

“All In”  
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church  
Genesis 6-9  
September 9, 2018  
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The story of the Great Flood and Noah and the Ark and the Rainbow was likely written down while the people of Israel were under threat from other nations or already exiled by foreign overlords. But the story itself probably goes back way deeper, joining other ancient cultures that had stories of worldwide floods doing major destruction.

When I read this story, I like to imagine a totally anachronistic scene. It’s a dark night cut by some sort of fire, and a child of seven or eight approaching their grandmother. This family has seen chaos and felt the stress of the world coming undone, and this kid is processing things in their own way. Silent at first, the child finally asks the grandmother, “Is God going to smash us all to itty bits?”

A parent might wonder where the child heard such a thing, but a grandparent doesn’t need to ask. She knows the children are afraid and trying to make sense of it all. She replies, “No, darling, *HaShem* doesn’t work that way.”

The child isn’t convinced. “Are you sure? *HaShem* is so powerful. And this world is so wicked. What if God gets really angry?”

The grandmother pulls the child close and explains, “*HaShem* tried it. Once. And *HaShem* doesn’t work that way...any more. Let me tell you about it...”

And then she tells the child this story of the flood. If you’re the rare Presbyterian who likes to follow along in the pew Bible, I apologize for the massive amount of skipping around I’m about to do through chapters 6, 8, and 9 of the book of Genesis. Listen for the story of the people of God:

The LORD 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 the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created —people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.”

But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD...

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. Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch...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. 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. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive...Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him...

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. In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry...

God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth..."

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 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. 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."

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: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 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; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

*This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.*

The setting of the fire and the grandmother and the child reminds me of the placement of this story in the larger drama of the people of God. For Biblical scholars, Abraham — who shows up in chapter 11 of Genesis — is the first character who is traceable as having lived and walked the earth. And so everything before Abraham is pre-history. It's vivid and sacred mythology. Calling it "mythology" isn't the same as saying it's not true. But people of faith are missing the point of, well, *faith* when they try to place someone like Noah on a timeline and look for archaeological evidence of his story.

Actually, I think we get confused sometimes because we think of this as Noah's story. Over the summer in our Parables Sunday School class we talked quite a bit about how the common name of a parable can really color how we interpret it. The "Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard" sounds a lot different from "The Parable of the Surprising Salaries" or "The Parable of the Frivolous Boss" or "The Parable of the Complaining Day Laborers."

So is this story "Noah and his Ark-y, Ark-y," or "Noah Learns Animal Husbandry" or "Noah: One Righteous Family and the Cutest Animals Ever?" Or is the story about God instead? "God and the No Good, Very Bad Creation" or "God Starts Over" or "God and Re-Creation" or "God and the Promise" or "God Hangs Up the Bow."

On the bow — that Hebrew noun translated as "bow" appears a bunch of times in the scriptures. In every other instance it literally means an archer's bow — a weapon. So when

God says “I have set my bow in the clouds,” we’re supposed to see that word play. God is hanging up the bow, giving up the weapon and placing it in the sky as the reminder of the promise God makes to Noah and to all of creation.

This story is about God hitting “reset” or shaking the Holy Etch-a-Sketch or throwing the entire rubbish cake into the bin. God is disgusted by the experiment that is creation and decides to trash it all. But! But even in holy wrath, God decides to hold onto a lineage, to carry a strain forward. Yes, Noah and his family. But also a lineage of robins and chipmunks and beetles and ibexes and duck-billed platypuses and pangolins and leopard geckos and jaguars and sloths and tree frogs and all those fish and crustaceans and let’s not forget the spiders and the foxes and the gophers and the pigeons and the moose.

I was in Chicago Friday morning sitting in a coffee shop and I picked up an honest-to-goodness newspaper, on real, inky paper. It was glorious. Below the fold there was a story about the spread of businesses called “rage rooms.” These started in Japan — because, of course they did — and are now emerging in markets across the U.S. You go to a rage room and you pay — usually a price per item — to spend a few minutes smashing stuff with a small sledgehammer. Dishes and electronics and some of them offer plaster busts of the politician of your choice. This service is advertised as a stress-reliever or a cathartic experience to let it all out. There are certainly times when this sounds like a bit of fun.

Of course the journalist spoke to some psychologists who have concerns. They warn that some might go to a rage room looking for more than the release of frustration. They point out that smashing stuff offers no insight to the actual problems behind the rage. They worry that this kind of experience could be dangerous for someone with chronic anger — that it might amp them up instead of calming them down. Mostly, the psychologists argue that a visit to a rage room is a quick fix and that they only offer destruction, not a constructive way to manage problems or disappointment or anger.<sup>1</sup>

In that same coffee shop, I read an email from a dear friend from college. Going way back to childhood, she has had the kind of Major League Family Issues that make most family Thanksgiving look like a walk in the park. There has been heavy emotional trauma and deep suffering. My friend, thanks be to God and with talented professional help, has managed to come through all of this reasonably well-adjusted and has a happy family of her own now. Recently, while raising three kids, she managed to finish a novel. She didn’t write to become famous, but to get it all out — to tell the story of what happened to her through these delightful characters she created.

Maybe Genesis chapters 6-9 tell the story of God and the rage room — and how unsatisfactory it was as an answer. The grass is still wet from the flood, and there’s God hanging up the heavenly weapon and informing Noah that the rainbow is a reminder — not a reminder to humanity or creation, but a reminder to God of this new, one-way covenant.

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<sup>1</sup> “Smash a TV, relieve stress? Patrons pay to break stuff at 'rage rooms' in Chicago, across the country” by Angie Leventis Lourgou, *Chicago Tribune*, September 6, 2018

God tried the reset button. God tried destruction. Just as doors of the ark are opened, God says, “Oy, I don’t think I want to do that again. This creation is a hot mess, but bless its heart, I can’t quit it. I guess I’ll have to throw in with this lot. For good. Forever. Okay, that’s it. Time to hang up the bow. I’m going all in with this crew. With these ridiculous humans and those goofy looking hedgehogs and boy-oh-boy did I do an awesome job on flowers, or what? I’m in. I’m all in.”

And so God promises to work with us as we mess up and break bad and do our best to destroy this beautiful earth and then shake our fists at the sky when things don’t go our way. God decides that a relationship with this creation is more important than it being perfected. God chooses to write new stories and let them slowly unfold and to invite us to have a hand in the writing, even as we skew toward horror or tragedy or ennui or sparkly vampires.

God’s great experiment here is different after the flood. When things don’t work, God adjusts the variables. When new disease arrives, God tries different interventions. God still gets angry — we are pretty frustrating, a lot more frustrating than the ibexes and the moose. Injustice grows like kudzu and generation after generation ignores God’s commands. And God has chosen to work it out in relationship. And so we get more scripture and inspiration and prophets instead of sledgehammers as God seeks to break open our hearts instead of smashing us.

In our story, God takes a giant leap — another big gamble — toward working things out. God goes all in, in the unlikeliest of places, pushing all the chips into the middle of the table and instead of destroying flesh, becomes flesh. God sees the bow pointed to the heavens and tears open the sky at the river that is running to the Promised Land and claims Jesus as God’s beloved. God-with-skin comes and hangs out among all the brokenness and for the trouble gets to experience destruction first hand and even then, remembers the promise. And so the new story being written is of redemption in water and bread and cup.

The world remains broken. People remain in exile. We seem bent on destroying this planet, covering it with water yet again, a destruction of our own hands. And yet, God is all in for my imagined exiled grandmother and child at the fire. And God was all in for our ancestors. And God is all in for us, if we can stomach that. It’s easier to believe that God is all in for the kids in our midst — for the newest among us born into such a treacherous world. We fear for them, and God is all in on them as the lineage worth saving.

God has hung up the bow and in it God sees the promise made. In that same bow, we see light reflected, refracted, and dispersed showing us the beauty of creation. We see colors and we know there are colors we can’t even see. We are reminded of how we ought to respond to such a one-sided promise from God: Seeking to be co-creators with God, not destroyers. We are to add to the story of redemption, following the God who leads us by pillar of cloud and fire to table and river and cross and into a new creation where we keep our promises too.

To the God of all grace, who calls you to share God’s eternal glory in union with Christ, be the power forever! Amen.