

Introduction to the Series as a Whole

Three Challenges

1. Challenge of Experiencing the Old Testament as Proclamation

- 77% of Bible
- Is the God of the Old Testament also the God of the New Testament? The violence and wrath of God, which are more on display in the Old Testament, tend to make us assume that there is a fundamental difference. But that has been rejected long ago as heresy.
- On the other side is a tendency to try and make what's called a "Christological move" with all Old Testament passages... to try and radically harmonize things between the Testaments and see Jesus everywhere.
- Calling it "Hebrew Bible" reminds us that these scriptures don't first and foremost belong to us, and that Jesus himself would've grown up hearing and praying these scriptures; they formed his sense of who he was, and when he preached from a text, by default he preached *these*.
- We can hear the story on its own terms, not moving too quickly toward a Christological interpretation of the passages, but recognizing that *these are the scriptures that Jesus of Nazareth read and believed*, the stories he *welcomed us to claim as our own* when he revealed that his work of salvation was not only for Israel, but also for the Gentiles.
- Having the "mind of Christ" when it comes to the Hebrew Bible partially means taking the Old Testament as God's story, our story – by grace! And whatever we find there that is troubling, confusing, and exciting, taking it to Jesus to ask, "Lord, what did this mean to you? What did this mean to your people Israel? What does it mean to me?"
- Let's come with an **obedient curiosity**

2. Challenge of Coming to the Pre-History with the Right Questions

- Define prehistory: Genesis 1—11: Creation, Eden, the Fall, Cain & Abel, Noah, Babel
- On the one hand, these are some of the most loved and familiar stories of the Bible; on the other, they have been the primary battlefield of the modern war between science and religion.

- I think the best way to approach these stories is with questions of faith, recognizing that these stories were told and then written down by people who were actively making meaning of *life* – of the world as it is, of their past and why certain things had befallen them, of God’s relationship to them and their relationship to creation. They are stories that answer *why* – not whether something happened, or how it happened, but why it happened. They are origin stories, not literal histories, for a community of faith. They are “true” in the sense that it matters. They put us in touch with some of the fundamental dilemmas of life and point to God’s presence in the midst of it all.
- Direct folks to the sheet and say: these provide a great opportunity for self-knowledge and for experimentation.
- Let’s come with **questions of faith**.

3. Challenge of Hearing the Flood Story

Oh, we can talk out both sides of our mouth when it comes to this story. On the one hand, we teach it to our children in Sunday School and love the drama, the animals, the dove returning with the olive branch, and rainbow in the sky. And then we’ll say to one another, I can’t believe in a God who would flood the whole earth and wipe out humankind! We reduce what is a very fascinating and complex story to a simple judgement, or we make it more palatable than it is. How can we set aside our assumptions and allow the story to stir new things in us?

Let’s come with **an expectation to be moved**.

Which brings me to sharing a bit about why I felt drawn to preaching this story in the first place:

I’ve been preaching out of the New Testament for a year, and wanted to take us to the Old, and then it struck me that there is something very relatable and consoling here with Noah. Things were once *so bad* that God determined to start over, and yet there was a person who lived by faith, who God used. Put in the form of a question: **What does it mean to be a faithful individual who lives and endures by God’s grace in the midst of cosmically calamitous times that they do not fully understand?**

We live in calamitous times, yet it is possible to be buoyed up through our faith and obedience. There is a reason why Christians have long seen in the Flood a prefiguring of baptism, in the Ark a prefiguring of the Church, in Noah a prefiguring of Christ. We will go there and see what God gives us to see.

To sum up this preamble, I was reading out of Barry Lopez’s book, *Arctic Dreams*, over the weekend, and came upon this quote: “...by coming to know a place,” and, we might add, *a story*, “where the common elements of life are understood differently one has the advantage of an altered perspective. With that shift, it is possible to imagine afresh the way to a lasting security of the soul and heart...” So, friends, let’s enter this strange story in this strange book and seek that lasting security.

Noah: His Family & His Name

First UMC of Pocatello

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Genesis 5:1-32

Before we encounter Noah, we first must understand some things about his father, Lamech. If we enter the story on its own terms and take the ages of these men at face value, here is a startling fact: Lamech's was the first generation to experience death. Of course, Cain had slain Abel centuries before, but that was a premeditated murder. Lamech, born into an unbroken family, was the first young man to watch his elders – first Adam, then Seth – lose their vitality, their bodily wellbeing, and, finally, their very breath.

Lamech was born while Adam was still alive. He was raised hearing the story – living the consequences, really – of the curse. He knew that because of the curse he and everyone else toiled painstakingly upon the thistly, thorny ground. But nothing impressed the profound dismay of the curse upon his young heart like witnessing these first “natural” deaths. Lamech was the first man to grow up remembering people who *had* been but who no longer were.

We all have – or will have – a first death like that. Can you remember the shock of it, the way it created a before and an after, jolted you awake, *changed* you? For me, it was Molly Halter, a senior at my high school when I was in eighth grade. I had known and looked up to Molly almost all my life because we were both competitive swimmers for the town team, and I was friends with her younger brother. One day, after a procedure in the hospital, she died of bacterial meningitis. It brought our whole school to a halt; it shocked me. Death was *real*. It could encroach upon my life.

Not only were the deaths of Adam and Seth *Lamech's* first, they were *the* first. Nothing like that had ever happened before. It was incredibly disorienting. Add to this that Adam and Seth were not the only losses Lamech suffered as a young man. Did you hear it? There was that odd hiccup in the genealogy. Enoch, Lamech's grandfather, didn't die but “was no more, because God took him.”

Enoch had exited the scene for a completely different reason than Adam and Seth. He had “walked with God,” meaning he was righteous. God whisked away the righteous man, in the prime of his life. As a result, Lamech spent most of his life without his grandfather. Because his grandfather was good? It's doubly disorienting. You can hear him thinking, *If that's the fate of the righteous, what does that say about everyone left behind? What does that say about me?*

My grandfather, my mom's dad, was a good man, and he died when I was just about to turn thirteen. You might think that that's plenty of time to form strong memories about a person, but to be honest I was late to awaken to that sort of thing. I really feel like he was gone at the moment when I could've started to truly experience him.

After Sus and I had found out we were pregnant the first time, and that we were having a boy, I had a vision of my grandfather one day while I was praying. He appeared in my mind's eye and told me that he was proud of me, and I expressed to him how much I wished that he could be here to know my child and help me become a good dad. It was a healing experience, because probably my greatest sadness related to family is that Pop-pop died young.

He died from cancer, in spite of his goodness. That was hard enough. But Enoch was taken away *because* of his goodness. How cruel that must've felt to Lamech, to one day have a grandfather who could show you what it is like to walk with God, and the next day have him no more. Apart from the question of righteousness, Lamech was the first parent in this lineage who was not able to share his children with his own grandparent.

So, if you're Lamech, how could you *not* conclude that life was cursed? That people are born to toil and then die – unless they are righteous, that is, in which case God whisks them away, leaving the rest of us to suffer.

It is this weight that Lamech brings to the naming of his son, to Noah. That name, Noah, is related to a verb that is onomatopoeic in origin – *naham*. It means to sigh deeply. You can hear it if you slow it down. *Naham*.

And that deep sigh gave the word a range of meanings: to be sorry for, to pity, to console, comfort, or relieve – even to repent. Noah is his father's *sigh*. Noah is his father's plea for relief, for consolation. Noah is his father's hope for a fundamental change in the human situation. "Out of the ground that the Lord has cursed, this one shall bring us *relief* – *naham* – from our work and from the toil of our hands."

Lamech is the first parent – but certainly not the last – to foist such a desperate destiny upon his child. Noah is the first offspring of a death-touched generation. He inherits that anxiety, that trauma. He will never know the man called Adam, the man called Seth. Neither will he know his great-grandfather Enoch, but will absorb instead the implied divine sentence, through his father's gloom, upon all left behind. Yet he bears his name – *rest*, relief from the curse.

If you were him, how would you conceive of such a destiny? How would you try and live up to, into, that name? Noah, it appears, in a quite relatable struggle, approaches that destiny by grappling with whether or not it is worth bringing new children, children of his own, into the cursed world. I say that because Noah waited for five hundred years, more than two-and-a-half times as long as anyone before him had waited, to father children. He must've thought to himself, *Maybe I can be our relief by no longer passing on the curse. I'll take it with me to my grave, and that'll be the end of this sorry story. Maybe the way to rest is simply to stop.*

With that determination, he goes on to endure the steady diminishment of his family – Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared; "and he died, and he died, and he died, and he died" – until something, for reasons we are not given, shifts deep inside him, and he changes his mind. At five-hundred years old, he brings three children of his own into the world.

Perhaps it was an animal instinct, the desire to prolong the line, which grew stronger in him as the generational foundation fell away. Perhaps it was a greater understanding of his ancestors' story, that though they were cursed, they had nevertheless been made in God's image, an image that was not wholly lost and was worth perpetuating. Perhaps against all his best efforts, he fell in love – and decided no longer to live ruled by fear.

No matter what happened in his heart, Noah – the *weary sigh* of Lamech, the first child born into a mixed legacy of hope and hopelessness; the first person to wonder whether life was worth living, whether it was a good thing to bring children into the world, whether the only way to relieve the curse was to end the story – he, Noah, came out, at the last, on the side of life. And it is that decision which underlies everything to come.

Oh, this is only the fifth chapter of the first book of the Bible, full of suspect numbers and strange details, but see how a mirror is already held up to us! For haven't you ever wondered, "Is it worth pressing on to a new day? Is this world fit for our children?" Hasn't it ever haunted you, the question: "Does the curse outweigh the blessing?" Haven't you ever *sighed* for relief from your toil or your losses?

The good news is that there is nothing new or out of place about our sighing. It is known to God. We are not stuck.

Friends, *this* is Noah, our guide for what lies ahead.

Amen.