

## Noah

For all the children's nurseries decorated with Noah's ark and all the animals, this is actually a pretty disturbing story. But what it says about God is super important...and also not what you might think. There are a couple of unhelpful tracks people take when they read this story so let's get those out of the way first.

The first is the argument over whether this describes an actual event. People get focused on that. Some decide it has to be factual description of events. They look for signs of ancient floods and try to find the ark on Mt. Ararat.

They take God's instructions and build a replica like the one in Kentucky – which by all accounts is pretty cool, whatever you believe.

Others say there's no way it could be an actual historical event – and then throw the whole thing away as irrelevant. Both miss the actual point, which is much more profound.

The second unhelpful understanding is to view this as a story about God's anger and desire to punish. But in reality, this story twists that on its head. That's what we'll spend most of our time talking about this morning.

This story begins another year in our narrative lectionary cycle – the readings assigned from September through Pentecost in late May or early June. It's a four-year cycle, each year corresponding to one of the four gospels. This year the gospel is Matthew.

Of the four gospels, Matthew is the one most focused on the continuity between Israel's history as laid out in the Old Testament and the mission and work of Jesus and the church as seen in the New.

As we go through these ancient stories, we'll try to see where the story points to Jesus...and to us.

The other three years in the cycle begin with one or the other of the creation stories. One includes the story of Adam and Eve's rebellion against God when they give in to temptation in the garden. Those early stories – creation by God and rebellion against God – shape the whole rest of the biblical story.

Once humans decided to rebel against their creator, a fracture in the divine force keeping chaos at bay developed and chaos and violence leaked back in. Adam and Eve's first child Cain killed his brother Abel. Violence has been a thorn in God's side...and creation's side... from the

second generation of humanity on. Once humanity's propensity for wanting to be their own gods set in, that was the inevitable pathway.

From Cain and Abel, it goes downhill. That violence has tainted and corrupted all creation. Even if you are unconvinced these ancient stories represent anything that actually happened, we dismiss them at our risk.

We know from looking around us even today how true they really are. They are like a mirror that show us a world...our world... that is run by people who are still in rebellion against the God who created them to live in peace and harmony with all of creation. We know this especially today as we mark the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of 9/11 and the start of a long ill-fated war.

In the Noah story, God decides things are so bad, something needs to be done. God is angry. But if we just leave that as the sum of God's response, we are missing something huge. Look at verse 6 there in the first section: "6And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." The primary crisis is not God's anger but God's grief.

God might be angry.... but that anger arises out of grief...out of heartbreak. If a child does something really bad and gets in big trouble, anger might be a bit of what a parent feels. But it will be a small part. Heartbreak...grief...an all-encompassing sense of shattered dreams...that's what a parent feels. That's what God feels here.

God had such high hopes for these creatures fashioned in God's own image. God dreamed of a people who would rule over the rest of creation with care and love.

But they have utterly failed. Like a potter smashing a lump of clay that refuses to take shape, God decides to blot it all out and start over.

But before you decide this is just a story about that angry, vengeful, Old Testament God, watch what happens to God over the course of the rest of the story.

First, God does find a way for creation to go on. He finds one man who just might be good enough to get creation started again.

Noah is a contrast to the rest of the world at the time. Noah is faithful. Noah has potential to be a new Adam...a new human. Noah and his family can be the ones through whom God will bring into being a whole new creation. And this time maybe they'll get it right.

But somewhere along the line, God realizes they never will. In a poignant line left out of what we read, we hear this: "the LORD said in his heart, I will never again curse the ground because of humans, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth;"

God knows that humans are never going to get it right on their own. The flood doesn't solve the problem. Hope for a harmonious creation through people is still out of reach. Hope will not reside in the actions of people but on the actions of God.

What changed in this story is not humanity...but God. God changed. This story represents God's recognition that the grand vision for creation will be repeatedly thwarted by human evil, and most importantly of all God's commitment to stick with it anyway.

God takes a weapon for conquest...the bow...and places it in the sky. God has willingly and unilaterally disarmed. God makes a promise...an unconditional one...that never again will God give up on creation and humanity. Never again will God try to wipe it all out.

The change in God's heart changes everything for us. It means God is committed to us...with us...and for us, not against us. Even when God stands in judgment.

So how does the story point forward to the gospel?

It tells us that trusting and obeying God will not come by God's force...instead it comes by the anguish and heartbreak of a God who enters in to the pain of the world. Ultimately, God will come in the flesh as that new human...the one who truly will start a new creation...Jesus Christ.

What does that mean for us? It means that God knows that we will fail to be the people God created us to be. But it also means that God has given us a way to become new creation...to start again...over and over and over again.

God has formed the church to be the body of Christ on earth...to tell stories like this that reveal God's judgment...but that also give us a way out of the chaos sin causes... a way through the waters of death and destruction.

We live in a time when it's not hard to imagine God again being heartbroken over the state of creation...war...floods and droughts impacted by human exploitation of the environment...vicious verbal attacks between neighbors...violence that is often shockingly random.

But still, God calls us into the ark...the ark that is the body of Christ. That ark built for us by Christ's body and blood is still God's way of making us into a new humanity...a new humanity that will stand in place of the old, judged humanity...a new humanity, ready to start again...as many times as it takes until God's work is complete.

