

Noah: Human Sin & God's Grief
First UMC of Pocatello
July 24, 2022

Genesis 6:1-8

Today we continue our journey through the story of Noah. Last week's sermon was a view "from below." It looked at the problem of a particular human family as they began to experience the corrosive and devastating effects of living under the curse. Suffering and death were at the forefront, as was the desire for reprieve. Such an inheritance helps us understand why Noah's father, Lamech, foisted on his son a name laden with desperate hope. As the African American Episcopal priest and legal scholar from the South, Pauli Murray, once put it, "Hope is a song in a weary throat."

In contrast to chapter 5, the eight verses before us are sweeping in their scope. They give us a view "from above." In fact, we are told it is God's own view. "The LORD saw..." God sees what takes place upon the earth. God sees what is at work in every human heart. God sees the bleak composite picture. God sees the bright anomaly, the needle in the haystack. With such height and breadth, this passage establishes some of the primary theological themes not only of the Noah Cycle, but of the whole biblical drama: sin, judgement, and grace.

I want to explore each of these themes, but first I ought to say a word about the first four verses in this passage. They are notorious for being some of the strangest and most difficult to interpret in the Old Testament. What we're told is that the "sons of God," presumably angelic creatures or lesser spiritual beings, violated the boundary established between heaven and earth and came down to seize and have children with human women. Their offspring became, according to the

text, the old warriors and heroes you might hear about in a mythological story. And a strange race of giants, the Nephilim, walked the earth.

Now, you can take some very fascinating rabbit trails into the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions that sprang up around some of this stuff, but for our purposes it's enough to say that, clearly, all of creation is in rebellion against the Creator. Boundaries are not being appropriately held. Heaven is in revolt as much as earth. And God's response to all of it is to shorten the human life span, forcing people into a quicker, starker confrontation with their mortality and limitations. God seeks to restrain the amount of damage that we might do.

Now, onto verses 5 through 8.

The LORD saw that the wickedness of humans was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually (v. 5).

The basic premise of this statement is enough to give us pause – God sees our hearts; God knows what goes on within us. God sees the self-contradictions that are there; the nebulous mixture of desire and fear, longing and doubt, selfishness and self-transcendence; our sins of commission and omission.

And, my goodness, what an indictment! Every inclination was only evil continually. The word “inclination” here means something like the “frame” or “shape” of a thought. It's not just the content of the heart's thoughts that are wicked but also the patterns of thinking, the ways of forming or shaping thoughts. Not only imagining evil but imagining evilly. It's a little hard to catch the idea but maybe it's like thinking envious thoughts about a person and then realizing you have a frame of mind that makes you see the world according to what others have that you don't. Or you can catch it in dualist thinking – it's either this way or that way, black or white – when in reality there might be a whole lot of in-between.

This is a bleak picture of the inner life of humankind, and it takes on a real sadness if you remember that Adam and Eve ate fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They became aware of these two divergent paths and possibilities for humanity. It's only taken ten generations for the knowledge of the good to be so far eclipsed by the knowledge of evil that God is able to say something like "only evil continually."

One Jewish commentator, Avivah Zornberg, observes, "A kind of sensitivity is lost to man."¹ That seems to be the definition of sin put forward here – the inability to even imagine what is good. And if you can't imagine it, you can't want it, communicate about it, produce it. This is a personal and a social crisis. It begs the question: What can be done?

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

God desires for creation to be at peace, to be whole, to be awash in joy and righteousness, to be rightly ordered. God is not okay with a humanity that cannot imagine the good. "It grieved him to his heart." This is not a distant, stoic, unemotional God – a changeless, passionless Force. God is involved. The things God sees affect God. The verb that's translated in these verses as "sorry" is really much richer. It's the same verb that's related to Noah's name. It means to console, to pity, to repent. And the form it's in is reflexive, meaning God experiences grief on the inside. God is in turmoil – repenting, self-consoling. Something is happening in God, at the depth of the heart. Notice the contrast: the human heart may be numb, but God's heart it dramatically alive.

¹ Avivah Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 38.

And it is out of this deep grieving compassion that God speaks the word of judgment. This is very important. God does not decide to blot out life from the earth because God is angry or wrathful or petulant. God's heart is broken, and whether or not we agree with God's decision from where we sit, the Maker of heaven and earth, the giver and taker of life, the one who was and is and is to come, determined that it was better to put things to an end than to let them go on in the way they were unfolding.

I'm not saying that there's an easy or entirely palatable answer to the question of divine justice that the Flood raises. What I am hoping to do is hold together three things: first, if we truly believe that this is God's world, then we must sometimes take to heart what God says through the prophet Isaiah, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are you ways my ways" (Isa. 55:8). Second, in the context of the story, the all-permeating presence of sin seemed to demand a solution equal in scope. And third, and most important, there is sufficient reason given in these verses for us to think of the Flood as a flood of tears, not a punishment doled out in angry retaliation, but a judgment coming from a living, responsive, suffering divine heart.

But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord (v. 8).

Here is the third theme: we've seen sin, we've heard the judgment, and now – grace! In this hopeless predicament for humanity, there's a person who stands apart in the eyes of God. Here's the strange thing: We aren't told why. Why did Noah find favor? We really don't know anything at all about him. Various interpreters across time have supplied answers: Noah was a just man, or: Noah was sexually pure. In the Qur'an, the holy scripture of Islam, Noah preaches a message of repentance to his generation and is at odds with his contemporaries. He's righteous because he is a faithful prophet. But we need to be honest, the story doesn't say anything. We can imagine reasons why Noah might be righteous, but maybe it's better to simply accept that Noah [was] saved more because of the grace of God than because of any intrinsic grace of

his own.² If not for the love that is deeper than grief, Noah might have been another object of God's regret. Maybe God does regret him, maybe God would forsake him. But greater than all regret, God loves him. And in Noah, God loves – and cannot ultimately forsake – these creatures made in the divine image.

Remember what we learned last week about Noah? He was a person who had wrestled with whether life was worth living. And he decided that it was. He wanted to live. And maybe that's all there is to see here. Noah's heart was still online, still could discern the difference between good and evil, could step into the tension between them, weigh the choice, and choose life. God saw a heart that was still malleable, that could listen, that could discern. God can use a heart like that – no matter how battered, no matter “the sin that clings so closely.”

Noah had no special qualifications. He was probably not particularly good, not particularly gifted. He was just alive. He felt things; he thought about what he felt; he wrestled. That's all it ever takes – even in the darkest and most wicked of times – to be chosen and used by God.

It could be you; it could be me; it could be us – so long as we never lose our sensitivity. So long as God's grief can move us, so too will God's grace.

Amen.

² Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire*, 41.