

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 2.21.2021



## The Pattern

### The Reverend Pen Peery

Genesis 9:8-17

It's hard to believe, because my vacuum cleaner still smells like a Christmas tree when I turn it on, but this past Wednesday we entered the season of Lent – Lent being the 40-day journey we take together in preparation for the good news of Easter.

Lent is a time for study, prayer, and reflection. The fact that it is 40 days is to remind us of the time Jesus spent in the wilderness after his baptism, preparing him for his public ministry.

In worship during Lent we will be following the Revised Common Lectionary – passages of Scripture that are thematic for the season.

In our culture, Lent is often rendered as a 40-day chance for self-improvement or to demonstrate that we have enough self-discipline to give something up. Kind of a “second chance for failed New Year’s resolutions.”

But in the church, Lent is an opportunity for us to slow down, take stock of who we are, remember who God is, so that we can better appreciate the limitless love that we see in Jesus journey the cross.



On Wednesday morning in the front drive, we offered “Ashes to Go” – another adaptation we have made because of COVID. Even though we were masked, and wearing rubber gloves, and using long que-tips to impose the ashes on people’s foreheads, it was a powerful, intimate, pastoral experience for me to say those words – one-on-one – that remind us all of how fragile we are: “From dust you have come, to dust you shall return.”

Three-year olds, grandmothers, healthy young fathers, people battling cancer, mom’s getting ready to go out for a run – everyone we saw on Wednesday were at different stages in life...but we all shared something in common: we are mortal, and precious, and utterly dependent upon the God in whose image we are made and who promises to be faithful.

And each of those things can be so easy to forget.

For so much of the time, we live under the illusion that we are in the center of the universe that we control. Lent is a time for us to reconsider.

As we prepare to enter the time in our worship where we will encounter God’s word, let us pray for the Spirit to open us beyond ourselves.

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Our Scripture reading today is from the book of Genesis - a part of the story about Noah and the flood. I confess that after two weeks of rain and 34 degrees, when it came time to write this sermon I almost changed Scripture passages – but the part of the story we will read is at the end – after the rains have subsided and the dove comes back with an olive branch in its beak.

Listen with me for the word of God...



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8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him,

<sup>9</sup>‘As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, <sup>10</sup>and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.

<sup>11</sup>I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’

<sup>12</sup>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: <sup>13</sup>I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

<sup>14</sup>When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, <sup>15</sup>I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

<sup>16</sup>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.’

<sup>17</sup>God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.’

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As a father of four children, I have probably had between 8-10 arks float through my house in the past decade.



Wooden arks, play-mobile arks, Lego arks, arks with stuffed animals, paintings of the ark and the rainbow...

I don't think it was just because my kids had two preachers for parents. The two ark per child ratio is probably indicative of the culture categorizing the story of Noah and the flood as children's literature.

And, honestly, I'm not so sure that's the right category.

I remember the ark in my own childhood room...it wasn't too long before I started to have questions when I began to really think about the story:

Like, what about the fish? I guess it's obvious why there is no mention of them.

And, did God really need to include animals like mosquitos and cockroaches?

And, how did the lions not eat the antelope? Or how did the lemmings not run overboard?

When I got a little older, I wondered why – in all the figurines and pictures – were Noah and Mrs. Noah smiling? Considering everything they must have seen and had to do, wouldn't they be scared, or sad, or overwhelmed?

And then, when I was old enough to be more in touch with my own mortality and after I had seen enough tragedy and suffering, I began to wonder why the flood had to happen in the first place...and what it said about God that so much destruction would happen on God's watch?



Not exactly kid-stuff, right?

The story of the flood is actually a long and complicated piece of Scripture. I just read a few verses from the end of the story a moment ago, but the narrative spans four chapters of Genesis.

And as I set out earlier this week to preach today, what I suspected is that there are a lot of people of faith who have been taught the details of Noah's story through the lens of a children's book – but probably also harbor some of the uncomfortable questions I have just named.

So what I would like to do – in what might end up being more a Bible study than a sermon – is explore three different aspects of the story of Noah and the flood that we often misinterpret or miss if we don't get beyond the pastel painted wooden characters, animals, and ark that sit on children's shelves.

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First, I think it is important to recall what God was feeling and why.

If you think about what happens in the story that the book of Genesis tells in these early chapters, it is kind of amazing how quickly things move from God looking at all of creation and calling it "very good" (at the end of chapter 1) to God looking over all creation and realizing that it was corrupt and doomed for destruction (in the beginning of chapter six).

Granted – our concept of time in Genesis is a fuzzy and imprecise thing – but the narrators tell the story this way on purpose. Those of us who hear – or read – the



story are **supposed** to notice that it doesn't take long for creation – especially humanity – to fall out of form from what God intended.

In that sudden transition from creation being good to it being lost – it is important to notice how the Bible describes what God is feeling. God is not angry (that's often how we've misread this story). No, God is **sorry**. God's heart is grieved because of what has happened – and because of what will happen with the flood.

It is also important to note why God's heart was grieved. There are a lot of general reasons the Bible gives, such as: “the inclination of the thoughts of their hearts were evil continually” (that's not good), or “the wickedness of humankind was great,” or, most plainly, “the earth was corrupt.”

But there is one – specific – reason the Bible gives for what kind of human behavior grieves God's heart – Genesis chapter 6, verse 12: God is grieved because the earth was full of violence.

And when you think about it, it makes sense that this would be lifted up and named in a way that other corruptions of the human heart are not. The creator of all living things is grieved when those whom God created hurt and wound and kill one another.

All of the stories we read in the Bible are intended – not only to be read – but to **read us**...so that we hold up our lives before the mirror of God's word and take stock of what we notice.

I can't help but think – as we live in the midst of violent speech, and violent images, and violent events that happen far too frequently – I can't help but think how much all of this still grieves God's heart. And why we choose violence instead of seeing the image of God reflected in each other's faces.



A second important aspect of the story about Noah and the flood is to consider who was responsible for the devastation the flood rendered.

At first glance, the answer seems obvious. It was **God's choice** to bring the waters of the flood to the earth. God's action was one of **judgment** – maybe even for a judgment that creation deserved.

This is where I have seen a lot of people get tripped up by the story, because it raises questions about what kind of God would do such a thing? Unfortunately, there have been far too many preachers over the years who have drawn a direct line between human suffering and human sinfulness. Think about what we inevitably hear whenever there is a major natural disaster or tragedy...it doesn't take long for some preacher to spin the disaster as God's judgment – or punishment – and then tell us who to blame.

A more careful read of the story sheds a different light.

Allow me to geek out for a moment: Linguistically, the root for the word for corruption and the root for the word for destruction are one in the same.

The world was not destroyed because God was angry and decided it was time to wipe the slate clean and start over. The seeds for the earth's destruction were sown by creation's corruption.

The judgment that occurs in this story – as is true of the judgment that happens almost everywhere else in the Bible and life – isn't found in a God who looks a lot like a white grandfather with a beard standing on the top of a mountain smiting sinners. Rather, judgement looks like what happens when the world runs into the consequences of its own choices.



It is true that God does nothing to stop the flood from happening. “The flood of the waters came upon the earth,” “the fountains of the great deep burst forth,” “the windows of heaven were opened.” For the attentive listener, you’ll notice that the way the Bible describes what happened is in the passive voice.

I think it is still a fair theological question to ask why God did not stop this destruction.

But what is more important to notice is where we see God’s action. The place where God was active in this story is seen in giving Noah instruction about how to build the ark – and how careful God was to be explicit about all parts of creation that Noah was to gather.

In the midst of a story about the world’s destruction, it is important to see that God’s action was one of salvation.

The lesson for us to hold onto is that no matter how complicated or convoluted our stories might become, we can trust that God will always be the one who saves.

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Finally, a third important aspect of this story – particularly this last part that we heard this morning – about God establishing a covenant with Noah...and every living creature on the earth...a third important aspect of this story is to understand that God’s action is not unique. In fact, it is a pattern that gets repeated again and again and again.





Sometimes, I think we believe that the story about Noah and the flood is God's attempt to reboot creation...to pick an upright and blameless patriarch and his family and recreate the story of Adam and Eve before the fall. The not so subtle message for those of us who seek to live our lives in obedience to God is that anything less than perfection is a disappointment and a failure of faith.

Maybe you know people who try to live out that kind of faith...maybe you are someone who defines your faith by your attempt to be moral and blameless. I have found that a faith weighed and measured by how closely we can approximate moral perfection is a recipe for exhaustion and disillusionment. It's a heavy weight that I am not convinced God intends for us to carry.

Certainly, making faithful and moral choices, and living obediently are a good thing. And they are things that gladden God's heart – instead of bringing God grief. I'm just not sure they are the main point.

If we look at the story of Noah – it **literally** takes three verses after God establishes God's covenant – for Noah to backslide into immorality. Just keep reading past the place where I left off in verse 17. I'll let Anna or Robert preach on that passage some other time...

We've often read this familiar story in Scripture and focused on Noah and how we can model our lives after his faithfulness. But this isn't a story about Noah. Noah never speaks a single word.

This is a story that reveals the character of a God who loves creation so much that God is willing to change course, issue new promises, expand the limits of forgiveness, and persistently search for those who are lost.



The point is the relationship that God desires to have with this creation...with each of us.

Six weeks from today, we will gather – virtually – to celebrate the power of a God who can empty the tomb...and to marvel at the depth of Christ's love for us that could lead him to the cross.

In between now and then, in this season of Lent, rather than evaluating our faith based on how much we can practice self-discipline or denial, I would invite us to spend this time working on our relationship...our trust...and our appreciation... with a God who created us...and whose pattern is to love us into right relationship no matter the cost.

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In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

