

Text: Genesis 6-9

Title: "Starting Over Again"

(Ninth in a series of sermons in Genesis 1-11: "The Story That Makes Sense of Our Stories")

We are talking about a lot of water!

We are talking about a lot of chaos! Can you imagine the conditions in that ark? on that cruise ship?

And we are talking about a lot of trust! Ever since I learned the story as a little boy, Noah has been for me the model of what it means to "walk with God" (6:9). He is out in a desert, kilometers from any lake or sea that could float the ship he built. No cloud in the sky; at least none portending a deluge of the magnitude the story describes. Believing a word spoken by a God he does not see. Trusting in a word when nothing in his environment supports it and no one else in his culture believes it.

Rightly does the author of the New Testament we call "Hebrews" lift up Noah as a "hero" of faith. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (11:1). Twice in the story...the author of Genesis says, "Thus Noah did: according to all that God commanded him, so he did: (6:22, 7:5)." Oh to have such faith!!

What has long fascinated me is the fact that this is not the only story of a great flood. Many other cultures in many other places on the globe have preserved stories very much like what we have in Genesis 6-9. Francis Schaeffer: "It is interesting that among the common myths in the world's history, no other myth is as widespread as the story of the flood." (Genesis in Space and Time, 130). All over the Middle East, throughout China, among the Native Peoples of the Americas, we find stories of a great flood.

Archaeologists, for instance, have found in the ruins of the Ancient Babylonian Empire, stories of a flood that follows the same pattern of the story in Genesis 6-9.

Creation comes into being.

Humans rebel against the gods in some way.

A huge flood comes.

And creation begins anew.

You have likely heard of the "Epic of Gilgamesh", a Babylonian story told (likely, 1700 years before the birth of Jesus) by a sage (one Ut-Napeshtim) to Gilgamesh, a King on a quest for immortality. According to this story, humanity is getting too noisy, making it hard for the gods to sleep. One god secretly warns his favorite human to build a boat to save his family. He does what he was told to do. The flood comes. After the waters recede he offers a sacrifice. According to the Epic, "gods gather like flies" around the sweet sacrifice, and then bestow immortality on the one human.

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many people assumed that what we have in Genesis is a copy or an adaptation of that Epic. But few would so argue today. For the simple reason that archaeologists have found other, different flood stories in other places than ancient Babylonia. Among the ruins of the Sumerian Empire (2000BC), for instance, there was a list of Kings, divided between quote, "Kings before the flood" and "Kings after the flood." (Also, "Epic of Atrakhasis", c1700BC in Semitic Old Babylonian).

The ancient Near East, ancient Mesopotamia had not one but many flood stories. And although the stories share much in common, the Genesis story tells a different story. In the others the gods are offended by the noise humans are making. In the Genesis story, God grieves over the corruption of sin and the overstepping of boundaries. In the other, one human is warned secretly. In Genesis, God warns everyone...through the preaching of Noah (2Peter 2:5). In the other a human pilots the boat. In Genesis, Noah has to wait on God. In the others, the humans leave the boat at will. In Genesis, Noah leaves at the command of God. And in Genesis, God makes a promise, a covenant that affects the whole universe and all living creatures.

The fact that there are many flood stories, reinforces a pre-supposition with which I work and live. A pre-supposition which I learned while serving in the Philippines from 1985 to 1989. The pre-supposition is that all cultures –ancient and modern- have myths that are in touch with truth. Their myths, though distorting the truth, in <sup>1</sup>some cases grossly so, are rooted in truth. Part of the work of evangelism is getting in touch with the truth at the root of the myth, and showing how the Gospel speaks to it.

The fact that cultures from around the globe have flood stories, says to me that something significant really happened. Something universal. This is why the Apostle Peter can say in his 2<sup>nd</sup> letter “by the word of God, the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water through which the world at that time was destroyed being flooded with water.” Something happened that was truly cataclysmic. You scientists among us can tell us that 65 million years ago one half to three quarters of all living species disappeared. Why? Something happened. To which Genesis 6-9 points us.

The story reveals a wide range of the attributes and character of the Creator. The Creator is the Judge: He does not tolerate for long the corruption and ruin of His world. The Creator is sovereign: His plans for His world will not be thwarted...even if He has to start over. The Creator cares: indeed, the Creator suffers in His caring. God feels sorrow that He made a creation able to ruin His world (6:6). The Creator teaches. He instructs Noah in the details of ark-building (6:7). The Creator smells the pleasing odor of the sacrifice (8:21). The Creator is “grieved” (6:6). The verb ‘grieved’ conveys a mixture of anger and anguish. Much like what we see in Jesus at the grave of Lazarus; John tells us that Jesus “snorted in spirit” (11:33) weeping in indignation at the reality of death. The Creator is gracious and He spares Noah and his family. And the Creator remembers. God remembers Noah (8:1) and God remembered His covenant (9:16).

I want to ask three questions of the Flood story. They are Why? What? and Now What? Why did it happen? What happened, what is the nature of the flood? And now what? What does it mean for us now? This story is referred to by a number of New Testament authors. You might be surprised that Jesus refers to it quite a bit. How does this part of the story that makes sense of our stories make sense of our stories? So why the flood? What is the flood and now what?

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Why the flood? For two reasons.

The first is the sin of humanity. Over the past Sundays, we have seen how the author of Genesis 1-11 develops this avalanche of sin. And how grace outruns sin. We notice this avalanche that is getting worse and worse. Until God chooses to no longer tolerate it.

Genesis 6:4 - "Then the Lord saw..." The first time in Genesis 1-11 we heard the words "the Lord saw..." was in Genesis 1, when God finished making His good world. "And God saw all that He had made...and look! It was very good" (1:31). But the avalanche continued downward, "the Lord saw..." and it was not good. Genesis 6:5 - "...the Lord saw that the wickedness of humans was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of their heart was only evil continually." Awful. Every. Only. Continually.

It is the texts like these that have lead the church to the doctrine of "total depravity". I know I am raising something very offensive in our time. "Every, only, continually". Totally depraved. The doctrine does not say that we are no good at all. Rather it says that every part of us has been affected by sin. Our minds, our emotions, our wills are all affected by sin in one way or another.

Which is why we are saying that our ethics can never be built on the way things are. Saying this is the way I am proves nothing because the way I am is not the way I am supposed to be. "What is" is not what is supposed to be. And this is why we need a new heart. Psalm 51 - "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me...Create in me a clean heart, O God..." (51:5,10). [Create - *Bara!*] Take careful note of the word "corrupt" in 6:11 and 12. "...the earth was corrupt in the sight of God..." "God looked on the earth, and look, it was corrupt for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth". The word can also be translated "destroyed" "The earth was destroyed"...before the Flood!!! The point being what God chooses to destroy (6:13) had already destroyed itself (D. Kidner, "Genesis", 87). This is crucial to grasp about the Living God: judgment is God giving humanity the final form of our chosen self-destruction.

The second reason for the flood: the crossing of boundaries. Genesis 6, verse 2 - "...the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful (lit. "good"), and they took wives for themselves". "Saw...good...took." Where have we seen and heard those words before? "Saw...good...took." In the story of the fall of humanity. Genesis 3, verse 5 - and Eve "saw that the tree was good...and took from its fruit and ate". The fall took place because humans crossed a boundary: "Saw, good, took." The avalanche of sin leads to another cross of a boundary: "the sons of God SAW that the daughters of human were GOOD and they TOOK them as wives they had intercourse with them." The question is, WHO are these "sons of God"? Some say they are the men of the godly line of Seth described in Genesis 5. Some say they are kings or rulers who exert their dominance over women (maybe, see Psalm 82; 2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2). Some say they are non-human, god-like beings; they are angels, some who, like the angel who became the devil, rebel against God and God's order in the universe. I take that interpretation. In Job we hear of "the sons of God" coming to meet in a heavenly court. One of them is "the Satan", the serpent of old (Job 1:6; Psalm 29:1). The apostle Jude speaks of angels "leaving their proper dwelling." (Jude 6,7) You see then what is going on in the Genesis

story? There has been an horrific violation of the created order. There has been a destructive over-stepping of boundaries. In Genesis 1, we heard the refrain “after its kind” (1:11-12, 21, 24-25). Everything is created to reproduce “after its kind”. The angelic beings are going against the will of the Creator. They are blurring the life between heavenly and earthly. They are breaching a God-given boundary.

The result of this horrible cosmic rebellion is the emergence of a creature that was never to exist, the so-called “Nephilim”. Creatures mere humans cannot control. (Israel would face them many times). David Atkinson: the over-stepping of God-given limits “produce giants that humans can no longer handle. It sets free powers which should have no place in this world.” (131)

The “sons of god” taking “daughters of man” is the culmination of a chain of “over-stepping” of boundaries. Eve and Adam in the Garden take the fruit of the forbidden tree; Cain kills Abel; Lamech takes two wives; and celebrates vengeance.

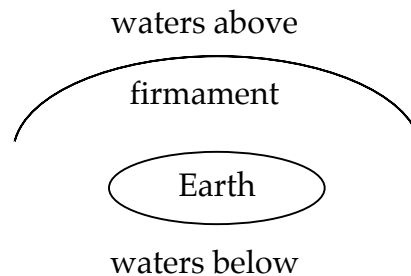
“And God was sorry” says the text, understandably so. Genesis 6:7 “And the Lord was sorry that He had made humans on the earth, and He was grieved to His heart.”

“But”...We will meet that little word again and again in the Bible! “But”. BUT Noah...Genesis 6:8 “But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.” Why Noah? Grace. The author is careful to keep things in order. 6:8 – “Noah found favour”. Then 6:9 – “Noah walked with God.” The author is emphasizing the fact that Noah finds FAVOUR with God BEFORE he walks with God. Grace enables him to walk with God. OT scholar J.A. Moytes suggests that we read Genesis 6:8 backwards. 6:8 – “Noah found favour,” “Noah found grace.” Read it backward, “Grace found Noah.” Grace enabled Noah to walk with God, and live in intimacy with God. Grace enabled Noah to believe the strange words: build a boat in the desert with no clouds in the sky! Grace enabled Noah to throw himself on a Word his contemporaries judged to be absurd.

Thus, the second question, What is this flood? Lots of water, that is clear! But what is the text wants us to know? “Blot out”. The NIV has “wipe from”. “Blot out” is better. (It is repeated three times in the story.) 6:7 – “I will blot out humans whom I have created...”; 7:4 – “I will blot out every living thing that I have made...”; 7:23 – “Thus He blotted out” God is starting over. The verb is used in Psalm 51 – “Blot out my transgression” (v.1), “blot out all my iniquities.” (v.9) It is a cry for cleansing, so we can make a clean start. “I will blot out.” I will cleanse my creation and start anew.

How? By removing a protective barrier. Look at Genesis 7:11, “...on that same day, all the springs of the great deep burst forth, all the floodgates of the heavens were opened.” “Deep”, “heavens”, “opened”. And look at Gen 8:2, after the flood subsided, we read, “...the springs of the deep and the floodgate of the heavens were closed.” “Deep”, “heavens”, “closed”. What is going on? Humans had made anti-creation choices...and now gets anti-creation. David Wenham: “In releasing the water pent-up below and above the earth, God is undoing his great acts of separation whereby the dry land was created and the waters were confined to the seas (Gen 1:9). The earth is going back to Gen 1:2, when waters covered its face.” (181). Boundaries were broken by humans and angels. Judgment comes in, boundaries being removed. It is aw-full.

The Hebrew word for “flood “ is “mabbul”. It is a technical term for a part of the structure of the universe; it refers to the heavenly waters:



In the Hebrew thought there were waters both below the earth and waters above the heavens. The firmament spoken into being in Genesis 1 – “the heavens” – separates these waters – the waters above from the water below. The flood involves the removal of the separating barriers. The flood is, in the words of Gerhard von Rad, “a catastrophe involving the entire cosmos.” (Genesis, 124) The boundary is removed. And the waters break loose. Creation is allowed to “sink into chaos”. Humanity is given the full implications of our desire for no boundaries. You want no boundaries then you will have none.

You may have seen the cartoon in Mondays’ Vancouver Sun. A man is kneeling by his bed to pray. He wants to make it quick. So prays, “Just give me what I deserve.” In the flood humanity is getting what we deserve: the full implication of our desire for no boundaries. Aw-full.

Thus, the third question: Now what?

Grace! That is what, grace! Unexpected. Undeserved. Unmerited. Grace! In spite of nothing changing in the human heart! Before the flood, God said that “the wickedness of humans was great, and that every intent of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.” (Genesis 6:5)

After the flood subsides, Genesis 8:21 – “I will never again curse the ground on account of humans, for the intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” Grace! Nothing changed. God restores creation even though nothing in us has changed. God puts the boundary back in place. Simply by grace.

Genesis 8:1 – “God remembered Noah”. The verb carries with it the sense of “remember to save”. “God remembers Noah to save Noah”. God is not going to give up on humans!

8:1 – “God caused a wind to pass over the earth, and the water subsided”. As God did “in the beginning”, when the Spirit, the wind, hovered over the surface of the deep. And as God did at the Red Sea, allowing His people to escape captivity (Exodus 14), God begins again!

8:17 – “be fruitful and multiply”. 9:1 – “God blessed Noah and said, “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” God renews the original creative blessing. Grace!

And God makes a covenant! Grace upon grace. An unconditional covenant. No “I will do this for you if you do this for me”. Just, “I... I will.” No expectation placed on humanity, a purely unilateral covenant. Which is the point of “... the intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (8:21). The covenant God makes is not determined by anything in us; it is not bound to anything we do. It is all by grace.

Genesis 9:9, “Now behold”. This is literally how the verse begins, too flatly rendered as “now”. “Behold is a command. It is the imperative form of the verb “to see”. “Behold! Look!” And in the Bible, the command “behold” usually introduces a surprise, an unexpected turn of events. As Jesus dies on the cross, Matthew says, “Behold! Look! The curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and the earth shook, and the rocks split, and the graves were opened.” All unexpected. All a surprise.

Genesis 9:9, “Now behold, I Myself do establish my covenant.” In the face of human sin – for Noah too is a sinner – God makes a covenant, an agreement, a binding agreement.

Genesis 9:9, “Now behold, I Myself do establish my covenant with you” – Noah and with your descendents after you – us! and with every living creature”. “With all flesh” as God adds in 9:11. “... for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in joy as in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live”. God makes a covenant with us! While we were still sinners! Grace!

Take note of the content of the covenant. God promises to keep the earth turning, so to speak. 8:22, “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and hot, and summer and winter, and day and night, shall not cease”. That is why it is appropriate that every morning we begin the day with “thank you”. “Thank you dear God... You are keeping your covenant”.

In this covenant, God affirms the dignity of human life... and sets up systems of protection. Though fallen, humans still bear the image of God – 9:6. And God protects that dignity by giving governments the authority to check human violence by the threat of consequences for violence – 9:6.

And the heart of the covenant. 9:11 – “All flesh shall never again be cut off by the waters of the flood, never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.” Pure grace. God will keep the boundaries intact! “Never again”. “Never again”. Yes, as the story unfolds... as the great story unfolds... we realize that there is another cleansing to come... when Jesus brings in His new heavens and new earth. But never again will God let the earth be destroyed by flood. There are times when it seems otherwise! When massive typhoons and hurricanes whip through parts of the earth, dumping torrents of water. It can feel like the boundary has been removed. But never again. “Never again” shall life be blotted out by the removal of the protective barrier.

“And this the sign...” Genesis 9:12 – “And this is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you.” “I will set my bow in the clouds”. In the Old Testament, the word “bow” almost always refers to a “bow of war”. “I have set my bow in the clouds”... in the midst of what looks like the flood coming again. In spite of human sin, God puts aside His bow. As Derek Kidner puts it: “the war

is over” the weapon has become a sign of peace” (341). Indeed, a sign of a covenant. Every time we see the bow – the rainbow – it is God saying “never again”.

This covenant – the Noahaic Covenant – is not the only covenant God makes with humanity. It is the beginning of a series of covenants.

We have been referring to Genesis 1-11 as the first half of the Bible, Genesis 12 to Revelation 22 as the second half. The second half begins with another covenant. A covenant with Abram: “I will bless you ... and in you ... (in your seed) ... all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:2-23, 17:1-21).

As the story continues to unfold, God makes a covenant with the children of Abraham, with Israel. Again and again, “I will be Your God and you will be My people.” All I am, I give to you.

As the story continues to unfold, God makes a covenant with Israel’s greatest king, with David. “I will raise up a seed after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom... I will establish the throne of His kingdom forever.” (2 Samuel 7:12-13)

Until we come to the New Covenant, as God calls it through the prophet Jeremiah. “Behold” ... “Look!” Surprise! “Days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel... I will put my law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one, their neighbors, saying, “Know the LORD”, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

And here is the sign of the New Covenant: a loaf of bread and a cup of wine. Jesus... son of Noah, son of Abraham, son of David, seed of the woman, the new Adam, holds up a loaf of bread and cup of wine and says: “this is my body given for you... this cup is the New Covenant in my blood”.

“I put my bow in the clouds.” “And I will remember.” Genesis 9:14-15, “It shall come about, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud, and I will remember my covenant (14)... my everlasting covenant (16).” “I will remember my covenant.” “I will remember my covenant.” Not only the one with Noah. But also the one with Abraham and the one with David. And the New Covenant, “I will forgive their iniquity and their sins I will remember no more.” I will remember my covenant to remember your sin no more. “And I will be Your God, and You shall be my people.”

This is how the Noah part of “the story that makes sense of our stories”, makes sense of our stories. “I will remember my covenant”. Every time we see a rainbow we remember God is remembering. Every time we see a loaf or bread and a cup of wine, we remember God is remembering.

And if you have spent any time in the Psalms, in the prayerbook of Israel, you know that God’s faithfulness to the covenants is what encourages and emboldens the prayers. Over and over again the prayers appeal to God’s “lovingkindness”. “Remember O

LORD, Your lovingkindness, for they have been from of old" (25:6). "How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God!" (36:9). "Be gracious to me , O God, according to your lovingkindness" (51:1) – sometimes the word is rendered "tender mercies". "Remember your tender mercies". In Hebrew, the word is "hesed" and it means "loyalty to the covenant" or "covenant love". "Your loyalty to Your covenant has been from of old". "How precious is Your loyalty to Your covenant". "Be gracious to me according to Your loyalty to Your covenant."

*O LORD I come to you on the basis of Your loyalty to Your covenant. I do not appeal to anything in myself. I do not appeal to anything I have done or not done. I appeal to Your hesed, to Your loyalty to the covenant you made with me when I did not earn or deserve it. Write Your good law in my heart... give me a heart that wills what You will. This You promised in the covenant sealed by the blood of Jesus. Let me know You even as I am known by You. This You promised in the covenant sealed by the blood of Jesus. Be my God, be to me all that You are. Do not let me be satisfied with less than You! This You promised in the covenant sealed by the blood of Jesus. Forgive my iniquity, my twisted ways. Do not remember my sin! This You promised in the covenant sealed by the blood of Jesus. Remember Your covenant O God.*

"For this is like the days of Noah to Me,  
When I swore that the waters of Noah  
Would not flood the earth again;  
So I have sworn that I will not be angry with you  
Nor will I rebuke you.  
"For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake,  
But My lovingkindness will not be removed from you,  
And My covenant of peace will not be shaken,"  
Says the LORD who has compassion on you. (Isaiah 54:9-10)