

## Shaping the Community of Faith

First UMC of Pocatello

September 25, 2022

Isaiah 54:9-17; 1 Peter 3:13-22

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Today we conclude our journey with the story of Noah by hearing echoes of it in these later scriptures, and by gaining some insight into how the story has, in an ongoing way, shaped the spiritual questions and theological imagination of God's people.

We went a long way through those five chapters of Genesis, so before jumping into the story's legacy, let's review where we've been by listing some of the parts of this story that we maybe didn't know or hadn't internalized before we started – details that surprised us, maybe even shocked us, and restored to this ancient myth some of its wildness, its drama, its depth, and its shadows.

For instance, we learned that if you take the genealogy of Genesis 5 at face value, then Noah's father, Lamech, was the first generation of humankind to experience the natural death of his ancestors. He was the first man to grow up remembering people who *had been* but who no longer were, to witness the consequences of the curse.

We learned that Noah's name means *relief, comfort, repent*, that it is related to a verb *naham*, which means to "sigh deeply." Noah is the sigh of weary humanity, the sigh of a desperate parent who foists a heavy destiny upon his child.

We learned that the "sons of God" – some group among the angels? – came down to bear children with the daughters of men and contributed to that sense of widespread wickedness upon the earth.

We learned that the sending of the Flood is less an act of wrathful punishment on God's part and more an act of unrestrained grief over the waywardness of humankind. God filled the world with God's tears, yet

still took the time to come down and press a shoulder against the door of the ark and makes sure it was shut tight against the storm.

Or, though the mammals, reptiles, and birds were gathered into the ark, the sea creatures must've had a special kind of holiday, and how terrible to Noah must the cries of his contemporaries beyond the arks' walls have been.

Or, Noah and his family were in the dank darkness of the ark *not just* for the forty days and forty nights that the rains fell, but longer, while the rains swelled and abated – almost *a year*.

And – no one actually told Noah to send out the dove, and we *still* have no idea what became of that raven...!

When Noah came out of the ark for the first time, he would've had no idea where he was, no sense of direction or place or bearings, because even the tops of the mountains had been covered by the flood.

The bow in the sky was a sign of God hanging up God's weapon, a sign that shines through and upon the clouds, robbing them of their doom.

It is in the Noah story that we see the first covenant, the first altar, the first animal sacrifice, the first vineyard, the first wine.

And – finally, though not exhaustively – the story ends badly, in dysfunction and disorder, as drunkenness sedates memory, children dishonor their father, a father speaks curses over his children, and siblings go forth to vie for power over one another.

I for one will never be able to read this story the same way again. I was surprised by each new segment of it. Actually, the deeper in I got the more I said, "What was I thinking? This doesn't make for laid back summer preaching!" Yet each week there was that exhilarating feeling that the scriptures can arouse in us, that sense that they are reflecting back a realer portrait of life than we are typically willing to entertain. And I would love to hear from you sometime about what you're taking

away from this story, the things you're wrestling with or integrating into your own journey.

That invitation to your own personal meaning out of this story brings us to the task before us now. Turns out, in the context of the Bible, Noah introduces questions and themes of many kinds for the first time, but none that is more obvious or troubling *than the problem of suffering*.

The problem of suffering.

After all, *all those people drowned. And in the end, even Noah, a righteous man who had walked with God, fell apart*. How has the community of faith held those stark realities together with their faith in the goodness of God?

Please don't hear me as suggesting a capital-A answer to such a timeless question. In the end, suffering is something that can only be faced honestly and accepted as a part of life, and doing that is a deeply personal journey for which there is no shortcut or key. I only mean to put forward these two passages – one from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, one from the Christian apostle Peter – and shed a bit of light on how they drew the Noah story into conversation with their own lives in order to make some peace for themselves.

The prophet responsible for the fifty-fourth chapter of Isaiah lived and preached during the Babylonian exile of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. What that means is that God's people in the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah had lost their political sovereignty, lost access to their holy places of worship, lost their homes. Cities were toppled by Babylon's armies, Hebrews were swept away into captivity in foreign lands, and the promises of life abundant that God had made to the peoples' ancestors – to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – seemed all but forsaken, foolish, false.

On the inside of the loneliness and agony of exile, the prophet lends speech to the heart of God:

This is like the days of Noah to me... the mountains may depart, and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart

from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you. (54:9, 10).

This is God recalling the days of Noah, remembering that unfolding of events, God doing reconciling past and present. Those days were days of widespread human violence; evil thoughts, destructive patterns of thought, losses of moral sensitivity and discernment. Surely Isaiah's people must have felt that way, too, as they watched their home be burned and occupied by another nation's army. But the days of Noah were also days when God's grace was at work, searching out the one among the many who hadn't lost the capacity to respond to divine invitation. They were the days when God planted in a person's heart the dream that would carry life through the chaos and storm and onto solid ground again. God remembers those days. God remembers the promise of an everlasting covenant that those "waters...would never again go over the earth" (v. 9).

The prophet acknowledges the power of God. God has created the ravager and God has made covenant. Both are true. God is the Lord over the Flood. God is the Lord over the ark. What matters is the memory, deep in the divine heart, of the promise to never again wash us away.

Isaiah interprets those waters symbolically, as overwhelming destruction and suffering of all kinds. *They all will have their limit, for God has promised. And we, friends, Isaiah says, are those to whom God has promised peace and compassion. A little while longer and we will be rebuilt with rubies and sapphires, in righteousness and prosperity; we will be far from oppression, fear, and terror. The grace, the ark, the rainbow, the covenant – they are ours.*

In their darkest hour, far from home, completely disoriented and fatigued and with no concrete reasons for hope, the people of God reached for Noah, and they heard God's word to them: "O afflicted one, storm-tossed and not comforted... you shall not fear" (vv. 11, 14).

That's one way Noah lived on.

Then there's this New Testament passage from 1 Peter. In a very different time and very different circumstances, Peter, also, is grappling

with suffering. *This* suffering is coming by way of the growing persecution of the early Christian community. Peter basically says to his people that to “suffer for doing what is right” is a blessing (v. 14). It’s a blessing, his reasoning goes, because it brings one into contact with Jesus, who suffered persecution, arrest, torture, and execution for doing what was right, even though he was righteous. To share in Christ’s humiliation in that way allows a person to share in what emerges on the other side of that humiliation – Christ’s resurrection, hope, and blessedness.

Peter makes sense of suffering of a certain kind by placing it inside the life and work of Jesus. Strangely, at the pivot point of Peter’s sketch of Christ’s work – the descent into suffer, the ascent into glory – Peter brings up, of all things, the “former times” of Noah, and says something pretty bizarre: In the spirit, Jesus went and proclaimed the gospel to the souls who were in prison because of their disobedience during the days of Noah.

Here we can tell that there had been a question raised by the Noah story that had lingered for centuries, maybe millennia: *What happened to all those people? All those people indiscriminately drowned by the Flood. What is God’s grace to them?*

Peter says that Jesus went to them.

(There’s a fascinating rabbit trail you can follow here into early Christian and it’s idea, based on this passage, of the “harrowing of hell,” the idea that, in between death and resurrection, Christ goes and invades the domain of the devil, and sets free all souls trapped in hell.)

But let’s stick with the task at hand. What Peter is doing with the Noah story for his *present circumstances* is more profound. I think he is saying this: *In the days of Noah, there was both death and life, suffering and salvation, waters that killed and waters that saved.* In Christ’s death and resurrection, God freely, lovingly joins us in both death and life. God becomes a sufferer as well as a savior. God dies, and God lives. God is killed, and God is raised. God is with us in our prisons – our watery graves – and with us in our arks.

Peter has placed the Noah story and the Christ event in conversation to show that God, in the end, does not hold himself separate from the damned. God stands among them, among us. In the end, death and damnation lose their authority. Christ emerges from the prisons, from the grave, from the chaos – bearing the marks of his passage, but alive.

Fascinating, that one of the only New Testament references to Noah suggests that we Christians should never see ourselves as safe inside the ark if we are not willing to also see ourselves as first lost among the waves. For Christ took up residence in both, and brought both inside his work of salvation. There is no site of damnation or depth of suffering that Christ has not joined us in.

Isaiah says, “God will not forget us, because God has made a covenant of peace with us! All of it, destruction and salvation, are in God’s hands [*cupped*].”

Peter says, “God can bless us, because God has suffered with us! All of it, destruction and salvation, are in God’s hands [*spread*].”

What do you say?

We sometimes want the Bible to be a book of answers, but it is more a book of questions, of vantage points, of signpost and attempts. No story ever means just one thing. And every story suggests but does not exhaust the whole story. The point is for the community that inherits it – for us – to place it in conversation with life.

As we move forward and take our communal preaching and reflection elsewhere, all I ask is that you let “the days of Noah” stick with you. Let them trouble you with good trouble, comfort you with hard-earned comfort.

May they lead every one of us deeper into the mysterious pangs and joys of life lived with God, that we may live faithfully even when the world seems to be falling apart.

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