

Water Stories

Scripture: Excerpts from Genesis 6-9 (6:5-8; 7:6-10; 8:6-11; 9:8-17)

The story of Noah, the ark, and the flood is one of the most well-known stories from the Bible. It would be difficult to find a children's Bible story book that didn't include it. Noah's ark toys and books are popular baby gifts. Many nurseries are decorated with an ark and animals theme.

But this well-known and well-loved story about a boat, lots of animals, and a rainbow isn't quite as cute and lovely as it's often made out to be. It's a story of God's disappointment with creation and decision to begin again. It's a story of mass destruction by powerful water.¹

We're reading the flood story because it's designated as today's reading in the Narrative Lectionary.² The Narrative Lectionary is a four-year cycle of readings. On the Sundays from September through May of each year the texts follow the sweep of the biblical story, from Creation through the early Christian church. In the fall the preaching texts begin with the early chapters of Genesis and then move through the stories of Israel's early history, the exodus, the kings, prophets, exile and return. From Christmas to Easter there is sustained reading of one of the four gospels. This year the gospel is Matthew.

We often read about Noah and the flood in the spring, on the first Sunday of Lent. When I've used this story as the basis of a sermon during the Lenten season, I've emphasized the idea of covenant. As I read it this time, however, I was struck by the relationship between this story and the story of creation. I thought about the role of water in these stories and in stories making headlines in the news today.

Last week I referred to the story of creation in the first chapter of the Bible:

*God created humanity in God's own image,
in the divine image God created them,
male and female God created them.*

God saw everything he had made: it was supremely good.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground." Then God said, "I now give to you all the plants on the earth that yield seeds and all the trees whose fruit produces its seeds within it. These will be your food. To all wildlife, to all the birds in the sky, and to everything crawling on the ground—to everything that breathes—I give all the green grasses for food." And that's what happened. God saw everything he had made: it was supremely good.³

Just a few minutes ago, we read from the sixth chapter of Genesis:

¹ Sources for this sermon include: [NL 101: Flood and Promise — Pulpit Fiction](#); [Narrative Lectionary 502: September 11, 2022 - Flood and Promise - YouTube](#); Eugene F. Ropp, *BCBC Genesis*, Herald Press 1987, p. 66; and Maria Trimarchi, *Was There Really a Great Flood?*, www.howstuffworks.com.

² [Narrative FAQ - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)

³ Genesis 1:27-31, *Common English Bible*

*The LORD saw that humanity had become thoroughly evil on the earth and that every idea their minds thought up was always completely evil. The LORD regretted making human beings on the earth, and he was heartbroken. So the LORD said, "I will wipe off of the land the human race that I've created: from human beings to livestock to the crawling things to the birds in the skies, because I regret I ever made them." But as for Noah, the LORD approved of him.*⁴

What a contrast in humanity! From supremely good to thoroughly evil, from fruitfully filling the earth to multiplying evil, from tending creation to corrupting it. What a contrast in God! From happy to heartbroken, from pleased to angry, from rejoicing in humanity to regretting their creation.

In God's grief, pain, anger, and regret, creation is reversed. In Genesis 1, God separates the waters under the dome from the waters above the dome and then gathers the waters under the sky to create seas separate from land. In Genesis 7, the springs of the deep sea erupt, the windows in the skies open, and the sea overtakes the land. In Genesis 1, God creates birds, then crawling things, then animals, then humans. In Genesis 7, God wipes away every living thing that was on the fertile land – from human beings to livestock to crawling things to birds in the sky. In Genesis 1, God begins with one family. In Genesis 7, only one family remains. In Genesis 1, God tells Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. In Genesis 9, God tells Noah and his sons – and I assume their wives as well – to be fertile and multiply. Populate the earth and multiply in it.

Then it appears that God again experiences regret. God regretted creating humanity and now regrets practically starting over. God destroys the earth and then realizes it was pointless. Because even after this starting over, this re-creation of the world, this reboot, humans are still fallible. So God promises that never again will all life be cut off by floodwaters. The sign of this promise is a bow. Listen again to these verses from Genesis 9.

*When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the clouds, I will remember the covenant between me and you and every living being among all the creatures. Floodwaters will never again destroy all creatures. The bow will be in the clouds, and upon seeing it I will remember the enduring covenant between God and every living being of all the earth's creatures.*⁵

Many people think of the bow as a reminder to us of God's promises, and that is true. However, that's not what God says. God's words are, "When I see the bow, I will remember my covenant with you." The hanging up of the bow is a reminder that God will not use such widespread violence again. It's a reminder that God's way of "doing business" will forever be different. This is a radical change of how ancient people viewed their gods. This god is not in the business of destroying the earth anymore by any means.

That's good news, however, these chapters from Genesis are mystifying and also horrifying. The story of Noah, the ark, and the great flood is definitely not some nice, neat, cute children's story.

It's been helpful to me to learn that the worldwide flood is one of the most common stories in ancient history. An ancient Babylonian flood myth, the Epic of Gilgamesh, is quite similar to the biblical account. Greek and Roman mythology tell the tale of angry gods who planned to flood the Earth and destroy humanity; the story's hero and his wife take shelter in an ark and are spared. Native American legends also tell of people taking shelter in a boat to be saved from a flood.

⁴ Genesis 6:5-8, *Common English Bible*

⁵ Genesis 9:14-16, *Common English Bible*

If hundreds of flood stories from different locations and cultures around the world are any indication, something must have happened on Earth to spur these accounts. Could there have been a global flood? Scientists have a few theories to suggest that yes, perhaps, there was. Like most of these types of stories however, the truth and meaning of the story isn't found in scientific fact-checking. The value of the story is in what it tells us about God and what it tells us about us.

What does it mean to worship a God who regrets? A God who is hurt, angry, and grieving is not a completely transcendent God, but a loving relational God.

What do these stories about creation, destruction, and re-creation tell us about what God values? God values justice, righteousness, purity, and truth. God also values faithfulness, forgiveness, love, and mercy.

The stories we find in our Bible – especially the ones in the Old Testament – were passed along orally from person to person for many generations. They were stored in people's minds and told over and over again, long before they were ever written down.

How is the way these ancient peoples view the relationship between God and humanity similar to the way we view it? How is it different? The flood waters didn't cleanse humanity of sin. Human beings are still created in the divine image but are still going to be subject to sin. One commentator reflects, "That bow in the clouds is the sign of God's promise that whatever else God does to seek our restoration, destruction is off the table. An implication of this promise is that God will try everything else. God will seek us and seek us, despite or perhaps because of God's knowledge of every sin, every grief, and every shame that veils our vision of God's reality and of our own as God's creatures. Whatever dwells in our hearts that keeps us from hearing the harmony of all life in God's care, God will not give up on loving us into restoration"⁶

What do these stories from Genesis say about the relationship between people and the rest of God's creation? God instructs Adam and Eve to tend the earth. God's decision to destroy the earth is precipitated by human action that defiles it. In the flood story, the Hebrew word used for human beings corrupting the earth is the same word used for the destruction of the earth.

It's impossible for me to read this story without thinking about how we continue to corrupt the earth. And how destruction of the world by water – or the lack of it – is a real possibility. I could list many current headlines related to water, but I'll focus our attention on Mississippi. A report from NPR describes the situation.

The crisis that has hit Jackson, Miss., highlights the fragility of water systems across the country that will be increasingly vulnerable to the effects of climate change in the coming years.

As rainfall of historic proportions flooded Mississippi's Pearl River, a key pump at the O.B. Curtis water treatment plant, which provides the capital city with its drinking water, was unable to keep up, causing a severe drop in water pressure. Some 150,000 residents were left without safe drinking water. Although water pressure has been restored, a boil-water notice remains in effect.

*Historic flooding and record droughts are already stressing water systems across the country, but as the threats to infrastructure posed by climate change intensify, experts warn that what happened in Jackson may be just the beginning. The situation in Jackson is a cautionary tale, but the reality is that in 2022, communities across our country have experienced severe flooding as well as drought.*⁷

⁶ [Commentary on Genesis 9:8-17 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)

⁷ [The crisis in Jackson shows how climate change can threaten water supplies : NPR](#)

Open Door Mennonite Church in Jackson is coping with this ongoing situation. Rhoda Byler Yoder, an elder in the church, requests our prayers. This is what she writes.

First, we offer thanksgiving that the national attention has brought much-needed resources to Jackson. Tractor-trailer loads of water have been delivered to people's homes, with more water being distributed daily. Engineers with specific skills are repairing the crippled water plant. We are seeing action after years of lurching from one water crisis to another.

Second, we pray for the repairs underway at our water plants, to restore clean drinking water to all homes and businesses and to be resilient enough for the next flood, freeze or other situation that could bring the plant to its knees again.

Third, we pray that officials at all levels will put aside their differences, their assumptions and their politics – and move forward together. There are miles and miles of brittle, century-old pipes between the water plant and the spigots in our homes. We need a plan. Funding. Ongoing action.

Finally, we pray for our church, Open Door Mennonite, located in the most underserved part of Jackson. May we connect ourselves and our community to God's living water that satisfies our soul thirst. May God bless our relationships – our social media feeds, our neighbors and the interfaith organization called Working Together Jackson where we are deeply involved. We also ask for prayers for a community event we are planning on September 28 at our still-under-renovation building. This event will feature a shared meal, presentation and conversation and will launch our Peace and Justice Center of the Deep South! Pray for good attendance and workable logistics.

We want to be a voice that calls people together, to be a space where people can safely share the hurt and anger that has built up after years of disregarded crumbling infrastructure, to be a word of hope for united action.⁸

Lord, hear our prayers for Open Door Mennonite, for the people of Jackson, Mississippi, and for people around the world facing water crises.

Just as we never forget, pray for, and mourn the loss of innocent life and destruction of property that happened 21 years ago today and in the many years of war that followed, so too we should never forget the multiple ways we defile the earth. When we see the bow in the sky, we must remember God's delight in creation, regret in destroying it, desire for restoration, and acts of re-creation.

May the God of promise make us ever mindful of our obligation to join in God's work of delighting, restoring, and re-creating. Amen

⁸ [Open Door invites Mennonite Church USA to join us in prayer | Mennonite Church USA \(mennoniteusa.org\)](https://www.mennoniteusa.org)