

“The Rainbow Covenant”

Genesis 6, 8, 9

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Did you ever wish you could have a “do-over?” You know what I mean, right? Like when you were a kid playing kickball in the street and neither side can agree whether the ball was kicked outside or inside the playing field. One of the kids would yell “do over” and the kicker would go back to home plate to kick again. Or when you played a board game and the dice would roll on the floor, someone would call do over and you’d be allowed to roll again. I don’t know about you but to me it seems we called do-overs a lot more when we were kids than we do now.

Wouldn’t you like to have more do-overs as adults? If you make a mistake, you could just call “do-over” and it would be wiped out and you could try again. Things you have done wrong, words you wish you could take back, situations that you handled poorly, actions that you regret, you could just call “do-over” and you’d get another chance. Especially as a parent, wouldn’t those be our most precious do-overs? Today is Father’s Day, and I know that I’m very proud of my children now that they are young adults. But there are certainly things that I wish I could do over. Mistakes I made when they were children, words that were said in anger, words of love that were never said. I’m sure there are lots of dads that would like a do over. That seems to be what is happening here with God.

Last week we talked about creation and that God had pronounced it good. But here, in Chapter 6, God begins to regret what he had done because of the wickedness of humanity. And so he calls for a do-over. He decides to start over again with just one pair of each animal and with just one family, the family of Noah. And so he sends a great flood. And the waters cover the face of

the earth. That makes it sound like a return to the way things were in the beginning. Remember how last week's story began? "In the beginning, when God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." All there is is God and the precreation waters of chaos. Water, to many of the ancient peoples, was a symbol, not always of good, but of chaos, of disorder. How does one control water? Water has no form of itself, it just takes the form of whatever container it is in. Water comes from the sky, but we can't control when it does. Water is in the sea, but that was a frightening place to the ancients, and still can be to us today. So a flood, a worldwide flood, is a return to the way things were before God ever spoke the words of creation. Scary to the ancient mind; and for many who worry about future of the earth, it is scary today as well. The flood waters here are a return to home base, a do over.

But let's be clear about these stories. If you look through the stories in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, you will notice something important. Like Rudyard Kipling's "Just So Stories," these folktales are stories that answer questions. They don't speak to us in a modern historical sense, but they teach truth through story. They answer questions: why do people hate snakes, why is there so much pain in childbirth, why are there so many languages in the world, and why is there a rainbow after it rains? This story of Noah is not an easy story—it's really not a children's story. On the surface it's a difficult tale about a God who is judgmental, who is sorry that he ever created human beings.

But is that what this story is supposed to teach us?

Is that what it says about us and about God?

Rabbi Marc Gellman tells a story about Noah and God. He says,

Like most people, Noah ignored bad news. For example, when God told Noah that only his family would be saved from the big flood, Noah figured, “God is very busy. Maybe the rest of the passenger list is in the mail. After all, this ark God wants me to build is huge. I’m sure there will be more than enough room for *all* my friends.

Later on, when God told Noah to take pairs of all the animals onto the ark, Noah understood right then that there would be no room for his friends. Noah didn’t have the heart to come right out and tell his friends. But he did try to tell them in a roundabout way. He said to his pal Jabal, “You know, Jabal, this might be a very good time for you to take those swimming lessons you’ve been talking about for so long.”

And to his friend Jehaz, “Jehaz, ol’ buddy, take my advice and move your house to the top of that very high mountain. The view is great over there and it’s much cooler in the summertime.” But Noah just could not bear to come right out and tell his friends about the flood. Noah’s friends didn’t pay much attention to his advice. But they became very curious about the huge pile of wood in Noah’s front yard. Noah told them it was just a statue. And even after the thing really looked like a boat, he said it was just a statue of a boat.

Noah’s friends thought he was nuts. But then they thought that Noah was nuts even before he started building the ark. Then the animals started to arrive. Noah still could not tell his friends the truth. So he said the animals were just there to pull the boat to the sea. But his friends did not believe him.

“Chipmunks?” asked one.

“Rabbits?” asked another. And they shook their heads.

On the day the rains began, the animals all ran into the ark. The water began to cover the ground. And Noah’s friends ran to the ark, banged on the door, and called up to Noah, who was peeping over the side of the ark: “Hey Noah, you rat, let us in. We’re your friends! You can’t float off and leave us here to drown. Save us, Noah! Save us!”

Noah looked down with tears in his eyes and said, “I didn’t pick me. God picked me. What can I do?” Noah’s friends Jehaz and Jabal came up to the ark dressed in a zebra suit. They demanded to be let in. Noah knew it was them. They were too lumpy to be a zebra. “Let us—I mean, let me in,” they said. “You forgot me when you gathered in all the animals. I am a Jehaz—I mean—a zebra.” Noah looked down on his friends and spoke through his tears.

“My dear friends, I don’t know how I can live without you. The world was not this bad when God gave it to us. I don’t know why God is saving me. Maybe God needs someone to tell the story of how we all messed up the world. Maybe God wants some of the old life to grow up in a new clean place. Honestly, I don’t know. All I know is that I didn’t pick me. God picked me. I will remember you always. And I will tell the story of how to live in the right way. The story we all were told by God and by our parents but that we forgot. Maybe my children’s children will learn the story. And then maybe the world will not turn bad again. And then nobody will ever have to say good-bye to his friends again. I love you. I am sorry for you, sorry for the animals, sorry for me, and sorry for God.”

Then the great rains came and flooded all the earth.

Some say it was just rain, but others say it was God's tears.¹

And that's what this story is all about to me. Oh, you can find people who will debate with you about whether a worldwide flood really happened, whether all the animals could have fit on the ark, even some who will say that this is how the dinosaurs died and that—like the Irish Rovers song---*Noah forgot*

the unicorn. But I think all those arguments miss the point. The point of the story can be found in what it tells us about God: God is not a God of judgment, but one of compassion and forbearance.

The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann tells us that what is fundamental to this story is

“the change wrought in God which makes possible a new beginning for creation . . . The flood has effected no change in humankind. But it has effected an irreversible change in God. . . It is now clear that such a commitment to the creation on God's part is costly. The God-world relation is not simply that of a strong God and needy world. Now it is a tortured relation between a grieved God and a resistant world. And of the two, the real changes are in God.”²

Human beings aren't any better at the end of this story. But what is affirmed to us is the covenant that God makes. But did you notice? God makes this covenant first with himself. In chapter 8 God speaks to himself and determines that he will never destroy humanity and God's creation again. Not because we are good, but because God is good.

1

Gellman, Marc. *Does God Have a Big Toe?* New York: Harper Collins, 1989. Pp. 31-33

2

Brueggemann, Walter. *Genesis*. Pp. 73, 81

“Thus, the conclusion of this story of the flood comes clear: human beings, even after the flood, remain evil. The flood has not washed that evil away. It is YHWH who has changed because of the flood. Though we humans are evil, YHWH resolves never again to destroy us because of that fact. It could be said that the God of strict justice who brought the flood has now become the God of grace who forbears from destruction in the face of our continual evil. The unceasing round of the seasons ([Gen 8:22](#)) is a perpetual sign that YHWH is keeping the divine promise to the sinful creatures.”³

That’s what the rainbow tells us. It takes a couple of chapters to get here, but the story of the Flood is really the story of the rainbow and the promise that we can trust in God. Yes, we might deserve punishment, but the rainbow is the sign that God will put up with us, that he will suffer when we choose evil, and he will find a way to redeem us.

What then does this covenant mean to us? Does it mean that we can just relax and do whatever we want because God will not punish us? Or does it mean something deeper? Does it show God’s unceasing love of his creation and if we are lovers of God then we are to love what God loves? How can we not care about climate or the elimination of whole species or the starvation of nations when this story tells us that God cares about those very things? Notice that God cares about his creation even when creation did not care about him. As those created in God’s image, that’s what we are to reflect to the created order and to our fellow human beings: care, whether we like them or not, whether they treat us well or not. Back in Genesis 2, Adam was put into the Garden of Eden to “keep it and till it.” To care for it and make it better. Is that what we do? As Christians our call is to emulate the God of grace and the Christ we worship, by caring for the world and one another and making the world better than we found it. Yesterday morning at 7:30

3 Holbert, John C. “A Grace -Filled God: Reflections on Genesis 6.” June, 19, 2011

there were 20 youth here at the church along with their leaders who were leaving for West Virginia to do just that. Their lives will change because of what they are doing this week. They are caring for others, making the world a little bit better, and learning to depend on and love each other as they are working. And you have done the same thing in making it possible for them to go. The back office was filled with coolers and snacks and bags of things for them to take. The refrigerator and freezer were packed full of your donations so it was possible for them to go. You are showing your care. You are making the world a little better when you support them. You are taking part in the rainbow covenant that God has made with himself and with all creation.

So, this is not really a do-over. God still uses the people and the animals that he created in the beginning. The story tells us that God decides to go with the world, come what may in the way of human wickedness. God makes this promise, not simply in spite of human failure, but *because* human beings are sinful. This story tells us that what we do, what we choose may cause God to weep, but that he will never, ever give up on us.