

“The Promise”

Selected Scripture from Genesis 6-9

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The Noah story is a church favorite. Many churches have a Noah’s ark mural painted on the nursery wall. Some of us know Noah songs. We read our children books about animals lining up two by two. It’s a story for people who love rainbows. Noah’s ark is a story of hope.

Professor Bobby Williamson says, “[Noah’s ark is] a children’s story combined with an apocalyptic tale.”ⁱ Because when you read the verses carefully you realize . . . things were BAD.

v. 5: *“The Lord saw that the wickedness of humans was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.”* God watches as humans, only 600 years after Adam’s death, act on the purely evil feelings in their hearts.ⁱⁱ

v. 6: *“And the Lord was sorry that he had made humans on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.”* God, our creator who called us “good”, is now sorry that humans are in the world. In fact, not just sorry—God is grieving deeply.

“So,” the Lord declares in verse 7, *“I will blot out from the earth the humans I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air—for I am sorry that I have made them.”* God is not just sorry or grieved. God regrets that humanity exists as a constant negative force in the world. And so God is doing something about it: God will eliminate not just the humans but every breathing thing. God is scrapping the whole project. Perhaps to start anew. Perhaps to simply end things forever.

Imagine the depth of God’s grief. The project into which God poured God’s artistry and wonder and heart and hope--is now a disaster.

Remember the dioramas we made in elementary school? You'd carefully hand draw bright white stars and glue tiny little trees, and paint a blue lake? After much hard work, you'd created an entire miniature world in a shoe box. Imagine how it would feel to leave your precious creation in the classroom on Friday, and when you return Monday you see it is completely infested – with mold or ants --and needs to be destroyed. That would have broken my little 2nd grade heart—would it break yours? And scripture tells us that's how God felt—"it grieved God to God's heart" to find the good, beautiful world God created completely infested.

Is anything more heartbreaking than a disappointed creator? Artists, who often set unachievable standards for their own work, sometimes destroy their completed projects. Claude Monet, painter of the beautiful water lilies that hang in every important museum in the world, destroyed more than 500 of his own paintings. Vincent Van Gogh did the same.

But God is not simply a disappointed artist who made something and is dissatisfied. God created something beautiful—something "good!" and it rotted. God created us and then stepped aside so we could make our choices. And boy, did we ever start choosing just what we wanted! And now, a mere 20 generations after Adam's death, humans choose to follow the evil inclination in their hearts.

So God decides to level it all. Anyone who has battled black mold knows the only way to get rid of an infestation is to wipe it out entirely. This is an apocalyptic tale, indeed.

And then, in verse 8, our first glimpse of hope: "But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord."

So there IS ONE good guy left. And the guy has a family, a wife and three sons and their spouses. And surely if there is good in Noah, he has passed that down to his children, through biology or, more likely, through modeled behavior. Surely these children have been taught by Noah to be decent people, just as we strive to do with our children today.

Humans must be taught to make choices for the good. A toddler must learn to share, to be gentle, to care for someone else. If no one shows them what is good, how will they learn? Isn't that why we bring our kids to church school? Why we take our youth to Mountain Top for mission work? Why we will intentionally explain food justice to everyone before Saint Luke's Rise Against Hunger project begins September 27th?

God invests hope in Noah, so God spares Noah and two of every breathing creature.

In Gen 7: 16, when Noah's family and every creature is on board, God shuts the door of the ark. And perhaps God imagines this ark as a new diorama, a miniature Garden of Eden, from which the world can begin again. Scripture makes no mention of manure smells, howling monkeys, or even infighting among the animals or humans. So perhaps the ark is a new Garden of Eden, a little slice of heaven. *Again, we see a glimmer of hope.*

Does the idea of a new Eden seem impossible? If we look closely at the world around us, we can find glimpses of Eden everywhere. An early evening walk on the beach with your dog. The perfect red tomato. An on-line prayer team that meets weekly to pray for our Saint Luke's family. Watching Nancy Moore exclaim with delight as she welcomes each individual to the Dodd-Sterling Food Distribution. The people of Abraham, Muslim, Jew, and Christian, gathered as one for worship in this very sanctuary around holy days. There are mini-Edens everywhere.

The great writer and farmer Wendell Berry once wrote, "...[W]e are confronted everywhere with wonders; we see that the miraculous is not extraordinary, but the common mode of existence. It is our daily bread."ⁱⁱⁱ

God closes the door on this brand new Eden, the rains come and go, the raven flies to and fro, the dove returns with an olive branch and then returns no more. When the ark finds dry land, the people and creatures disembark, and God finally seems to exhale. For forty days and nights God has been holding

God's breath, and now that the people and animals are safe, there is hope and promise in the air.

And that promise is specific. *Never again*, says the Lord. "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. . . . I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth." (Gen 9: 11, 13)

This God of ours, gives us and God's own self, a visible reminder of this promise: a rainbow. God doesn't choose an innocuous object, but instead something shaped like an instrument of war, a bow, and bends it into a symbol of peace.

And God adds light, and sprinkles, all the colors of the rainbow, so we—and perhaps God—cannot miss the rainbow when it spans the sky.

In the end this apocalyptic tale is a story of hope. Hope for the world in general when some days we need to search very hard to find it. With the profundity of bad news that slithers into our brains each day, we can lose sight of hope. But my goodness, it's out there. It's in here.

This is also a story of hope for our God, who theologian Walter Bruggemann calls *a recovering agent of violence*^{iv}. Between Genesis 6 and 10, God changes from choosing violence to choosing peace. In recognizing the goodness in Noah, God moves from annihilation to continuation, from abandonment to covenant.

There's hope for the world. There's hope for God. And this is a story of God's continuing hope in us. Despite the inclinations in our hearts. Despite our decision to call out, "Give us Barrabas!"^v Despite our inclination toward war rather than peace, toward greed rather than generosity, toward walls rather than welcome.

God's hope in us is evident in God's instruction to us. God did not teach Adam, but God now teaches, now shows Noah. God says, look at this rainbow, it is a reminder to be merciful and forgiving. Like the parent to a

toddler, God is teaching us how to deny evil inclinations and choose good. And God tasks us with doing the same. We must teach the ways of peace to our children, to each other, and to the stranger. The message is simple. Choose mercy. Look for Eden. Cling tightly to hope.

God still sends us a rainbow now and again, but always present with us is the Holy Spirit, still teaching. The Spirit is here, reminding us of the mercy and grace that is Jesus the Christ. Don't wait for a rainbow to appear to share that good news. Amen.

Benediction:

When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.^{vi}

ⁱ BibleWorm, Season 4, Episode 401 "From Destruction to Covenant," Genesis 6: 5-22, 8: 6-14, 9: 8-17), published Sept 4, 2022, Dr. Robert Williamson, Dr. Amy Robertson.

ⁱⁱ This general idea is from Amy-Jill Levine: Genesis: A Beginners Guide to the Beginning, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2026, p. 73.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wendell Berry (2003). "The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry", p.311, Counterpoint Press.

^{iv} The Walter Bruggemann quote is cited in the podcast *BibleWorm*, Season 4, Episode 401 "From Destruction to Covenant," Genesis 6: 5-22, 8: 6-14, 9: 8-17), published Sept 4, 2022, Dr. Robert Williamson, Dr. Amy Robertson. They are referencing a 2008 essay by Bruggemann entitled "The Recovering God of Hosea."

^v See Luke 23: 18-23.

^{vi} Wendell Berry (2012). "New Collected Poems", p.79, Counterpoint Press.