



“The Anguish of God”
Scripture – Genesis 6-9, selected verses
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, August 25, 2019

The story of Noah is a challenge for serious reflection because we have turned it into a charming children’s tale. God calls on Noah to build a boat capable of surviving a great flood and gives Noah an eye-popping blueprint of an enormous vessel. Noah faithfully gathers up his tools and supplies and begins the monumental construction project even though there is not a single cloud in the sky. This boat must be enormous because it is intended to hold two of every animal species on earth. This is to spare them from the deluge to come.

We chuckle about Noah needing to keep the cuddly lambs at the opposite end of the boat from the lions; we imagine the heads of the giraffes poking through a top deck window; and we joke about the number of rabbits onboard by journey’s end.

But taming this tale robs us of its substance. This is no Pixar animation aimed at the kiddie crowd. It is an ancient story in which people wrestled with the prevalence of sin, God’s response to evil, and what breeds hope.

Over the past couple of weeks, Camilla and I had the opportunity to see five of our seven grandchildren before they start school and our schedules are overloaded. In the car ride home, we pondered the challenges each one of them will face and shared our lofty aspirations for them.

We pray they will grow up to become adults who are kind, thoughtful, and responsible; and will make meaningful contributions to the world. We pray they will develop a faith in God that will bring meaning, joy, and purpose to their lives. And we pray that they will possess hearts of compassion that prompt them to respond to human need and a thirst for justice that compels them to treat others fairly and to speak up for those whose voices are muffled. We are not expecting perfection, but we hope they will contribute much that is worthy. God surely had similar expectations when the first Homo sapiens walked the earth.

The Book of Genesis begins with the majestic poem that correlates the stages of creation with the days of the week. It is not a scientific description of the origin of the universe, but rather a theological proclamation. It declares that the world and its inhabitants are not here by chance, but due to the work of a benevolent Creator. Further, this Architect of the universe is devoted to the wellbeing of our planet and is affected by everything that happens.

In the beginning the universe was a formless void, and darkness covered it. And God said, “Let there be light,” and light appeared. And God saw that it was good. This phrase, “it was good,” is repeated after each of the first

five days of creation. Then, on Day Six, when human beings are created, the text says that it was not only good, but *very good*. The creation of men and women is declared the crowning glory of creation.

However, those who compiled the Book of Genesis added a second creation story. In it, we read that human beings are not only the glory of creation, we are also its principal problem. God places Adam and Eve in a lush garden where the surroundings are breathtaking, the climate is perfect, and food is abundant. Everything they need is provided. It is in a word – paradise.

God has such grand hopes for them. They will multiply and they will experience the joy of caring for one another and sharing with one another. But before they really settle in, sin slithers onto the scene, and Shangri-La goes up in smoke.

The story tells of temptation and doubt, and knowing the right thing to do, but not carrying it out. It is a drama of rebellion and rejection, of anarchy and accusation. It is an allegory about the dark side of human nature that often slips behind the wheel and takes command. While it is not an historical-factual story, it is a true story about the way we alienate ourselves from God and one another.

The following chapters of Genesis inform us that sin continues to spiral out of control generation after generation, and by the time we reach the story of Noah, violence and corruption are so endemic that God resorts to drastic measures. The high hopes God had for human beings at the beginning of creation have been dashed. What was initially created “very good” has become “very bad” and God determines that there is no alternative but to wipe the slate clean and start over.

The writer who was inspired to create the story of Noah must have been a deeply spiritual person who was trying to make sense of the state of the world. There may have been a devastating flood that had wiped out whole towns before the writer’s lifetime, and stories of this deluge were passed down from age to age. Since many believed that God acted like a no-nonsense judge who punished the wicked and rewarded the good, it would have been natural to assume that God had created the flood to wipe out widespread wickedness.

While we might abhor that thought, it should not be difficult to understand. The recent mass murders in El Paso and Dayton are just the latest in a long stream of senseless killings. When we look around the globe, it is impossible to fathom the anguish in the heart of God over war, terrorist attacks, widespread poverty, destruction of the planet and the countless acts of cruelty that people inflict on others. I can certainly see why God might reach the conclusion that the best hope for the world is to scrap the present one and try again.

It would have been natural for the writer of this story to hold the Noah account over the heads of the people and declare: “If you do not give up your cruelty and hatefulness toward one another, God will be justified in wiping you out and starting over.”

Yet, that is not what the writer concludes. Instead, the writer leaps beyond the prevalent understanding of God and envisions something new. At the outset of the Noah narrative, the writer says that “God was sorry for creating human beings and it grieved God to his heart.” That is, God acted not chiefly out of anger, but sadness. It prompts a colleague to ask, “Could the flood be the weeping of God? Could it be the tears of God drowning the world?”¹

The flood is devastating, but all is not lost. Noah and his family are warned of the approaching calamity and he takes measures to save his family and pairs of animals so that after the flood there can be a new beginning.

Noah builds the ark, the flood covers the earth, and all but the inhabitants of the ark perish. And the final part of our reading tells what happens after the waters subside. God establishes a covenant with Noah and his

descendants. God says, “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

What is remarkable is that there is not much of a change in human behavior after this. The same inclination toward evil is widespread. What has happened is that the writer understands God anew. God is not like an angry judge who loses his patience and punishes with fury. God is like a loving parent who grieves the destruction we bring upon ourselves.

Walter Wangerin tells a story about his son, John. As soon as he learned to read, he fell in love with comic books. He loved them so much, that was all he wanted to read. His parents told him that he also had to read some books of substance. John resisted, so his parents laid down a rule. He could only read a certain number of comics each month. They thought he was abiding by their rule, but one day they discovered, hidden away in young John’s room, stacks of contraband comics. Upon examination, they realized they were all from the public library and not checked out; they were stolen. So John’s parents gave him a stern lecture about lying and stealing. They made him gather up all the comics and take them back to the library and confess what he had done. They hoped that would be the end of the story.

But a year later they discovered another stash of comics in John’s room, and this time they learned the books had been pilfered during a family vacation, at a store near their cabin which was several states away. It was not realistic for John to return them from where he had stolen them, so they gave him a lecture and made him put all his comic books into a fire. Again the parents prayed and hoped that he had learned his lesson.

But before too long, they again found stolen books in his room. They felt desperate to get their message across. How could they stop him from stealing? They chose the method that many would disagree with; they chose corporal punishment. Dad took their son into his study, and gave him both a lecture and a serious spanking. Afterwards the father said: “Sit here in my chair and think about what you have done and what will happen if you do not overcome this.” Then the father went outside, closed the door of his study, leaned against the wall in the hallway, and wept. He wept because of what their son had done. And he wept for what he had done to his son. He wept out of fear for what the future might hold for their child.

Years later, when John was an adult, he returned home and he was reminiscing about his childhood with his mother. At some point the story of the comic books came up. John had grown up to be a very normal adult; not perfect, but certainly not a thief. In the course of their conversation, his mother asked what had turned him around. And John said, “After that time Dad spanked me I never stole again.”

His mother said, “So, it took a spanking.”

And John replied, “No, it was not the spanking. It was because after Dad left the room I heard him crying and I knew I could never take anything again.”

The story of the great flood is the story of God’s tears for fallen, failing humanity. When we live in destructive ways, we reap the consequences of vile behavior, and God weeps. But God never gives up on us. God continues to open doors and provide new opportunities for us to get it right and to inch this world to a better place.

NOTES

1. Carl L. Schenck, “After Losing,” in *Lectionary Homiletics*, (February-March, 2003), p.43.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of the Covenant —
who fashioned an earth intended for good,
and gave all living things a home in which to flourish;
who painted a rainbow across the heavens,
and gave all living things a sign of your faithfulness —
You are the Artist of Creation, the Author of Life ... You are worthy of all our praise!

We give to you our gratitude ... For the blessing of this day, and the promise it holds. For the gift of your mercy, discovered anew each morning. For the presence of your Spirit — always drawing near, always searching our hearts, always interceding with sighs too deep for words.

We give to you our cares ... For a creation that groans for redemption. For communities that long for healing. For hearts that yearn for wholeness. You fashioned sky and sea, birds and beasts and declared them ‘good’ in your sight. But there is much in this world that is *not* as you intended:

There are wounded souls who fill the earth with violence,
choosing paths leading to death and destruction
instead of paths that build up and give life.

There are landscapes consumed by flames, billowing smoke that fouls the air —
and again, your creation suffers the burden of human hubris,
the consequences of appetites that are never satisfied.

There are bodies that succumb to disease,
and minds that drift into fogs of forgetfulness,
beloved ones lost despite our care,
and hearts that stop beating far too soon.

So — Ever-Creating God — we pray for your Spirit to hover once again over chaos and confusion, disorder and death. Sweep over this hurting world and re-claim all things for good.

We give to you our lives, knowing that we return only what we have received. For you are the Lord and Giver of Life. With gratitude, we offer our time, our talent, our treasure ... and our trust. We trust that your creative hand will take these gifts and shape them for your purpose, so that they will enrich your world. We trust that you — who formed the cosmos out of nothing — will transform the most meager offerings into fountains of blessing that renew hope among your people everywhere. Take all that we offer and all that we are, and use us to bear your love, until all creation knows the abundance of your grace.

This we pray in the name of your Son, our Lord, who gave us words to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.