

**Things Fall Apart**  
First UMC of Pocatello  
September 18, 2022

Genesis 9:18-28

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Even after I had decided to preach through the Noah story this summer, as I was mapping out the sequence of passages, I tried to give myself a pass on preaching this final part. I confess that I didn't *want* to preach it. It's a troubling passage and a bad ending to the story. But then, early on I was sharing my thoughts about Noah with a friend of mine who is a biblical scholar and a prison chaplain, and she reminded me that we preachers have a responsibility to deal with the difficult parts of scripture as well as the more palatable. The Bible doesn't shy away from human brokenness, so why should we? This was coming from a person who is in touch daily with the depths of human suffering. She was right, and I knew better. I went back to my spreadsheet and, with a sigh, slotted it back in there: Genesis 9:18-28.

Our felt-board, Vacation Bible School, cartoonish version of the Noah story only hits the high points: Noah's faith in God, the pairs of animals, the rainbow. It has made it hard for us to render the story in 3D again by integrating the lows – and there are so many lows. The fact that Noah lived through the mass death of humankind; that he weathered the worst storm known to the world; that he was shut up away from the daylight, in the company of only his family and hundreds of anxious, needy, smelly animals, for almost a year; that when the door of the ark finally swung open there was not a living soul to greet him, and no telling where he was; all that anxiety and anguish repressed as he spent his days in the ark keeping the animals alive, comforting his family, and catching fugitive moments of sleep.

The Flood was traumatic. The end of the story confirms it. Noah seems to deal with the pain by falling down the well of drunkenness, by numbing out. He was the first to plant a vineyard, we're told. There needed to be some new form of escape to deal with this unprecedented anguish. He begins to reject his awareness and consciousness and memory, his acute sensitivity for which he was favored by God. He accepts an altered, less present state of mind.

On the heels of this coping comes an act of abuse. Ham comes into the tent and sees Noah's nakedness. There are many scholars who look at the story in its original language and believe that what is being suggested here is an act of sexual violence perpetrated by Ham against his father. In the same way that "to know" one's partner in Hebrew means to have intercourse, or for Ruth to "lay at the feet" of Boaz means to seduce him, so to "see the nakedness of" works as a double entendre. And even though we may not *want* that to be a part of the Noah story we think we know so well, it would hardly be unique to the Old Testament, where acts of sexual violence happen frequently.

There is, too, a less specific way to take this phrase, which is that Ham takes advantage of his Father's vulnerability and diminishing agency – that he sees his father's pain in an unguarded moment, and, in some way, manipulates it. Either way, to numbing out the story adds violence and dishonor between father and son.

As if that's not bad enough, Noah wakes from his stupor and speaks the first word we hear him speak in this entire story. Have you noticed that? From the building of the ark to the rainbow in the sky, Noah hasn't said a single thing. Now, he speaks. And what is the first word out of his mouth? "Cursed."

"Cursed be Canaan, lowest of slaves shall he be..." God has just sworn to never again curse the creation, and it takes humanity almost no time at all to rush in and fill that void. Noah curses his own flesh and blood, and creates a hierarchy among the brothers: Shem and Japheth on top, Ham on the bottom. Noah breathes into being a scale of value, an

ordering of human relationships based on power and powerlessness. Sure, he blesses, but only as the counterweight to his curse.

This is the picture of humanity in the aftermath of the flood: obliterating one's presence, preying on another's vulnerability; siblings at odds; curses. This is the world Noah is finally released from, with no more fanfare or praise than any of his ancestors: "And he died."

It's a bad ending.

Content alone would make a person not want to preach it, but this passage also comes with a horrific legacy, a history of being misused – used as a curse! I'm referring to something called "the Curse of Ham," which was one of the core biblical arguments used to support the idea that God ordains the enslavement of Africans and African Americans by white folk.

The next chapter of Genesis contains what's known as the Table of Nations. It charts the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth and also gives some geographical designations about where these three branches of humankind settled: Shem in the Middle East, Japheth to the north and far East, and Ham to the South, into the land we now call Africa. At the advent of the Transatlantic slave trade, these designations were read racially, and hierarchy of these races was latched onto as a binding reality. Ham's descendants were dark-skinned people who had been cursed forever with a destiny of enslavement to Shem and Japheth's presumably lighter-skinned descendants.

In 1860, a Baptist pastor and plantation owner named Thornton Stringfellow put it this way: "Here, language is used, showing the *favor* which God would exercise to the posterity of Shem and Japheth, while they were holding the posterity of Ham in a state of *abject bondage*..."

God *decreed slavery*—and shows in that decree, tokens of good-will to the master...”<sup>1</sup>

About a decade earlier, in 1851, a New Orleans-based doctor named Samuel Cartwright, who was a leading contributor to American medical journals wrote this:

In the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter and the 27<sup>th</sup> verse of Genesis, one of the most authentic books of the Bible, is the remarkable prophecy: God shall enlarge Japheth and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem, and Canaan shall be his servant. Japheth has been greatly enlarged by the discovery of a new world, the continent of America. He found in it the Indians, whom natural history declares to be of Asiatic origin, in other words, the descendants of Shem: he drove out Shem, and occupied his tents: and now the remaining part of the prophecy is in the process of fulfillment, from the facts every where before us, of Canaan having become his servant.<sup>2</sup>

The Curse of Ham was invoked all the time in the proslavery regions of antebellum America – by politicians, lawyers, doctors, teachers, theologians, and pastors. It bears saying directly that this was a willful misinterpretation, that *God* never curses Ham; it was a human curse. And though that may seem far away from us, just yesterday a CNN article came through my newsfeed about a contemporary bestselling Christian writer, Philip Yancey, who remembers he was taken to a pro-segregationist rally as a child in the 1960s and hearing the Curse of Ham preached. It is an idea, drawn from an agenda-driven, pseudo-

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<sup>1</sup> Thornton Stringfellow, “The Bible Argument: Or, Slavery in the Light of Divine Revelation” (1860), in *Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Paul Finkelman (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2020), 129-130.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Samuel A. Cartwright, “Report on the Diseases of and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race” (1851) in *Defending Slavery*, 167, 168.

intellectual Biblical literalism, that has profoundly shaped our world, and contributed to the ongoing racism in contemporary life.

In all seriousness, this is one of those passages where the good news has to come by way of bad news. There is nothing redemptive in the story itself. It is all wounds begetting wounds – both for the characters within the story and in the world beyond it.

But it is important that we have it. It is important that the Bible doesn't let this side of the human experience escape notice. It puts it front and center so that we have to see it, have to look at ourselves, have to see that God sees it, have to know that God knows it. There's not much worse than this picture here – and it's named. This is what we're capable of.

This story comes to us by way of a people, a real community of real people, who were committed to telling the truth about their life with God. First it passed from ear to ear in oral tradition, and then it was written down, edited, distributed. At any point over the course of centuries, it would have been easy for someone to say, "Let's stop the story with the rainbow, with God's promise to keep covenant. Let's not bother with all that drunkenness and dysfunction any longer." But instead, they preserved it. They refused to suggest that life with God always ends in happiness, in a "win" for the faithful. They refused to cover up the evidence that a curse had been spoken. Our suffering isn't novel, and the community of God has always known that in order for God to truly help us, we must admit to the severity of our trouble.

And so, *yea*, we come to a passage like this and throw up our hands and sigh and say, *It can be this bad*. Thanks be to God we are rendered three dimensionally by God's word, no matter how much we try and flatten it. Thanks be to God that Genesis 9 isn't even *close* to the end of the story.

There's one more thing – and this, too, comes by way of bad news.

It is important to notice the power of human speech. Noah curses, and the curse enters lived experiences. Noah blesses, and the blessing enters lived experiences. Noah establishes hierarchical relationships within the human family, and we have never been able to get out from under it. In a way, the living legacy of this scripture is a dark testimony to its own inner message. The world is built by the stories we tell each other, by our words.

The book of James (3:5-6, 9-10) in the New Testament says this:

How great a forest is set ablaze by a such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of life, and is itself set on fire by hell. ... With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse people, made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth comes a blessing and a curse. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

*It ought not be so.*

That is where the story of Noah leaves us: It ought not be so.

We have learned that the problem of human sin is a problem of the human heart. The Flood, for all its lessons, could not fix it. And now that we hear Noah speaking, our predicament becomes even clearer: *You have the power to curse.* What you speak cannot be gathered in again. With your words you can bind, and with your words you can set free.

We all live inside the stories that we tell.

We *need* a word that blesses. We *need* a word that loves. We need a word that heals. We need a word that reconciles. We need a word that forgives. We need better stories that are worthy of life.

May we speak such a word.

And – Oh! – that One would come and speak such a word to us!

It is a clarity to our longing that this story gives us.

For that, we can be thankful.

Amen.