

Sept. 7, 2014

Flood and Promise - Genesis 6:5-22; 9:8-15

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Noah: A boat? God: Yes. Noah: Two of every animal? God: Yes. Noah: I have a better idea. God: What? Noah: Maybe don't kill everyone.

The introduction which I wrote to today's Scripture betrays what I think of it: *This is a terrifying story . . . and also one of covenant.* In this story God says, "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." Is this a God whom we can love? Fear, yes. But love? I don't think so. That's why I don't like this story. and I can't understand why we teach it to children. Yes, it's got animals in it, and drawings of the ark almost always include depictions of the cute ones. But it's not a cute story. It's a story about a God who demands obedience and is willing to kill on a massive, almost universal scale when he doesn't get it.

And that's the other reason I don't like this story. It depicts God as wanting obedience from us more than anything else. This is in direct contradiction to what the historical part of the Old Testament says. And it is in direct contradiction to what Jesus said. When asked what was the most important commandment, Jesus, quoting the Old Testament, said, "Love the LORD your God with all that you have and all that you are." That, say the Scriptures, is what God wants.

But this week I'm stuck with this story. Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever come face to face with a piece of God's Word that bothers you? The easy way out is to skip over that part and go on to something that you find more comforting—or at least less troubling.

But I'm going to wrestle with this one. I'm going to wrestle with it because all of Scripture is the Word of God. I'm going to wrestle with it because if I skip over the parts I don't like, my picture of who God is and what God wants will be missing some pieces. And I'm going to wrestle with it because like Jacob grappling with the heavenly being, I'll be better off for having done so.

First, this comes from the pre-history, those first ten chapters of Genesis before God calls Abraham. These first ten chapters contain stories that would have been familiar to people throughout the Ancient Near East, regardless of their ethnicity or religion. For example, it seems that every Ancient Near Eastern culture had a flood story. What Genesis does is put a spin on those stories that is consistent with the God the Israelites had come to know.

So what's the spin on this flood story? It's violence. This violence starts with Cain killing his brother Abel. And that's just the beginning. Lamech revels in vengeful killing. God looks upon the broken relationship between humans and God and sees that extreme violence among humans is the result. Hear that again: God looks upon the broken relationship between humans and God and sees that extreme violence among humans is the result. The Genesis writer says, "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."

And I learn two things: 1. It's kind of hard to fault God for being angry at the violence we perpetrate on one another. It kind of angers and saddens me, too. And 2. God is depicted here in very human terms. God is not depicted as some slash and burn vengeful deity but as grieved and sorrowful. And it makes me want very much not to do anything that would cause such sorrow in my God. And when I hear the story that way, I hear it a little differently.

And it surprises me that God is willing to start all over again with Noah and his family, knowing full well that he's probably not going to like the results.

And then the end of the story surprises me further. At the end of the story human beings haven't changed, but God has. "I will never do this again. I know what humans will do; they haven't changed. But I have. I will never again destroy every living creature as I have done. Here's the sign of my covenant with you, my promise to you: when I see the rainbow, I will remember my promise."

There is always a "yes, but" or a "maybe not" with this God of Genesis. God tells Adam and Eve that if they eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, that is if they become intimately acquainted with evil, they will die. But when they eat that fruit, God backs off. They don't die. They are cast out of the Garden, but they do not die. God even makes clothes for them. When Cain sets off what will become a violent explosion, God protects him from human vengeance. And now, even though God's heart is grieved and he is sorry that he made us, God looks to start again.

I'm familiar with that. I'm familiar with starting each day as a fully forgiven baptized child of God. I'm familiar with starting each service with confession and forgiveness. I'm familiar with being redeemed by Jesus and being fed Jesus himself. I'm familiar with starting all over.

I still wrestle with this story. But in this terrible story in which God changes his heart I hear a call for me to change mine. And that is my prayer for me and for each one of you.