



## “The Power of a Promise”

Text: Genesis 6:5-22, 8:6-12, 9:8-17

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

**Sunday, September 9, 2018**

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

For many years, we have been following the Revised Common Lectionary - a prescribed set of readings for every Sunday that seeks to take us through the major passages and themes of the Scriptures over a three-year period. It has served us well, and we may return to it sometime in the future.

Today, we begin using a new lectionary. It is called the Narrative Lectionary, because it seeks to grapple with the major stories of the Scriptures. It challenges us to engage these ancient stories afresh and to do what God's people have always done: find that place where God's Word and our lives intersect and, in that process, to give ourselves more and more to the God who is, in one way or another, in each and every one of the stories.

During the fall and early winter season of each year, we find ourselves remembering Old Testament stories that may be familiar to us. As we approach Christmas and the spring season, the stories take us into the New Testament.

And in a special way, we want these stories to go home with you. There are children's activity bulletins that will help our younger members engage the story. "Living the Word" - which takes the place of "Journeys in Worship" - will help our youngest members unpack the story. And, most importantly, there is a take-home sheet for families with questions for each day of the week to help keep the story alive and allow the family to be what it was intended to be: the first community of God's people.

Tonight, our friends at Temple Adath B'nai Israel will begin the celebration of Rosh Hashanah - the new year. And it is, in every respect, a new year for us as well, here at First Presbyterian Church. So, let's get to it.

By now you know that the story at the center of our worship and attention is the story of Noah, the Ark, and the Flood. It is a story that, over the centuries, has become a bit domesticated. We have so broken the story's spirit, that we use Noah as a children's story, decorate Sunday School rooms with animals, and make children's nurseries into little Noadic temples, complete with night lights, bath toys, bumper pads, and comforters.

But it is not really a children's story.

The heart of the story begins with these words: "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence." (Gen. 6:11) What God had created and called "very good" was now corrupt - fraudulent - and far from what God intended it to be. Creation has become so unrecognizable to God that God decided to put an end to it. As Walter Bruggeman puts it, "the 'very good' of Genesis 1:31 has become "I will blot out."

The two words in Hebrew that are in play are *shichet*, which we translate "corrupt" and *chamas*, which we translate "violence" or "lawlessness." When the question of what was the corruption and lawlessness of the people of Noah's time, the Rabbis of old reasoned that the people of Noah's time had been blessed with "good time." They lived in a time of plenty. The weather was favorable for crops and bounteous harvests. No one lacked for anything.

So the people began to take the blessings of life for granted. Many stopped offering thanks to God. Many stopped worshipping God. The concerns and cares of their neighbors meant less and less to them. Suspicions rose among them and trust and mutual concern broke down. The people took advantage of one another, robbing one another, lying to one another, bribing judges, exploiting loopholes in the law, taking advantage of the poor, mistreating those they deemed different. That's what the ancient Rabbis taught.

The Noah story contains these words: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of their hearts was only evil continually." (Gen. 6:5) And here is the point: God didn't make the people wicked. God didn't make the people corrupt. God didn't make the people violent or lawless. We did that ourselves. We, the people of earth, the pinnacle of God's creation, abandoned God's way, walked away from gratitude to God, took from God without offering thanks, and lived for our own glory instead of loving God and neighbor.

In the 2007 film, *Evan Almighty*, - which would be a great family movie - it's on Netflix - Steve Carell plays a modern-day Noah. God shows up (in the person of Morgan Freeman) and gives the command to build an Ark. The rest goes along as you might expect. But the flood comes, because of the failure of a dam at a housing project, at which corners were cut and unscrupulous deals were made by corrupt politicians. The flood carries the Ark to Washington, DC, where it comes to rest on the steps of the Capitol.

The screen writers got it right. The truth is that all too often, as the saying goes, “we are punished not so much *for* our sins as *by* our sins.” The Flood is caused not so much by God as by the corruption of humankind leading to the corruption of the earth itself. Too often we quickly blame God when the blame really lives far closer to home.

God is not angry. The Bible doesn’t say that at all. It says, “And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.” (Gen. 6:6) God isn’t striking out in anger. God is brokenhearted over what God’s very good creation had become. God wasn’t seeking to destroy it all. In fact, there is evidence that God was hoping that humankind would change its way and return to the way of God.

In the tradition of Midrash, the rabbis told the story of what happened.

God said: “If Noah starts to work on the ark, people will gather around him and say to him, ‘What are you making?’ He will answer, ‘I am building an ark because God is about to bring a flood on the earth.’” God hoped that the ark would serve as a warning, but the people of Noah’s generation paid no attention to what Noah was building.<sup>1</sup>

Again, another story:

Noah planted cedars, and the people of his day asked him, “What are you planting cedars for?” He told them: “God is about to bring a flood and has commanded me to build an ark for me and my family to escape in.” When they heard his explanation, they all laughed and ridiculed him. Later, when he was cutting down the cedar trees and planing the wood, they asked, “What are you doing with that cedar wood?” At that point he warned them, again, about the Flood, but they paid no attention and refused to repent.<sup>2</sup>

It takes a long time to build an ark (even when you’re building it in Kentucky). It takes a long time for a cedar to grow from a sapling into a tree that can be used as lumber. The point is this: God gave the people of Noah’s day plenty of time to repent, to turn around their way of life, to return to God and the way of life God created humankind to live. But they continued in their corrupt and lawless way of life.

Still, God did not wreak the complete destruction of all living things. God preserved a remnant - a re-starter - for the renewal of the earth and its creatures and its people. God still believes that humankind is worth something. God still believes in us.

And God moves to act on our behalf. That’s what the word *remember* means, when we read: “But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark.” (Gen. 8:1) God hasn’t forgotten Noah or any of his family. God has not forgotten any of the animals in the floating zoo. God acts on their behalf.

And the first thing God does is to send a wind - a *ruach* - to dry up the waters and bring forth life. Just as the *ruach* hovered over the waters of creation, now the wind of God - or the Spirit of God - or the Breath of God - blows the waters away, until the earth is ready to be inhabited once more.

And then, in the highlight of the story, God makes a covenant with Noah, and his family, and with every living thing upon the earth. God makes an unequivocal promise never to destroy the earth with a flood again.

But - watch it - God doesn't make this promise because God thinks humanity has changed. It hasn't. God knows the truth of the matter: "[that] the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth." (Genesis 8:21) God knows that we will abandon God's way whenever it is absolutely convenient and whenever it brings us pleasure and comfort if only for a moment.

No. And here is the good news: God decides to make an everlasting commitment to this broken, corrupt, lawless, and violent world! God's mercy wins the day! God's grace flows in rivers of new life, forgiveness, and re-creation!

When the prophet Isaiah was speaking to the people of his day, who were not all that different from the people of Noah's day, Isaiah said:

This is like the days of Noah to me:

Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. For 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. (Isa. 54:9,10)

More steadfast than the mountains and hills is God's faithfulness and covenant love. God will be faithful, not because of anything that we do, but - as our Jewish friends will repeat again tonight as they begin their new year - because "God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." (Ex., 34:6)

Does God take sin and evil seriously? Absolutely. But from the time of the story of Noah to this very day, God has chosen other ways to address them. God calls a people as God's own. God sends prophets and priests, shepherds and vine-dressers, foreign armies and wise men and women, to proclaim God's judgment and God's loyalty, and to call the people back to God's way. And, in the fullness of time, God enters into the waters of a woman's womb, and into the waters of the Jordan, to show, once and for all, how passionately committed to God's creation God really is.

Will we sin? Yes. Will we be corrupt and violent and lawless? To be sure.

But, thanks be to God, "the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but God's steadfast love shall not depart from us, and God's covenant of peace and wholeness shall not be removed." That's the power of a promise. For now and evermore. Amen.

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1.) Fields, Harvey J. *A Torah Commentary for Our Times, volume 1.*, p. 32

2) IBID, p. 33