

Sermon Series: Noah-A Faith Story Part 1: "God Grief"

Genesis 6:5-8, 11-13

Salem United Methodist Church

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This begins a three part sermon series on the Genesis story of Noah. It is not just a great children's story about an ark with two of every kind of animal. The adult version is one that teaches us about God, who we are as humans, and the relationship between God and us.

Different people interpret the Bible differently. Some believe in the inerrancy of scripture. This belief means that every word, every verse of the Bible is from God's mouth to the writer's hand. These people read the Bible through a literal lens. Every word is absolute truth. While others read the Bible through an analytical lens of a socio-historical context. They ask, "What was the Bible saying to the people of that time? And what is the Bible saying to us today?" Depending on how one interprets the Bible, one will answer these questions differently. Did the Bible stories actually happen? Or were they stories told in some cases from generation to generation for hundreds of years before they were written down? As we explore the Noah story, we are not spending time on the literal aspects of the story, but rather our focus will be, "What does this story teach us about God and ourselves?" Let's begin.

The story of a flood that covered the earth is not unique to the Bible. Different Middle East cultures have ancient tales of a flood that covered the earth, particularly in the Mesopotamia area. The most famous one is the story of Gilgamesh from the Sumerian culture. The gods were angry with the people. There were too many of them and they were too noisy so the gods decided to get rid of all humans with a flood. But one god, Ea, whispered this news to one human, Utnapishtim, and Ea told Utnapishtim to build a boat from his house. He did and put all the animals that he had on the boat. When the flood was over Utnapishtim became a god. This story is similar to the Noah story, but it is not the same. Some believe that the Noah story was written before the epic tale of Gilgamesh while others subscribe to Gilgamesh story being older than the Noah's. Others think that they both may have originated from yet another ancient flood story. No one knows for sure and that's not important. What is important is what the Noah story tells us about God and about humanity.

Verse 5 gives us a good clue. "The LORD saw that humanity had become thoroughly evil on the earth and that every idea their minds thought up was always completely evil." What kind of evil were these people doing to be thoroughly evil, that every idea in their minds was not just a little bit evil, but completely evil? Commentators have suggested open adultery, no respect for human life, slaughtering of humans, random killings, greed, grabbing what one could for one's self, not caring what happens to the other, and destroying their environment. Every idea, every thought was evil. It's not just their thoughts that were evil, but their actions as well. One theologian stated that sin is the result of fixing one's thoughts on oneself. Isn't this our story? How many of our thoughts revolve around "me?" "What can I accomplish? What can I acquire? A bigger house? A new car? A great vacation? What do people think about me? What do I have to do to get people to like me?" Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, states that focusing on 'me' is not our true selves. Our true selves reflect God because God put God's image in us which is about love and caring for another. That image helps us think this, "Your life is not about you; You are about Life." This means our thoughts and actions should be asking, "How can I make a difference in the world? How can I bless others with the blessings God has given me?" These are the thoughts and actions that God applauds. Those "me" thoughts lead to all the evil mentioned above.

Another clue about what this story tells us about God and humanity comes from verses 11 and 12. "In God's sight, the earth had become corrupt and was filled with violence. God saw that the earth was corrupt, because all creatures behaved corruptly on the earth." The word "corrupt" is used three times in these verses. The Hebrew word used for corrupt is also used for "ruin, decay, spoiled, injured, polluted, destroy." One could say that cancer is a type of corruption. God saw a corruption as cancer on the earth. It was just five chapters before Noah story in Genesis that God created the world and called it, "Good." When God created humans, God called this creation, "Very good." When creation was completed, God charged humans to be stewards of the earth. In the Noah story God did not see good stewardship, but saw humanity destroying each other and destroying God's earth. Isn't this our story? Talking about taking care of our God's earth, the environment is a

political hot potato, but this is not about politics. It is about God who created this earth to sustain us and calls us to take care of it. Little things like making fewer trips, turning off lights, and recycling assists in protecting God's creation. The Boy Scouts teach "Leave no trace" when they are camping. The scouts not only clean up after themselves, but they strive to leave the environment the way it looked before they arrived and sometimes even better. In Noah's story, God is disheartened by the thoughts and actions of the people, not angry like the gods of Gilgamesh. What does God think of how we are caring for planet earth today?

Verses 11 and 12 also speak of violence on the earth. And it began just two chapters before in Genesis with the first killing. Cain, jealous of his brother, Abel, kills him. For Cain life was all about him and not the other. What does violence look like? It is cruelty to other humans. It is oppressing people who are powerless and voiceless. It is the injustices served to the innocent. It is bullying both verbal teasing and physically harming. Isn't this our story? In the 20th century humans were the historically the most technological advanced and we yet we were killed more people than in the rest of history combined. So far in the 21st century we aren't proving ourselves to be much better with wars, kidnappings, school shootings, etc. How does God react to all of this? Verse 6 states, "The LORD regretted making human beings on the earth, and God was heartbroken." NRSV states that God grieved. Do you know what grief is like? It's like someone rips out your heart and stomps on it. God grieved and was sorry to have created us! Did God wonder what happened to the image of God that was placed in humans? Here lies another difference between the Noah and the Gilgamesh story. The gods of Gilgamesh just wanted to destroy. The God of Noah grieves. God feels responsible. Seven years ago, Terry Roberts shot Amish children in their school. Terry's mother grieves. She grieves for herself and for the families whose lives will never be the same. She doesn't understand why her son did this evil thing, yet she feels responsible. Through the forgiving spirit of the Amish, Terry has made friends with one Amish family whose daughter is now permanently disabled from the shooting. Terry goes every day to help with this girl's care. She can't erase the story, but she can help. God feels responsible. God is sorry to have created this mess. As a father have you ever been disappointed in your child when they do something awful. Bill Cosby had this line in a monologue, "I brought you into this world and I can take you out."

In verse 13, God promises to destroy the earth, to cast it aside. When there is rotten food in the refrigerator we throw it out. There is nothing redemptive in rotten food. God is passing judgment on the rotten earth. Methodists don't talk much about judgment. We want to believe in God's grace, love, and mercy. Even in this promise of destruction, however, God is redemptive. God is trying to figure out, "How can I make this right?" This is not a story about retributive judgment as much as it is a redemptive one. God searched and found one man, Noah, who was doing the opposite of everyone else. He tried to do the right things. He was caring, loving, sincere, trustworthy, a person of integrity. He was not perfect but he was faithful to God. He did his best to do good. He did his best to refrain from evil. And he did his best to walk humbly with God. These three are the three rules John Wesley expected the early Methodists to follow. 1) Do no harm, avoid evil of every kind, includes our thoughts and actions; Say no to evil. Whenever we say no to evil, we are saying, "Yes to God." Adam Hamilton, pastor of the Church of the Resurrection states that saying "no" to evil is an act of worship to God. 2) Do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, if every you can. Ask: "What is the loving, kind thing to do?" 3) Adopt practices that help you walk with God such as worship, talking with God, reading God's word, reading books that help you grow in your faith, prayer, stay connected with other Christians who are striving like you.

God walks with us and yearns to give direction, but we have to reach out to take God's hand. God is yearning for us to be blameless and righteous like Noah. God wants us to walk with God. So on this Father's Day, Dads hold the hands of your children. Model for them how to live a Christian life with these three rules. They are watching you even when you think they are not. Show them every day how blessed you are and how to be a blessing to others. Avoid evil. Do good. And show them how you love God.

Resources: *New Interpreter's Bible* Vol. 1; "Points of Similarities Between the Babylonian and Noachian Flood Stories" http://www.religioustolerance.org/noah_com.htm; Richard Rohr's April 23rd Meditation; "Mother of Amish School Shooter Shares Amazing Story of Forgiveness" By Jeff Glor, CBS NEWS, December 12, 2013; "There's Nothing Like the Leadership of a Dad," <http://www.rightnowmedia.org/fathers-day>; "Evil, Corruption, and the Grief of God" sermon by Adam Hamilton, May 4, 2014, www.cor.org

