

*Texts: Genesis 6:5-22; 8:6-12; 9:8-17; Matthew 8:24-27*

*Subject: Noah and God's Promise*

*Theme: Between Me and You*

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 11, 2022; *Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven, and our risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Faith is weird sometimes. By faith we hold out hope for things that we cannot see, maybe things that seem strange. We expect miraculous healing. Sometimes it happens. We pray for rain, rain comes eventually. We interpret the events of our lives and of the world through a lens that may seem impractical to others. We pray for those in the paths of storms, for the specific creatures of the natural world - there was a prayer prompt going around a couple years ago for the duck-billed platypus - for no particular reason than to uplift them to the care of the creator. That's a real animal by the way. It looks like a beaver, with the face of a duck, and lives in Australia. That's a real place too. Such a strange animal - it's almost irrational. Faith, or some version of it - can cause people to *act* irrational at times, to condemn others or create change, to start wars or stir creativity, to burn books or build homes. Early Christian communities were accused of being cannibals, for following a Savior who invited followers to eat his flesh, and drink his blood. Weird, right?

The story of Noah and the Ark - is one of the most popular in children's Bibles - with rainbows and arks are painted on nursery walls and decorate Sunday school classrooms around the world - might seem weird too. What kind of God would flood the whole creation and destroy what had just been declared 'very good?' Not very comforting. Do we take this literally? How could this possibly happen?

As we lean deeper into the story, we only have more questions. Did kangaroos have to swim from Australia to the middle east? Did the fish survive the flood? Who had to clean up the mess after the waters receded? We don't know. This is a problem with literalism. Maybe there was a flood. Other ancient belief systems included stories of floods too. They also had vengeful gods whose wrath was executed on the people. What does this particular version of the story begin to reveal to us about the kind of God we proclaim and worship in this place?

The text tells us that "the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth," (*Gen 6.5*) and "the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence" (*Gen 6.11*). I don't find that part very hard to believe. We might imagine it was a lawless land, like *Game of Thrones* or the Wild West, or worse. But we don't need gruesome fantasies or computer generated monsters to remind of us evil. This weekend we remember the loss of thousands of lives in a terrorist attack in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. We know the violence that people do to each other. And there were preachers who tried to blame the destruction on all muslims and people who look like them, ones whose religion had been coopted by fundamentalism, not simply violent creatures who used religion for their own purposes. And the unity we felt in our mourning was quickly divided by politics and fear. After twenty-one years of wars in the middle east, we struggle to see how we've made any progress toward mending the divisions in our world. It seems beyond our reach.

Who is like Noah? He walked with God. (Enoch, Noah's great-great grandfather was said to have walked with God.) This means he prayed, he was faithful, he had *fellowship and obedience that resulted in divine favor*. We learn from the story that he's

no great hero, not a warrior like in other ancient myths, but that he *listened to the Lord*. And God spoke. God commanded him to build, and he built. To the exact specifications giving to him by the divine. He followed the plans. The film version, *Noah*, with Russell Crowe, depicts the neighbors who looked at Noah and laughed or thought he was a fanatic or nuts, at least a little weird. But Noah is faithful.

The floodwaters rose, and for forty days, we picture Noah and his family and all the animals onboard, doing what humans and animals do, so they had to open a window. Noah opened the window to send out the raven, and then the dove, who brought back an olive branch - now we know it as a sign of peace. I was today years old when I learned that the origin of the meaning of the olive branch goes back at least to the 5th century B.C. - the ancient Greek believed the olive branch would keep evil away. Wars would be suspended for the ancient Olympics, and the olive wreath was worn by the winners of the games. Also, because olive trees take so long to bear fruit, the ones who planted them had to believe there would be a long strength of peace for them to survive. The olive branch was the visible sign on peace on the earth for Noah and his family - they knew the flood was over, and they would be saved.

It's a turning point in the story. The flood is over. Things are going to be different. This is where God's goodness is revealed. In other ancient cultures, punishment was a lesson from the gods, and the creatures had to serve them in order to be spared. Human beings lived in fear of what the capricious gods might want or do to cause pain and bad weather, suffering for the people. The God revealed to Noah was not the same.

See - this isn't a story of a vengeful god, or the threat of punishment for all who turn away and disobey. We can read it that way sometimes, but I think we see

something more here. This is the story of what happens when human beings learn to trust that the one who made all that there is loves us and wants better for us than the evil and violence we bring about. God is working to fix the brokenness in the story, not for the glory of the divine one, as in other myths, but for me and you, for all humanity and for the earth itself. God's longing is for life and the flourishing of the creatures, the humans, and the earth. This story is the reveling of a God who is unlike any other in the ancient world, who creates life and loves it, who serves life instead of the other way around, and will do whatever it takes to bring about the wholeness of the creation.

God speaks again to Noah after the flood and makes a promise, one like God made to Abraham - a covenant - a deal that never ever would the flood cover the earth, never ever would God destroy what God created, saying, "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." It's a forever thing. It's ever lasting. And God's bow, unlike the one made with human hands, is a sign of peace and beauty. When we see it, we have to stop and look up - we notice it and still have that sense of awe. God remembers, and we remember.

We remember that we're not here for violence and destruction, to tear down, and waste what we have been given but to be for healing, and growth, and peace, and life. We remember that we have a God who loves us enough to make that promise to never forsake us or the earth again, and even broke into our own time and space to shed his own blood on the cross, and do what we could not do for ourselves. Jesus - the one whom even the wind and the storms obey - has died and risen for us, not to forgive only us and make us the righteous ones while everyone else dies, but to let the light of the

world shine in us and share the love of Christ in our lives. The story of the renewal of life is the renewal of all life in Christ Jesus, our Lord. The Word of creation was given so that we may see and know that we are made in God's image, that we are forgiven and loved, and sent to forgive and work to repair the damage *between me and you* - to share that word of forgiveness and promise and peace in a world that insists on destruction and evil and violence. God has kept the promise in Jesus and calls us to continue to share it with the world around us.

Today as we remember nearly 3,000 lives lost 21 years ago, and the ones who have suffered ever since, we will give some time, and serve together. We will remember *who we are* as citizens, neighbors, friends, and families. We will work because we are able, and our neighbors need our work.

But this is God's work: Peace, life, renewal, and a promise for us, for ever. Our hands are tools to serve the neighbors that God has given to us today. We believe in the promise and we know that we are not forsaken, but have been forgiven and made alive in Jesus. We give thanks to God and carry that good news with us into our community as we serve in every way that we can. Today, we'll clean up a park and paint some apartments, and honor our first responders and write letters to our elected officials. We'll enjoy time together with our neighbors and Girl Scouts and city staff. it's a day to remember who we are, helpers, peacemakers, proclaimers of the promise given to Noah and to us through the cross: God is here. You are not alone. You are loved. Amen.