

September 23, 2018  
**The Next Time God Is Done with People**  
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Genesis 8:6-12, 9:8-17

*<sup>6</sup> At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made <sup>7</sup> and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. <sup>8</sup> Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; <sup>9</sup> but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. <sup>10</sup> He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; <sup>11</sup> and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. <sup>12</sup> Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more.*

***[9]** <sup>8</sup> Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, <sup>9</sup> “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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.” <sup>12</sup> 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: <sup>13</sup> I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. <sup>14</sup> When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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.” <sup>17</sup> 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.”*

Rainbows are a meteorological phenomenon, circles of color that appear as light is refracted, reflected, and dispersed in droplets of water. Rainbows appear in the sky after a rain and on the driveway when I give my dogs a bath. Are they miracles? Yes, I'd say. As much as the rain, the wind and air to breathe are miracles. As much as pigmy goats and jellyfish and golden retrievers are miracles. As much as live oak trees and morning glories on a fence.

Creation is the miracle, not the rainbow itself. The story gives creation shape, so we can think and talk about it, rather than be completely lost inside it. The story is the human method by which we find our feet and voice. It gives us a direction in which to move. This is your Bible from its very start, the pre-history of Israel. The composers are

pouring the footers, if you will, upon which to build the history they are about to tell, beginning with Abraham: the story of God and the people of God, always in pursuit of God, even when they are running away as fast as their feet will take them – and even when their feet aren't moving; when they are fleeing only in their thoughts and dreams.

Early on, they need some definition to this one called God. An impossible task. They do their best. So, Genesis.

All our words are small and wrong. Five – it only takes five biblical chapters for the Creator of the universe to regret not stopping with the creeping things. Five chapters. Twelve generations of humans, give or take a handful. I always remember Hannah F. telling me, “Oh, I’m a handful.” God knows we all are.

Genesis 6 reads: <sup>6</sup> *The Lord regretted that he had made humankind on the earth, and he was highly offended.* <sup>7</sup> *So the Lord said, “I will wipe humankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth— everything from humankind to animals, including creatures that move on the ground and birds of the air, for I regret that I have made them.”* Divinely-driven genocide. Genocide by natural disaster.

Only “genocide,” while an awful word, is in this case too trifling a word, as “genocide” refers to the systematic killing of some people group or certain people groups – not ALL. Not “every-single-human-save-one and his family” (“not related to Noah” is hardly a people group) “plus every single plant and animal.” What’s the word for that? I don’t know that we have one. Annihilation. Obliteration. Extinction.

Which makes me wonder, once again, who first thought this would make a good children's story?? A nursery decorating theme? You know it well enough, how all the animals but the dinosaurs showed up at the dock and lived on the boat with Noah and his family for weeks and weeks on end. It rained, while the entire world was flooded and every living thing was drowned. After a time he started sending doves away and finally one came back with an olive branch. And then another didn't come back at all, so Noah knew the water was receding. And then the scene Greg read to us just now, God's promise not to do that again. Annihilation. Obliteration. Extermination. THAT – for which we have no words.

The story is full of problems, literary and otherwise. It may well have been adapted from another the Hebrews had heard from their neighbors – the Sumerians, they were called. You may know their book [The Epic of Gilgamesh](#), one of the first written-down stories found so far. (It's linked to this sermon as posted on the website.) My Sunday School teachers are turning over in their graves right now, if they heard me say that. But does borrowing a flood story mean this one was not inspired? I would say not.

They were preachers after all, storytellers explaining the meaning of why life turns out as it does. And for them, life had turned out in exile – exile in Babylon, a long, long time and place from Noah. In a time and place where the Hebrews were pretty sure their days were numbered. Writing down their history, believing that soon there would be no

one left to tell it. Their history with Yahweh, the Creator God. From Adam unto Noah. Noah unto Abraham. Abraham to Samuel. Samuel to David. David unto Cyrus the Great. My seminary professor said, if it weren't for Babylon, Genesis 1:1 would read, "In the beginning God created Jerusalem."

For all I don't know about the story of Noah, here's one thing I do. The Noah story pours one footer upon which the entire Bible rests: God is dependable. Before chapter 9, the Creator God has been a little unsteady, acting on impulse more than purpose.

In Genesis 9, God makes a promise. Translations that use *covenant* are tricky. *Covenant* suggests an agreement between parties. Noah agrees to nothing. God promises. Noah hears it. The rainbow is a reminder, for whom? for Noah? For God! Because God's gonna need it, right? There's gonna be a next time. <sup>5</sup> "I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature...." <sup>16</sup> "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." The rainbow is for God, not us.

God can be trusted – at least to keep this one, very limited, very specific promise. Certain weapons in the arsenal are now de-commissioned. Total annihilation, specifically. *Oh I can still do it*, the Creator says, *but from this day forever, I promise that I won't*. There will surely be a next time. Before the chapter's out, in fact. It's Noah. Noah – who was the best of the species in chapter 6, remember, the only one God didn't regret having made.

It reads like Noah planned it. He steps off the boat, plants a vineyard. He harvests the grapes and makes the wine. He ends up roaring drunk and buck naked in public. The text gives no more detail than that, only that his sons are mortified. They make a plan to capture him with a robe, the way people catch a bat in the house, only without actually looking at him. You know their mama sent them!

But that, naturally, is not the worst thing Noah did. The next day, in his hangover shame, when he might have been humble, Noah is horrible. He blames the youngest son for the whole incident and curses him and his descendants forever. Because, as we know: People. Sometimes. Are. The Worst.

Another footer is poured right there, by the way, with Noah's curse. That youngest son is Ham, the father of Canaan. We'll get to it later in the fall, how the geo-ethnic map of the Old Testament is being drawn right here in the names of Noah's sons and grandsons. Noah may be the next time, but he is hardly the last time in the story, that God needs God's own reminder that God promised not to drown them. Or toast them. Or wipe them off the face of the earth in whatever ways God fantasizes about exterminating us, until God sees a rainbow somewhere. And God sighs and thinks, "Aw, dang. I said I wouldn't do that anymore." Of course I know how silly it all sounds, even assigning all these little thoughts and feelings to God. But we only have the words we have to get our heads and hearts around it.

And, were *we* driven finally from our home and believed our days were numbered, would we look back and hate God for abandoning us, or would we see how God had given us every opportunity to turn ourselves around while we made other choices? That's what Israel decided, there at the end of all things: that God could have and didn't, when God got fed up with people every next time after Noah.

The promise is VERY specific. It must not be generalized, in two ways in particular. God does not promise NOT to get angry again, just to stay God's own hand when selecting retribution. And secondly, the God who promised never to annihilate us altogether, did NOT promise to keep our hateful hands off each other. Humankind hasn't invented a weapon yet we didn't eventually use. We could annihilate ourselves and the creation in an hour. Or take the slower boat we're on right now, environmental self-destruction. In either case, the planet will most likely recover. But I figure whatever humans who survive sooner or later will start throwing rocks at one another, until they build a catapult.

If it didn't have such poor cultural reference, I'd title the story, "Fresh Off the Boat." God is so ready to start over with Noah and his people. Not unlike with Adam. Good food and incentives against murder – I think that's a perfect first page of a covenant. With the good news and promise of God that what comes from God is good. And the understanding that what we offer back to God and to one another – well, that is up to us. And God is with us in the consequences, be they joy or tragedy. Would you pray with me?