Rather than giving up, God doubles down, determined to see in humanity the hope of faith and obedience. We've yet to fulfill that hope, but as we know through the gift of Jesus Christ, God still hasn't given up on us.

But...that doesn't change the fact that, in this story, the only way God can start over is if God gets rid of the bad people. We are told the people were wicked and evil, which you could argue isn't that different from today. The Hebrew word used here for "sin" is "hamas," which means injustice and social unrighteousness. The issue wasn't just that people were sinful; it's that they were sinning against each other. The creation had rebelled against the Creator. God created us to be in community, in relationship, and people were acting selfishly and in ways that hurt others. Like I said, you could argue that we haven't learned our lesson.

You would think God would be angry, don't you? Here God made us this wonderful place to live and we've sprayed it with spiritual graffiti. But the story doesn't say God was angry. It says God was grieved. Big difference there. Our sinfulness didn't make God irate; it made God sad. God had great expectations for us, and we served God a slapped-together fast-

food hamburger. God is not an angry tyrant; God is a grieved parent of wayward children. But God believes enough in us to start over.

So, did God actually kill all the humans and animals and plants? To be honest, that's not the God I believe in. I believe what happened was there was a flood in the ancient world that was given divine causality. Realize that this story would have likely been written hundreds of years after the actual event, so it had been passed down orally through dozens of generations before being recorded. Back then, natural disasters were imbued with divine energy because that's all they knew, so if there was a flood or a storm, it was assumed that the gods sent it.

Our understanding of nature and weather have evolved since then, and so has our understanding of God. I believe today it's only the narrowest of minds that think that God sends natural disasters as punishment for sin. I don't believe God gives people cancer to punish them or gives them winning lottery numbers to reward them. I have to incorporate into my interpretation of this story that the writers were writing what they knew, but their version of God doesn't have to be the same as my version of God. We still have different versions of God today, don't we? A drive down Tates Creek Road will show you that there are plenty of churches that worship a different understanding of God. Just because I don't accept the version of God in the Noah story doesn't mean I don't believe. It just means I don't believe in that version of God.

What I do believe in is what God does at the end of the story. Recognizing the destruction that has taken place, God makes a promise to Noah never to blot out humankind again. And God seals that promise with another meteorological phenomenon: the rainbow. In effect, God literally hangs up God's bow, a symbol of war and death and destruction, and promises never to bring chaos again.

So, after the flood, the creation story begins anew, and within a few chapters, we've screwed it up again. So God starts over with Abraham. And when that gets screwed up, God starts over with Isaac. And then with Jacob. And then with Joseph. And then with Moses and the Israelites. And then with the prophets. You get the picture. We keep sinning, God keeps recreating. That's what I love about God in this story: no matter how much we disappoint God, God never gives up on us. In fact, each day is like a new creation, isn't it? Each day God wakes us up and encourages us to go and be God's people, doing justice and living out righteousness. And during the course of the day we bring chaos back into the world. But God doesn't give up on us. God starts over, not with a flood of water, but a flood of grace shown to us through Jesus Christ.

I had an atheist tell me once she didn't believe in God. I asked why and she said, "Because the God I read about in the Bible is all about retribution and punishment and killing sinners." And I said, "I don't believe in that God either." It's OK not to believe in the version of God we're given in the Noah story, but there is still something to learn, there is always something to learn. God is still creating. God is still hopeful. God still has great expectations for us. And when we fall short, God offers a rainbow and grace. Always, always grace. That's the God I believe in.