

Second Sunday after Pentecost (June 26, 2011)

**Beginnings: Telling Stories from Genesis**

**“Noah: The Rainbow Connection”**

Text: [Genesis 6-9](#)

by the [Rev. Dr. James A. Harnish](#)

For a preacher telling stories from Genesis, the headline in yesterday’s “New York Times” was almost too good to be true: “2 by 2, or Not, Zoo Animals Escape Flood.”

MINOT, N.D. — As a historic flood threatened to drown this city, the animals from the local zoo were evacuated to a warehouse high above the valley floor. There were two of every sort — donkeys, hedgehogs, bald eagles, reindeer, toucans and many others — packed together in a makeshift sanctuary...Zookeepers...named a lamb Noah in honor of the occasion...The sounds and smells of these displaced animals...fill the drab confines of an old furniture warehouse...The camels have shown a mischievous side, trying several escapes and, recently, operating the light switches with their tongues...while little Noah pranced happily alongside the pens...The floodwaters climbed to levels never before recorded...filled houses, closed bridges, washed out railroad tracks and, as more and more water arrived, left residents wondering how high it would rise...As the city sank deeper into the Souris River, the kookaburras continued their cacophonous chatter, the camels munched on hay bales, a lone alligator soaked silently in a large tub, the hornbills greeted visitors with curiosity, and the lamb named Noah continued his rounds. [Click here for more information.](#)

Everyone knows about Noah. Here’s the way some of us remember it. [Bill Cosby “Noah” video].

That’s how it is with flood stories. Everybody has their own version. In the ancient Middle East, every culture had its own version of the flood story based on the Mesopotamian “Epic of Gilgamesh.” What made the Genesis story unique was not what it said about the animals or the flood,

but what it said about God. The purpose of the story was not to teach meteorology or animal husbandry, but theology. So, let's look for the surprises in what this story says about God, beginning in Genesis 6:5-7.

**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. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." (Genesis 6:5-7)**

Let's face it. There's nothing surprising about "the wickedness of humankind" or that, as Genesis 6:11 says, **"the earth was filled with violence."** Human sin is the most easily observable of all Christian doctrines.

The surprise is what our sin does to God. **"It grieved him to his heart."** Walter Brueggemann, one of our finest Old Testament scholars, says that what we find here **"is not an angry tyrant, but a troubled parent...God is not angered but grieved...not enraged but saddened."** ("Interpretation: Genesis," p. 77) That comes as a surprise to people who begin with the assumption of a judgmental, vindictive God.

We saw the way human sin breaks the heart of God on Palm Sunday. Luke records, **"As [Jesus] came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'If you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!'"** (Luke 19:41)

We'll never get the story right until we get it through our heads that our narrow addiction to self-interest, our insatiable greed, our violence, our abuse of the creation, our relentless rejection of the things that make for peace, and all the petty little sins of our own lives break the heart of God. Jesus said God is like a mother hen that does whatever she can to protect her young. (Matthew 23:37) And so, God takes action. God sets out to wipe the slate clean and start again.

The surprise comes in Genesis 6:8. **"But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord." (Genesis 6:8)** The King James Version said, **"Noah found**

**grace in the eyes of the Lord.”** Grace: the unexpected, unearned, undeserved love of God finds Noah.

A footnote in the Wesley Study Bible reads: **“The justice of God requires a flood but the grace of God provides Noah.”** Brueggemann calls Noah **“the bearer of an alternative possibility.”** (p. 79)

The presence of Noah means that faithfulness and goodness are always possible in the worse of circumstances, when everything seems stacked against it, when you least expect to find it. The point is not that Noah was good enough to be saved, but that God used Noah to redeem and restore the whole creation. Again, the storyteller uses the word “but” in Genesis 6:18.

**But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you. (Genesis 6:18-19)**

The shocker for kosher-keeping Jews who heard this story must have been that God told Noah to save both clean and unclean animals. God intends to save the whole shebang and God intends to do it through ordinary human beings like Noah. Nobody saw that one coming.

So, the flood comes. It rained for forty days and forty nights. People who know their bibles say, “Aha. We’ve heard that before.” Forty days Moses spent on the mountain, forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness, forty days the disciples were present with the Risen Christ before the Ascension. In scripture, forty days is however long it takes for us to clean out the clutter in our lives so that we can be fully present to the Spirit of God and become the men and women through whose lives the loving purpose of God can be accomplished in this world.

Then the word “but” appears again in Genesis 8:1.

**But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided. (Genesis 8:1)**

You’ll remember that in the creation story the wind, the breath, the Spirit of God blew across chaos and brought forth creation. Now, again it is the same wind, breath, Spirit that blows over the earth and the waters subside.

The surprise in the words, “God remembered Noah.” The gods of the ancient Middle East were notoriously capricious and utterly undependable. They were free to do whatever they wanted with the creation. But is the God who remembers his people.

We said last week that the stories in Genesis were gathered together in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. by Hebrew refugees in Babylon. The “flood” that swept away their world came when Jerusalem was sacked, the Temple was destroyed, and the people were driven off their land into exile. They told these stories to make sense of what had happened to them and to remind themselves of the God in whom they trusted.

Can you imagine what it meant for those exiles to hear that even when they felt the most God-forsaken, God had not forgotten them? Can you imagine the difference it can make for you?

Finally, the biggest surprise appears at Genesis 9:12.

**God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth...(16) When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” (Genesis 9:12-16)**

Did you notice it? God hangs the bow in the sky, not to remind us of our faithfulness, but to remind God that he has promised to stick with this creation. **“As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”** (Genesis 8:22) It’s the reminder of God’s promise that God will not give up on this world and is relentlessly determined to save it.

Scholars point out that the “bow” may not only mean the colors that appear in the sky when sunlight is reflected through the rain. It could also be the archer’s bow, the bow of the warrior. When God hangs up his bow in the sky, the conflict is over. No matter how sinful humankind becomes, God will continue to be faithful to his covenant.

In good Jewish fashion, let me tell you another story. It’s my all-time favorite Garrison Keillor story.

Keillor said that the concern in Lake Wobegon was not about floods, but about blizzards that could shut everything down so that the farm children would not be able to get back home from school. On the first

day of school each child was given the name of someone in town to whose home they would go if a blizzard came while they were in school. His "storm home" was the Krugers, an old couple who lived in a little cottage by the lake.

The Krugers became very big in his imagination. He imagined that it was not coincidence that he had received their name; that they can come down to the school, picked him out of the crowd and said, "We'll take the skinny kid over there. He's our storm child."

He would imagine knocking on their door and hearing Mrs. Kruger say, "Oh! It's you! I knew you'd come someday... Come on in to the kitchen, sit down, I'll make you some chocolate." She'd say, "Ah, it's terrible outside, isn't it? And probably gonna get worse." Then she would call upstairs, "Karl! Come on down here and see what's in the kitchen!" He'd say, "Is it our storm child? Has he finally come?" She'd say, "Yes! He's sitting here!" They would sit around the kitchen table and have a wonderful time.

Keillor said he never actually went to the Kruger's house. All the storms that came that year were convenient storms that came on the weekend. But, he said, blizzards aren't the only storms, and not necessarily the worst that can happen to a child. Somehow the storms he faced seemed more bearable because he knew that the Krugers were there. They were his storm home.

The Genesis storyteller knew that everybody has a flood story, but no one had a God like this. Everyone faces a storm, but no one needs to face it alone. Thanks be to God.