

First Friends Church

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Hostility Transformed To Promise

Genesis 9:8-17

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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, ¹⁰ 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.^[a] ¹¹ 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.” ¹² 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: ¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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.” ¹⁷ 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.”

Hostility Transformed To Promise

I have always enjoyed the story of Noah's Ark. Exactly why I'm not sure, perhaps it's because as a children's story you hear about Noah, a man who listens to God and trusting that he is doing what God wants him to do willing builds an ark (a boat the size of 1 ½ football fields) and by doing so will save his family and all the living creatures of the world. In my Noah's Ark collection I have a folk-art picture that makes me feel good and reassured, the picture is of the animals coming on board the ark and written above

and below the picture are just six words two-by two, heart by heart. We find a whole slew of images of Noah's ark and the animals available in children's toys, puzzles, material and even on wallpaper borders. While I don't really like that the mosquitoes came on board, most of the animals in the Noah story have proved irresistible to people over the years.

The story of Noah and the flood is one of those biblical narratives that we are so familiar with we think we know the whole story.

In fact, what we tend to think of as the story is one of two commonly held interpretations. The most common interpretation is very much a children's story of animals and rainbows. This is a story about God's love for animals, about remembering God's love each time we see a rainbow, even about the bright side of every storm. The second is a story that is most definitely not for children. In this interpretation, God is so angered and upset by the wickedness of humanity that God floods the whole earth, wiping out nearly everything in a fit of anguish and despair.

Neither of these stories is the whole story, of course, and neither contains much truth. A truer story is that God has a myriad of ways of calling us back to the harmony and love that God intended for us.

Many cultures in the ancient Middle East had some sort of flood story. Some scholars speculate that a catastrophic flood centuries earlier provided the raw material for such legends, and it's safe to say that people of ancient Israel were familiar with more than one version of the story. These flood tales are frequently linked by common elements that parallel the Biblical account including the warning of the coming flood, the construction of a boat in advance, the storage of animals, the inclusion of family, and the release of birds to determine if the water level had subsided. The overwhelming consistency among flood legends found in distant parts of the globe indicates they were derived from the same origin, but oral testimony has changed the details through time.

When we look at the stories in the book of Genesis we often encounter conflicting accounts or our scientific or historical knowledge begs us to evaluate and figure out the

HOW of many of these events. But sometimes the HOW is not as important as the WHY. Maybe we could learn more about the nature of God and about God's relationship to creation, and especially God's relationship to human kind (that would be all of us). Sometimes we forget the purpose of these stories and are dismissive of their importance when we imagine them to be just primitive, ancient tales.

The Noah story begins some three chapters prior to our reading, with this comment. ***Yahweh 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 Yahweh was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.*** Or perhaps, it grieved her to her heart. Men wrote down the stories after all.

A heartbroken God may seem strange to us, but the Hebrew Bible has no problem portraying a God emotionally impacted by humanity. And so the flood story begins. You've heard it. A great ark is constructed and animals of every sort are brought on board. Subterranean springs burst forth and rain falls for forty days and nights. Creation returns to its pre-creation chaos where the Spirit of God moved over the waters. But finally, after months, ***God remembered Noah***, and the waters begin to subside. Now, as the story is often understood, creation and humanity can start fresh.

And yet, when Noah first comes off the ark, builds an altar, and makes an offering, God says to Godself, ***"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."***

Did you hear that? The very reason given for the flood, the evil inclination of human hearts, not only still exists, but it is now cited as the reason God will not destroy. The flood itself seems to have changed nothing about humanity or creation. If anything has changed, it is God's heart. The story began with a God described as hostile toward wayward and wicked humanity, but it ends with hostility transformed into promise. Divine speech shifts from talk of judgment for sin to promise, to gospel, the good news of perpetual commitment.

If we are made in the image of God, and God can transform hostility and anger into grace and peace. Then doesn't it stand to reason that we can change and transform as well?

God makes a covenant with Noah, with his descendants, and with **all** the creatures of the earth. The destruction from the flood, of course, is not total. God doesn't wipe away the creation entirely and then walk away. The flood is in fact the means of re-creation. God washes the earth clean and both God and the earth begin again. Thus all of creation is given a new beginning, a new opportunity to live in the harmony that God intended. However, this new beginning is also a continuation; God does not create new beings, but begins anew with a remnant of the beings created at the beginning.

What's important about this covenant, the sealing of the newly-restored relationship between God and God's creatures is that this is entirely God's doing. God enters into an eternal covenant with all creation without requiring anything in return. God does so fully aware that "the inclination of the human heart is evil ..." still. The flood has not cleansed the human heart of sin. But God knows this, and God enters into covenant with us anyway. Perhaps the divine heart that was so aggrieved by human wickedness that caused God to send a flood is now moved by that same grief to seek another way to get through to us. So God promises to Noah and to his descendants, and to every creature on the earth, never again to destroy all creation with a flood.

This suggests that because of this promise God will try everything else. God will seek us and seek us, despite or perhaps because of God's knowledge of every sin, every grief, and every shame that veils our vision of God's reality and of our own as God's creatures. Whatever dwells in our hearts that keeps us from hearing the harmony of all life in God's care, God will not give up on loving us into restoration.

Ancient Israel is hardly alone in worrying that God had finally had enough and is done with them. Most of us have experiences of life descending into chaos. You only have to turn on the news or pick up a paper to find out what the latest example of chaos

looks like. Often such moments are accompanied by crises of faith, doubts about God. Who has not at some point feared that God has forgotten them, or its modern day equivalent, that God simply doesn't exist?

But the Noah story speaks a powerful word of gospel to people caught up in chaos of theirs or another's making. God will not forget. No matter how pained God's heart is over the state of creation or humanity, God will not walk away. God is fully and totally committed to humanity, to Creation. And to prove it, God gives a sign. God hangs up God's bow.

All those rainbows painted on nursery walls may obscure the fact that this bow is a weapon of war, a weapon that God now retires. Even more remarkable, God says of this bow, ***"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."*** The story speaks of the rainbow as a sign, a reminder, for God. The string tied around the divine's finger is a multi colored bow as a way of describing the depth of God's commitment to creation.

I think that science sometimes robs us of appreciating God's revelation through creation. It's like a chemist doing an analysis of the chemical elements in a piece of strawberry pie. I suppose there is a place for that, but the main thing with strawberry pie is, "Taste It!" You can explain a rainbow as a refraction of light, but the main thing is, enjoy its beauty and remember the meaning God assigns it, that God is faithful to God's promises on our behalf!

In the scripture from Genesis, it is simply the word "bow." In Hebrew, this word is also used of a weapon, like a crossbow. With this lethal weapon one can eliminate their enemy. One commentator notes, "The OT itself describes Yahweh as a warrior (Exod. 15:3) who vanquishes his opponents with a bow and a quiver full of arrows (Hab. 3:9)." I don't think this is the first rainbow ever in the world. I think what God is doing is put a new meaning into what a rainbow means. So the next time it rains and then when the sun comes out, sometimes you might see a rainbow, maybe even a double rainbow!

Let it remind you that God has hung up the bow. It's like God's saying, "I'm sorry that I made humankind, you have grieved me to the center of my heart. I am saddened over the corruption of my creation, the evil inclination your hearts is not following after my heart. God then sends the flood, not as an act of revenge, but out of grief over the breaking of right human relationship with God. But, I'm also grieved over what I have lost. I love you and I love my creation. Therefore, now I'm hanging up my bow, and I'm going to bless you, and you're going to live even if you dishonor me, and I'm not at war with you today or ever again. The symbol of combat and hostility is now a picture of grace, love and peace.

Important note to remember, this is also a picture of life. We should also pay attention to what God does not say. God does not say, "I will never send a storm again." " God never promised that life will be free of storms, trials, troubles and difficulties. Most rainbows appear only after the storm has come and gone. If there were no storms, there would be very few rainbows. The rainbows come after the rain, not before. Weeping endures for a night, but joy comes in the morning. (Psalm 30:5)

There will still be many storms along the way, tears aplenty, and much sadness. And if we look up, we will see God's rainbows, the signs and tokens of his love, here and there along the way, reminding us that the storms of life do not mean that things are out of control. God will always keep the promises that are made. God's promises are like the stars, the darker the night, the brighter they shine.