

FLOODY, FLOODY
GENESIS 6-9 (EXCERPTED)
18 FEBRUARY 2018

FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA

Our text today comes from Genesis 6:5-6, 7:11-12, 8:13, 9:8-17

6.5 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. ⁶And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

7.11 In the six-hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. ¹²The rain fell on the earth for forty days and forty nights.

8.13 In the six hundred and first year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying.

9.8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and 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. ¹¹I 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.' ¹²God 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: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I 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. ¹⁶When 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.' ¹⁷God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

On all of our church youth retreats growing up we would all stay up a good three-five hours past curfew doing one form or another of nothing. And every morning, about an hour too early our advisors would call us to attention with the same song, accompanied

by pots, pans, and the pleasure that comes from knowing you're aggravating the heck out of the teenagers who've spent the week aggravating the heck out of you.

"Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory," they sang and clapped, finishing on a long, drawn out "Children of the Lord!" If the rendition didn't do the trick they'd just repeat it on a loop till all of us were awake and complaining.

Not long ago I found myself humming "Rise and Shine" and remembered that I'd first heard it at Vacation Bible School while learning the story of Noah's Grand Ark. "*The Lord said to Noah, "there's gonna be a floody-floody, get those children [clap] out of the muddy, muddy, Children of the Lord!"*"

My recall was limited to the chorus and that first verse. Knowing I'd soon preach this text I decided to look up the song. And let me tell you, after the Lord tells Noah about that "floody-floody" things start to get weird. In verse three Noah builds the arky-arky out of hickory barky-barky (the first of a few scriptural inaccuracies), then goes on in verse four to welcome the animals by two-sies, two-sies (including, obviously, kangaroosies, roosies). Verses five and six cover the 40 days and the dried up land. And then, the great climax, in verse seven the sun comes up and, "Everything is hunky dory, dory, Children of the Lord!"

I can't help but be struck, reading this passage and recalling the ditty, by the curious place of "Noah's Ark" in the religious imagination. Rarely is this text preached. It's too difficult. But it is one of the first stories we teach our children. We tell them of the faithful old man who built himself a heck of a boat and filled it with all the animals of the world. He sailed and sailed until the sailing ended and a rainbow appeared in a clear blue sky. We leave out the troubling parts: man's evil, God's punishing sorrow, and a world underwater.

Confronted with the quandary that's how most religious folks deal with Genesis nine. Even here in the stained-glass story of Westminster's faith we skip from Adam and Eve to refracted light. In our telling Noah's is a story full of rainbows, never mind the rain.

Of course there's a second way to deal with the troubling aspects of the great flood, one of my favorite ways: talk your way out of it. Rationalize and contextualize: as a matter of fact, an epic flood wiped out the region and the ancients, unable to comprehend the totality of the devastation, attributed it to an angry God. Look no further than the *Epic*

of Gilgamesh or its many parallels, floods as a vehicle of divine wrath were a common trope in Ancient literature. A local problem with universal consequences.

Likewise we can recall the historical circumstances that led to the codification of Genesis 6-9: written during the Babylonian exile, the story reflects the anxieties of a people who wondered if the world was over, if they had been abandoned by God for their unfaithfulness during the time of the kings.

Ignore it or whitewash it. Both are reasonable responses. But this first Sunday of Lent we are faced with the bare realities of the text. We are asked to fight and grapple with the proclamation, to make sense of this holy story as we approach this season of penitence, reflection, and, despite it all, hope.

Over and over the authors of Genesis proclaim God's intimate concern with the goings on-of creation and warn of dire consequences for a creation hell bent on self-destruction. Never a dispassionate observer, God is moved by the evil in his once good creation, "[T]he Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on earth, and it grieved him to his heart."

Neither anger nor wrath: God looked on creation and was full of sorrow.

Now I know some of you might be getting nervous here. "Leigh!," you'll say, "you're anthropomorphizing God! God is immutable, never changing." Perhaps. But then there's this text. We can listen to the wisdom of pagan Greek philosophers from whom we inherited ideas about immutability, we can name God "the Unmoved Mover." Or we can read Genesis.

And this is what Genesis tells us: the God of creation will not stand aside as humanity seeks its own destruction. God is concerned—concerned with how humans are treating one another, concerned with our violences, concerned with our wickedness. God is concerned with the animals of the field, concerned with crops and the wild. And when we ignore God's concern, ignore God's creation, ignore God's people ... well, it matters.

The author of our text lays bare the reality of God's expectations and challenges our neutral sentimentality, our ignorance, and our expectations that God be to us nothing more than a static, unmoved object whose commandments we can reasonably ignore or an almighty companion who dolls out favors to the faithful.

As the author of Genesis tells it, God's desire for good in creation was so profound that God *chose* to bring evil to its end rather than allow creation to destroy itself. Terrible though it seems, the choice was just. Seeing humankind and comprehending the depth of darkness to which we are bound, God held creation accountable, a strange mercy for a world gone sideways.

So we begin Lent quaking in our boots. As we should. *But.*

The story doesn't start with the rainbow. But it doesn't end with the flood. After forty long days Noah and his family disembark on the dry mountain. I can only imagine what they must have felt: joy, sorrow, relief. Fear perhaps. Before they get a chance to tell us God, moved by the sorrow that surrounds him, chimes in.

Mark it, because this is the divine change that really counts. The world needed re-creation. Noah and the family, kangaroosies included, needed ground upon which they could thrive, a future for whatever society would come. So God makes Noah a promise—well, a *covenant*. The language of covenants is mostly foreign to us but in the Ancient Near East the covenant was a foundational element of civic life, a contract meant to clarify complex legal situations. The contract stipulated how two parties were to relate to one another, what strictures were placed on the relationship, and what punishments would be offered for failure to meet legal obligations.

Given what's gone before we might expect God to promise to Noah that if he behaved, did his Torah portion, cleaned up his room, didn't murder his neighbor or cheat on his wife, God would refrain from destruction. And if Noah failed, well — Floody-floody 2.0 was always an option. But as always, our expectations fall short when confronted with the living God. Where we expect limitations, God grants freedom, offering an comprehensive one-sided promise: *never again*.

That is our Lenten hope.

There are no obligations placed on Noah and his descendants. God requires nothing of the new creation. In fact, Noah says nothing. The covenant is a one-sided promise encompassing all of creation: *I will not destroy, not ever again*. Not humans, not the earth, not animals.

As a sign of the promise God offers the bow. The Hebrew word takes its primary meaning as a bow of war, the bow and arrow. Only here in all of Hebrew scripture does

“bow” take the meaning of refracted light, brilliant, hope-filled color. God sets aside the weapon of war, and hangs, undrawn, a bow of light whose presence transforms the clouded sky. The rainbow serves as a reminder: in the darkness of evil, God will not destroy. Chaos will never have the final say.

Never again will he draw the bow, never again will he pierce the sky. God, unchanging in his will for the good, by limiting himself ensures creation will have the space to thrive, which also means creation will again have the space to fall.

Because here’s the truth of it: God knows that humanity won’t change, that he will once again be aggrieved by creation.

God knows that a people hell bent on destruction will eventually find a way. God knows that humanity, intended to be “very good,” will time and again refuse its goodness. Look no further than Stoneman Douglas High School to see the desire of one man’s heart for evil, look no further than the responding apathy of inertia in our world-weary hearts. Even before Wednesday it wouldn’t take much hunting to see that the world has once again turned from God’s goodness. Given freedom, room to live and thrive, we nevertheless ignore the rainbow, choosing for our own lives the bow of destruction.

But God remembers. God, who after the flood chose vulnerability, abides still with creation. And that matters—because without God’s choosing to abide, to remain with and for creation despite our failures, there would be no incarnation.

Trace the rainbow that leads to the cross. The animating principle of creation, the Word condescended to humanity, made flesh for us and for our salvation, was crucified, dead, and buried *precisely because* God chose vulnerability over power . In relinquishing the bow God makes possible the cross. The cross, wherein the Son takes our failures as his own. The cross and the empty tomb that follows.

God demanded nothing of creation in his covenant with Noah, nothing of the kangaroos, roosies, nothing of the sons of Noah, nothing of us. God gave us life and opened himself up to death. But if we’re paying attention God’s change should inspire our own.

The Eternally Moved Mover pushes us forward, away from complacency and apathy and toward the the Kingdom. In the empty tomb the deed is done (*that* is the rainbow’s end), the powers of evil are defeated, chaos is tamed. It is our task to live into new creation. That is the yoke of discipleship. This Lenten season we are called to relinquish power for

solidarity, trade in violence for vulnerability, transform sloganeering to kingdom-seeking living.

Remember: God will not destroy, God will not allow our destruction. God will seek the good. God will transform. Will you? Will you embrace the vulnerability of openness, the danger of discipleship, the pathway that is both rainbow and cross? Will you allow the world to break your heart and do the work of repair? God gives us room to live, it's time we make good on the promise.

Lest I sound too sentimental it's worth remembering, no matter how trite, that the rainbow doesn't come without the rain. Everything is decidedly not hunky dory. God has given creation its freedom, which often means failure. The covenant, the rainbow, is a promise that God remains, that God continues to work in our lives and our world. And what God wills *will* come to pass.

So rise and shine ... and get to work. Until that unclouded day, the final defeat of chaos, when the yes of God resounds in our ears and across our world and our voices are always amen and hallelujah. Until we set aside our bows, our selfishness, our ambivalence, our anger and jealousy. Until the rain stops and we see one another in the multi-hued light for who we are and whose we are, loving and beloved, claimed all under the wide ark of the covenant, the bow of promise. Until we live into a world already good and very good. *Amen.*

—Leigh Stuckey