



“Let’s Make A Deal”

Text: Genesis 9:8-17

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Once again, events in the past week have conspired to change the sermon I intended to preach today. I was going to have a little fun with the Noah story in order to unpack one of the most essential understandings in scripture: the concept of covenant. I’m still going to do some of that in a few minutes, but the events in Parkland, Florida, and the latest in the obscene series of school shootings demand our attention this morning.

And, oddly enough, the Noah story – the story assigned to this day by the lectionary – offers us insight. The Noah story, when heard in its entirety and fullness, gives us a reason for hope and offers us a pathway to life as God envisioned it for us all. However, there’s a word of warning: to gain the lesson intended, we have to hear the whole story.

That story is a violent story. While our passage from Genesis only gives us the end of the story, we have to truly hear the beginning of the story as well. It is an uncomfortable story. It challenges us to consider the very nature of God. It demands that we see a God who changes.

So, let’s get started.

How does the story of Noah begin? These are the words from Scripture:

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created – people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” - Genesis 6:5-7

Human wickedness and sinfulness had risen to such proportions that God regretted ever having created humankind. Miss this piece of the story and you've missed a lot.

God got angry and in God's anger, God became destructive. God decided to wash away the wickedness of the world with a flood. God was sickened by the corruption and violence of humankind and resolved to wipe us out.

That's how the story begins. It is a violent story. It is a story of untold pain. It is a story that speaks of mass genocide. It is a story that seems completely out of place in the Scriptures.

But here it is. And we know what happened. In that wonderful verse we read, "But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord." (Genesis 6:8) God could not carry through on complete destruction, but preserved a few to begin the world again. Noah, his wife, his sons and their wives, along with their floating zoo, passed through the waters - waters that would later be used to illustrate something of our baptism - and after forty days and forty nights - which ought to sound familiar to us in this season of Lent - the waters began to subside and their feet once again returned to dry ground.

But don't miss it or dismiss it. The story begins with God acting in violence toward the creation.

When the flood had subsided and the people and animals had disembarked Noah and his family built an altar to the Lord and offered sacrifices. Then, we are told, God said, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done." (Genesis 8:21b) And then we get to our passage for the morning:

"As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

We may never be able to understand, or reconcile, or explain why God resorted to the untold violence which begins the Noah story, but by the time we get to the end of the Noah story, God repents of the violence God had done and God swears that never again will that kind of violence be unleashed upon the earth and its people.

In evidence of that repentance and promise, God hangs God's bow in the sky. There are times when we don't hear that or see that for what it is. We like to think of the beauty of the rainbow and the colors. Even though we know the scientific principles of light refraction and how the colors can be remembered by the name "Roy G. Biv" - red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet - we are still totally captivated by the appearance of a rainbow. Just look at Facebook when a rainbow appears and your newsfeed will be flooded by pictures of the rainbow. (There was a terrible pun in there and I apologize.)

What we fail to remember, however, is that a bow was a weapon of war - as in bow and arrow. We see a colorful decoration. What we are supposed to see is a lethal weapon being hung in the clouds as a reminder to both God and humankind that God will never bring another flood to destroy the earth. To hear the power of it, imagine God hanging up an AR-15 in the clouds. God is done with violence. God is done with destruction. God is finished with rage, wrath, and fury. God has hung up his warring against humankind.

God enters into a covenant with humankind. The idea of "covenant" is central to our understanding of the Scriptures, of God, and of Jesus Christ. The Bible's idea of covenant is based on a practice in ancient times, where a ruler would enter into an agreement, a contract, a promise, with the ruler's people. People could not make covenants with the ruler, because they had no power or possessions that would entice the ruler into a covenant. The covenant was initiated and spelled out by the ruler.

Noah could not say to God, "Lord, we're going to make a covenant. We're going to be who we are and you are never going to destroy the earth again by a flood. Okay?" We don't make covenants with God. God makes covenants with us. We don't offer God terms of an agreement. God offers us terms of an agreement.

And that means God makes the first move toward us. God reaches out to us, even when God is under no obligation to do so. God takes the chance on us, even when we are a little timid to take a chance on ourselves and - sometimes - even willing to take a chance on God.

This idea of covenant is all through the Bible and all through our theology. And here is the covenant God makes with Noah - a covenant against violence, against destruction, against injustice. God hangs all of that up in the clouds, along with God's weapons of war.

And if God repents of violence, shouldn't we? If God repents of hostility, shouldn't God's people? If God hangs up God's weapons of destruction, shouldn't we? If God repents of destructive behavior, shouldn't we? If God mourns God's past violence, shouldn't we?

I wish I had an answer to the reason for the violence that has visited American schools 17 times already in 2018. I wish it were just about guns, but it's not. I wish it were just about mental illness, but it's not. I wish it were just about inert and cowardly politicians who are afraid to tackle tough issues, but it's not. I wish it were just about an apathetic public that gets worked up for a few days and then quiets back down, but it's not.

My fear is that it is something much more challenging. My anxiety is that what we are facing is quite ancient and deeply engrained in humanity. My nightmare is that it is as it once was: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." I am in dread that our problem of violence is to be found much deeper than the presenting issue. I fear the problem is that we are losing our heart, our compassion, our wisdom, and our humanity.

Like our God, let us put away our destructive nature. Like our God, let us repent of the wrong we have done. Like our God, let us hang up our weapons and be the people of peace that God calls us to be. Let us work together for the common good and let us see that all people receive the care and welcome that is due every person created in the image of God.

God has offered us the deal of a lifetime. God will never again practice violence against humankind. Let's make a deal. Let's offer each other a covenant of living in peace and love and mutual support. Let's offer each other the deal that we will put away violence and bloodshed. Let's make a deal. For now and evermore. Amen.



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