

Faith Mennonite Church  
June 16, 2013 – God’s Good Creation  
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### **After the Flood: Re-creation and Covenant** Genesis 8 & 9

The story of Noah and the Ark and the flood that destroyed the whole world, like the creation stories that precede it in Genesis, are ancient stories...stories from the earliest memories of one community within humanity. They are similar in part to other creation and flood narratives from other civilizations. They weren't told and later written as historical or scientific accounts, in the way we tend to approach such documents today. But we give them our attention and consider them today—millennia later—to help us understand something of the mystery of God, of our human ancestors, of ourselves in the world today.

As Phil Stoltzfus said in his sermon last Sunday, by the second chapter of Genesis the story of humanity was already heading south. God created an exquisite world filled with flora and fauna and placed humans to be the caretakers of this garden. But although the humans were created in the image of God (something that we don't fully understand), they went their own way and messed things up (something we understand rather well!).

The image of God that we find in these stories is varied and changing. God is powerful, creative, lovingly engaged with the creation, and also irritable. When God sees humanity turning away from God and taking the lives of each other, God gets angry—angry at the creation and seemingly angry at Godself for getting it wrong. So God decides to start over—to let the waters return to their chaotic state as they were at the beginning of creation and to wipe everything out. But not quite: there's one person, Noah, whom God esteems to be faithful, esteems to be trustworthy to reinitiate humanity. God gives Noah the task of building an ark, a large sea-worthy vessel to hold his family and protected species. This turned out to be a thankless task in an arid land with no water in sight. While everyone made jokes about deluded Noah, he listened to God and went about the business of building and gathering his family and representative creatures to save for the task of repopulation.

The flood came, brought on by rain from above and ruptures from below. Imagine the worst storm that a science fiction filmmaker could create with full sound effects. And in the midst of this mother of all storms, a small boat bobbles about, cresting and crashing. If you saw the movie *Life of Pi* you'll remember the concerns about seasick animals when the voyage began. Let's just say that being inside the ark may have saved their lives, but it was not a luxury cruise experience.

We picked up the story in our reading this morning with the words “God remembered Noah and all the animals that were with him in the ark.” *God remembered* is a phrase that appears in various parts of the Hebrew Scriptures. Its Hebrew meaning is broader than a mere recollection of a memory. Rather, it is a physical action of drawing near. When God remembers, God responds and moves toward creation. In this case, God begins to hold back the waters and causes wind to dry the land, allowing the ark to settle and its inhabitants to disembark. As they do, their first act was worship, offering a sacrifice to give thanks for survival, for the chance to begin again.

Meanwhile, God begins to speak. The first speech is self-talk: God says “in God's heart,” to Godself. “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind... nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.” Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman says of this: “Cataclysmic judgment may not change humankind, but the Flood has changed God.”<sup>1</sup> Church of the Brethren theologian Eugene Roop concurs: “Even though humanity’s thoughts and

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggeman, *Genesis* John Knox Press, 1982, 81.

actions remain as they were before the judgment, God is now saying that God will not again participate in the alienation of humanity from its formation, its moorings, its ground. Alienation from that which grounds us may happen,” Roop continues, “but not as God's act of judgment.”<sup>2</sup>

Only after this reflective, self-talk does God address Noah and his family. God's second speech (which we didn't read this morning) is a restatement of the creation command to be fruitful and multiply—to begin the process of re-creation. In the second speech, God assured them, as God does again in the third speech, contained in our reading, that what they have just experienced will not happen to the earth ever again. Here God uses covenant language; God assumes full responsibility. God's actions moving forward will not depend on the human response; this isn't a contract that people can break. And the sign of God's covenant, the rainbow, serves as a reminder to God—not just people—of God's faithful, covenant intention.

So what do we take away from this story today, thousands of years since it was first told? Can we find comfort or direction in these days of super tornados and hurricanes that seem to be increasing in intensity, and amid amplifying signs of climate change and increased unpredictability of weather patterns we've trusted in the past?

First, it's important to remember God's covenant and not to conclude that current weather patterns and devastating storms are God's judgment on particular people—either those affected by the storms, or the easiest group at hand to scapegoat.

Second, the care for the earth that God entrusted to humans at creation and at re-creation, after the flood, remains in effect. We are invited to be Adam and Eve and Noah and his family, to make wise choices and care for this magnificent yet fragile creation. If anyone is to blame for the changing climate and the growing intensity of storms, it is likely the sum of our collective actions that have polluted the environment, and increased harmful greenhouse gasses. Some will scoff at any action we might take—as they did while Noah built his ark. Drive a small car with less comfort? Build a smaller house or live in a multiplex without a large lawn to mow and fertilize? Walk or bike or bus as often as possible, even if takes a bit longer? But these crazy things may just be the things that keep us and our planet afloat.

Over the centuries some have compared the ark with the church—a place of protection in an uncertain and dangerous world. Every analogy and comparison has its shortcomings, and some have no doubt thought of “church as ark” as an escape from the world. But how lovely to think of the church, of the people of faith, as a place of protection, of rescue and preservation, riding out the storm in hope because we trust in a God who remembers... a God who moves toward us in our distress. A God who kept covenant, coming close again, intimately close and among us in Jesus, and who abides with us through the Spirit, remaining faithful to the promise that we will not be permanently separated or removed from our earth-garden home.

And the reality of the ark, filled with sea-sick people and animals, can reassure us that the experience of church isn't always going to be pleasant or smooth sailing. We sometimes annoy each other. We can't always meet all the needs or bind up all the wounds. We sometimes imagine that jumping ship, even into choppy seas, may be preferable to staying on a vessel that doesn't always have a clear direction.

But a final truth of the story is that the ark, the church, and each of us, like Noah and his family, are ultimately not the ones in charge, not the ones to make the final call. We are a very small part of a vast universe, yet we are loved. Staying together as a body, in this church, on this ark, may well save us, and save the world. God remembers. Christ redeems and is present among us. Let us continue the work of re-creation. Let us trust the God who keeps covenant.

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Roop, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Genesis*. Herald Press 1987, 71.