

The story of Noah and the Ark is one of the best-known stories of the Bible. There are probably at least three reasons for this. First, any story with animals in it is popular. Kids especially love hearing about Noah guiding the animals two by two into the ark to save them from the flood. Many a nursery has wallpaper borders or baby quilts featuring pairs of elephants, camels, lions, and giraffes waiting their turn to walk up the gangplank onto the ark. Many a toddler has her own little plastic ark whose deck comes off revealing the toy animals inside. What other story is there that a parent can use that can teach children the names of so many different animals?

A second reason for the story of Noah being so well known is all the jokes that spring from it, such as “Why didn’t Noah go fishing while he was on the ark?” (He only had two worms.) Or fun tales about the unicorn that didn’t make it on board, or our wistful regrets on hot summer evenings that Noah hadn’t slapped those two mosquitoes.

A third reason people know the story of Noah, even if they know little else of the Bible, is the part about the rainbow. A week ago Saturday here in Plymouth we had a fast moving rainstorm pass just before sunset, resulting in a beautiful rainbow in the eastern sky. Even though I understand that a rainbow is the result of water vapor refracting light and splitting white light into the colors of the spectrum, I was still in awe of these brilliant colors suddenly appearing in the sky. Jackie and I were taking a walk at this time and we got to enjoy this rainbow for over twenty minutes and the sunshine was bright enough that even the purples on the inner edge were clear. I can only imagine the mystical impact a rainbow would have on ancient people trying to figure out the significance of this multicolored bow mysteriously appearing in the sky.

These are some of the reasons that the story of Noah and the Ark is one of the best-known stories of the Bible. But we could also make the case that the story of Noah and the Ark is one of the least-known stories in the Bible. We know the basic aspects of the story – God tells Noah to build an ark and take the animals on board, it rains for 40 days and 40 nights causing a flood, the rains stop, the waters recede, Noah and the animals get off, and God puts a rainbow in the sky as a sign that the world will never again be destroyed by a flood. That’s a fair outline of the story, but it’s not the whole story. To really know the story of Noah and the Ark, we need to identify the point of the story. What is this story trying to tell us? What does the story tell us about God? What does it tell us about humankind? The story of Noah is a faith story, so what religious truth is it teaching us?

Let’s see if we can answer some of those questions. We’ll start by identifying the context of the story within the book of Genesis. Genesis is the first of a collection of five books sometimes called the Pentateuch (“penta” meaning five). These books tell the history of the people of Israel from their father, Abraham (who we’ll read about next week) through Moses (who we read about two following weeks). But as a prelude to this story, we find an introduction that spans the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Here we find ancient stories brimming with theological insights about creation, the origins of humankind, and sin.

Genesis begins with two stories about creation which address the questions “Who created the world?” and “Why was the world created?” The answers are, “The world didn’t just come about by chance, nor was it the result of battles among several gods (as some of Israel’s neighbors maintained). The world was created out of nothing by the LORD God, the God who revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses.” And why did God create humankind? The stories assert that we are created in God’s own image so that God might be in relationship with us. God gives us free will so that we might love God freely, for love not given freely is not love.

But sin entered the world when the humans decided they wanted to be like God – that’s the reason Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. They want to be like God. After that, things go from bad to worse very quickly. Cain murders his brother Abel, and human

society gets more and more corrupt until God decides that making these humans was a mistake and the only thing to do is scrap the project and start all over again. God decides to send a flood.

What is God's motivation for this decision? Most of us assume that God was angry, or at least frustrated, but that's not what the story says. It says God's motivation was grief – "The LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." Think about that insight. Do you ever think of God as experiencing grief and heartache over our actions?

This grieving God sets out to make a new creation, purifying the earth with flood waters. Does God succeed? If you read the story, you find that when the waters have receded and Noah's family and the animals disembark, Noah builds an altar and offers a sacrifice to God. And God's response is "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the imagination of the human heart is evil from youth." Even by starting over again with Noah and his family, God realizes that evil has not been eradicated. You only need read the verses that follow today's reading to discover that Noah next plants a vineyard, makes wine, and gets drunk – not any improvement on Adam and Eve. God accepts the paradox that the humans who are made in God's image are the same ones who trouble God's heart.

God surveys the situation and says "Never again" – never again will I destroy the earth. What has changed to prompt God to say "never again"? Did humankind change? No, the humans are just as sinful after the flood as before the flood. Did creation change? No, evil still exists in creation. Then what changed? God changed. God repents of his action to destroy the earth and says "never again". God unilaterally makes a promise, or covenant, not only with Noah but with all of creation that he will never again destroy the earth. As a sign of the covenant, he puts his bow in the sky. That may seem like a quaint detail for us, but it wasn't for the people for whom this story was first told. You must remember that a bow and arrow was the most lethal weapon in existence at that time. For us it would be a cruise missile or maybe even a nuclear weapon. God hangs up his weapon, his bow – he puts it on a shelf and promises he'll never use it again.

This is very significant. This ancient story is telling us that God is not going to use a one-to-one connection of guilt and punishment in dealing with us. There's no denying that we will still experience death and destruction. Evil has not been eradicated from creation. But we are here assured that these are not rooted in the anger or rejection of God. His weapon has been put away. From here on out, our relationship with God is not based on retribution, but on unqualified grace.

It's interesting that the purpose of the rainbow is not to remind *us* of God's covenant. Its purpose is to remind *God* of the covenant. "When the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh."

The gospel in this story, the good news for us, is that God remembers us. This surprising God who is not above changing his mind, who grieves when his love for us is not returned, remembers us. No matter what floods and chaos we encounter, we are not forgotten. God remembers us. The waters of chaos and death cut through everything else in our lives, but they cannot cut through God's commitment to us.

The experience of Noah in the waters of the flood is often used as an analogy to our experience in baptism. We will see that in a line in our next hymn, where Lina Sandell writes, "Oh, wash me in the waters of Noah's cleansing flood." She's talking about baptism. We face the paradox that though our sins are forgiven in the waters of baptism, we continue to be sinful. Yet God makes a covenant with us in the waters of baptism – a unilateral covenant. God makes a decision for us, claims us as his own, and promises that whenever floods may seem on the verge of overwhelming us, he will remember us and be present with us.