

Noah

Genesis 6:13-18; 7:11-12; 8:13-16; 9:3-4, 8-13

¹³ And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. ¹⁴ Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. ¹⁵ This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. ¹⁶ Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks. ¹⁷ For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. ¹⁸ But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. (Gen 6:13-18 NRS)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. ¹² The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights. (Gen 7:11-12 NRS)¹³ In the six hundred first year, in the first month, 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. ¹⁴ In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. ¹⁵ Then God said to Noah, ¹⁶ "Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. (Gen 8:13-16 NRS)³ Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. ⁴ Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. (Gen 9:3-4 NRS)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. 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. (Gen 9:8-13 NRS)

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The first 11 chapters of the book of Genesis are sometimes called pre-history. The stories in this part of Genesis are shrouded in the mist of ancient memories. The story of Noah and the flood is a major story taking up almost four chapters. You may recall that when we looked at the story of creation, we found that there were two stories of creation, one in chapter one and the other in chapter two. Back in January we talked a little bit about the flood and noticed that there are two stories of the flood as well. But with the flood, the two stories are woven together.

In one story Noah and his family enter the ark and seven days later the rains began. In the other account they enter the ark the same day that the flood began. In one account the flood lasts for about 60 days. In the other account it lasts for a year and 10 days. In one account the flood is caused by rain alone, but in the other story water erupts from beneath the ground as well as comes down from above. One account talks about clean and unclean animals with seven pairs of clean animals entering the ark, and single pairs of all other animals being saved. But the other account only talks of pairs of animals and doesn't make any distinction between clean and unclean animals.

Now, I don't think that God dictated two different stories about the flood. God is certainly old but I doubt that God's memory is bad. Instead we need to look at the stories as the dim human memories of the far distant past. Several ancient civilizations had stories of a tremendous flood. There's a Sumarian flood story, a Babylonian flood story, and the Gilgamesh epic. All three of these have some similarities to the story of the flood in Genesis. However, in some of the ancient flood stories the gods are frightened by the flood, but in Genesis God is in command of the waters.

The differences in the two Genesis stories eliminate any possibility that they are factual accounts.. They are much more important than that. They're theological stories about God and our relationship with God.

There isn't a whole lot to be said about Noah. We're told that he was a righteous man and God noticed. Perhaps one point of the story of the flood is that even one person can have a great influence on God's actions. God takes note of righteousness! Noah did as he was told and did something that had to seem foolish to all of his neighbors and family. Most of us are very reluctant to let our faith lead us to do something weird. After the flood, Noah's first act was to build an altar, illustrating that a fundamental purpose of humans is to serve God with thankfulness. Finally, we should know that Noah wasn't perfect. Once he was on dry land, he planted a vineyard, made wine, and drank too much.

Unlike Noah, there's a lot to say about God in this story. Back at the end of the stories of creation, God declared that it creation was very good. In creation God intended humankind and nature to live together in peace and harmony. Now, at the beginning of the flood stories, God declares that the earth is corrupt. The earth had become spoiled and ruined - and the specific issue stated is violence. The text doesn't say that God was angry and full of wrath. It clearly states that God was grieved, saddened, and regretted having made creation. We may have heard this story as one of judgment and punishment, but the scripture actually speaks about disappointment, grief, and regret.

God's reaction to the violence he sees also indicates that God didn't know this was going to happen. God didn't say creation is very good, but it's going to turn sour and I'm going to have to wipe it out in a few years. God doesn't say, "Well, right on schedule, now's the time to erase what I've done." No, God is grieved and filled with regret.

The point of the flood isn't to wash away sin; it doesn't clean up creation. After the flood God says, "the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth." (Gen 8:21 NRS) The point isn't to undo creation and start over again. The fish are never destroyed, nor is the vegetation. The flood makes no change in humankind. The actions of Noah and his sons after the flood, as well as human history to follow, makes that clear. But there's an irreversible change in God. The relationship between God and the world is not simply that of a strong God and a weak world. Rather, it's a complicated relationship between a grieving God and a resistant world. Rather than destroy creation completely, God decides to deal with the disappointing level of goodness in humans. God chooses the route of suffering - rather than the action of destroying. This personal decision is made with all the mix of sorrow and regret that goes into making difficult decisions that affect people whom one loves.

After the flood God does several amazing things. God declares that humans are unchanged. They will continue to do evil things. Nonetheless, humans are still in the image of God. And wonder of wonders, God makes a covenant with no conditions placed on humans. It's a one-sided covenant, a promise to never again treat creation in this manner. And the promise isn't just to humankind, but to all of the animal kingdom as well. The world hadn't changed, but God changed and promised never to deal with creation like that again. This is the very first covenant found in scripture, and the entire world is under a covenant with God.

One of the recurring themes in the Old Testament is how God repeatedly has compassion for people. After the man and the woman in the garden had disobeyed, God replaced their flimsy fig leaf clothing with leather clothing. After the flood, God promised that there will never be such destruction again. And at the end of the Babylonian exile, Isaiah wrote that God promised, "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." (Isaiah 54:9 – 10)

The lessons of the stories of the flood need to be understood, remembered, and applied to our daily life. Unfortunately, sometimes that doesn't happen. Halloween is coming in about a month. What began as a time to honor the memory of all the saints who have gone before us has lost that meaning for

so many people. I was reminded just this week that some churches set up “Hell Houses” at this time of year. They don’t remember the “cloud of witnesses” that have gone before us, those whose lives are an example and inspiration for us. Rather than tell our youth about God’s never ending compassion and the rock steady love of God, these “Hell Houses” strive to illustrate the tortures of Hell awaiting those who die suddenly without being meticulous in what they believe and unwavering in obeying certain moral rules. The message is, “Be very afraid. God is watching your every thought and move, looking for the chance to send you to Hell.” The unconscious message that youth take home from a “Hell House” is that the reason for being a Christian is fear of torture. Being a Christian isn’t a matter of living a life that is abundant in joy and meaning. Instead, the Christian life is spent dodging God’s anger, trying somehow not to mess up, living in fear of not measuring up and ending as an eternal crispy critter. Life as a Christian is dull, joyless, boring, almost impossible, and constantly stressful --- but it’s better than what God will do to you if you don’t comply. Cringe in fear - rather than serve in love. It grieves me that so many adults only see God as a threat - and it's so depressing that they'll pass that terrible view on to unthinking youth.

Brothers and Sisters, if you don’t know anything else about God, know this one thing from Psalm 145. “God is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made, the Lord is faithful in all his words and gracious in all his deeds.” (Verses 9 & 13) **Amen and amen!**

Sisters and Brothers,
God knows how we are made and how weak we are.
Despite that, God has decided to stick with us.
“God is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made,
the Lord is faithful in all his words
and gracious in all his deeds.” (Ps 145:9 & 13)