

The Flood: Resetting Creation

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How is Noah's Ark like a church? If it were not for the storm outside, you couldn't stand the smell on the inside. A bit ridiculous, but maybe not completely. Think about it...

On the day that I was invited to give this sermon, our local newspaper, "The Observer," ran an article on Michael Purves-Smith who had died the previous week. Purves-Smith was a resident of Elmira, a professional musician and professor at Laurier and Brock, and a strong environmental activist, as is his wife. The editor, Steve Kannon, summarized a two-volume novel Purves-Smith had written, entitled "Rocky Mountain Locust." Kannon admitted that he himself has a pessimistic view of the future - an advancing police state, filled with surveillance, loss of democracy and collapse of the environment. Purves-Smith, on the other hand, remained optimistic that "the better angels of our nature would emerge."

Kannon summarizes the book thusly: Purves-Smith paints a romantic picture of humanity re-learning to become part of nature. That may seem odd given that the story begins with a large-scale virus killing off almost every human. The few survivors, having lost the bulk of all the modern conveniences we take for granted, learn to cooperate with nature and each other. He essentially imagines life if we had a do-over, a new chance to avoid the mistakes we made on the road to "progress."

Holy Mackerel, I thought, this sounds like a modern version of the Flood Story, the main difference being that God is clearly in the picture in the Bible. God seems to say, Let's reset this whole thing and start over.

I genuinely feel we need to be humble when we read the Bible and strive to understand its message for us today. I cringe inside when I hear people use language like, "My Bible says..." or "what about no do you not understand." Look, these chapters in Genesis were put into writing about 2,500 years ago, preceded by hundreds of years of oral tradition. That's a long time ago and world views were very different from what they are today. Just think of how today grandchildren and grandparents compare the worlds... That is just a difference of 60 or so years. For our text, we are talking here of a bridge of over 2,500 years.

I sometimes struggle with how could those fantastic things happen way back in Biblical times, and they don't today. Like the sun standing still (Joshua) and the whole world being flooded (Noah). I sometimes say that some of the history recorded in the OT is "poetic history." I suspect that phrase may not be original with me. Re-reading a book by Alan Richardson which I read way back in my school days, I caught something of the same understanding. Richardson wrote that the language of religion is the language of parable and poetry. Ultimate truth can best be communicated by means of images, not by the exact prose of science. He suggests understanding these early chapters in Genesis as parable, a teaching tool used so effectively by Jesus. (Richardson p. 18)

In 1968, Margie and I started a "cycle d'orientation" (equivalent to grades 9 and 10) in northeast Congo, on a Norwegian Baptist mission station. We started with 90 students, 89 boys and 1 girl,

ranging in ages from 14 to 20. One morning a dead adult male was pulled from the river that ran by the mission and was laid on the ground near our school. He had been killed with a blow to the head. During my first class that morning, I discussed this matter with the students, many of whom claimed the man had been killed by little white men who lived under the river. Given my advanced education and arrogant enlightened world view, I challenged that assumption. "Have you ever seen these little white men," I asked. No-one did. Then one of the biggest guys in the room stood up and said, "Monsieur le Directeur, have you ever seen Jesus?" Aha, he caught me! I threw the question back to the class. The smallest guy in the class got up and says, "I know Jesus is alive, because he lives in my heart!" Whew, salvation! I said a hearty thanks and resumed the lesson for the day.

For many years I have looked back on that event and kick myself for not pursuing that legend or myth or poetic history. I was arrogant, dismissing it as stupid. What I should have done was try to find out where and how that idea originated. I would guess nobody would really know, but it did start somewhere, sometime, based on something dramatic that happened and people tried to understand it. I can guess, but I won't take the time here. I later would hear from veteran missionaries and African church leaders that Africans took to Christianity in a big way in large part because they could identify with these fantastic OT stories in ways that we from the post-enlightenment, scientific west could not. These fantastic Biblical stories connected with their culture in ways they do not with my culture.

So, why did I share that story? I am guessing that the "little white men under the river" was based on something that happened back a while ago. A legend developed around it to understand what had happened. In like manner, there is considerable evidence that a massive flood occurred in the "Middle East" way back in pre-historic times. Various peoples and cultures tried to understand that event and developed stories around it. The Biblical writers knew of those stories and used them because it was language people of their time would know. But they dramatically reshaped them to help their people understand who God was.

Of the various flood stories that floated around at that time, the flood story in our Bible is most similar to the flood story that came from the Babylonian empire where the elite of the Hebrew people were kept captive for about 70 years, in the 6th century BCE. They used these stories, but with major differences... E.g., the Babylonian account begins with no clear reason for the flood and ends with granting immortality to the main character of their story (Utnapishtim).

The Biblical account begins with a clear reason and ends with a very different conclusion. Which we will get to.

The Biblical Flood story is a blending of two Hebrew traditions, known as J and P. This blending shows up in what we modern smarties find inconsistencies in the narrative. For example, how many animals was Noah instructed to bring into the ark? Most of us would say a pair (male and female) of every kind. Genesis 6:19-20 (P). That is true, but we also read a chapter later that Noah was ordered to take seven pairs of each of the clean animals and one pair of each of the unclean animals. Genesis 7:2-3 (J). How long did the flood last, or how long did everybody need to remain the ark once the rains started? Most of us would probably recall the phrase "40 days and 40 nights." Then add a few weeks for the ark to hit dry land... The text also says the ark was

a float for over a year. These differences obviously did not bother the Hebrew writers. The main point was not a scientific historical account. This is not a history lesson. This is a theological lesson.

What was the main point? A couple of writers put it this way... The Biblical account turns the flood legend into a “magnificent presentation of the awfulness of God’s judgment and the wonderful quality of his mercy.” (Richardson p. 97 and Logan p.62)

The awfulness of God’s judgment. What on earth does that mean? Here again I will go out on a limb. If you don’t agree, that’s OK... Does God zap people with brutal judgment because they disobeyed God and made God angry? Or, is the judgment, at least in part, self-inflicted? That is, God created a world that was good... A world of harmony, good will, kindness, justice, etc. If humans destroy that goodness, they reap the consequences. E.g., Smoke heavily and you destroy your lungs. God did not make lungs to filter smoke. A nation builds up arms, other nations do also to stay even, or stronger. Eventually someone throws a match into the tinder box and there is massive destruction. Self-inflicted judgment on pride, greed, power.

Is judgement self-inflicted or a direct act of God? Or both? I’d say both.

So, let’s go to our text.

There are two separately stated reasons for God’s judgment (from the two streams - J&P).

Gen. 6:5-7... The people of the whole world had become wicked and their hearts were inclined toward evil all of the time. The Lord was grieved and his heart was full of pain. God was **grieved that he had created humans**.

The Noah story starts here. Now we get another reason for the flood...

Gen. 6:11- The earth was **corrupt** and full of **violence**. What a combination! Corruption and violence, combined with wickedness. A **perfect storm** for really bad self-inflicted consequences.

God decides to put an end to all people and all animals... except for Noah, his family and selected animals.

In a way, we could say that God hit the re-set button. Enough! Let’s wipe the slate clean and start anew. Well, mostly anew.

Today we might say all hell broke loose. In this story, all water broke loose.

Gen. 7:11-12... all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. Rain fell on the earth for 40 days and 40 nights.

The waters rose and covered the mountains. Gen. 7:19

Sound a bit like Genesis 1:2? The earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; men and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds of the air were wiped from the earth.... Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark. Gen. 7:23

The slate is clean. We can pretty much start over.

Noah sends out a dove to test the environment. It returns with nothing the first time because the land was not yet dry. The second time it returns carrying a freshly picked olive leaf in its beak. A powerful sign of peace replacing anger and pain... and foreshadowing our currently common peace symbol... a dove with an olive branch in its beak. (Mennonite Church logo)

Gen. 8:20-21... The first thing Noah did after all people and animals were off the ark was to build an altar and sacrifice some of the clean animals and birds he had cared for in the ark. God smelled the pleasing aroma (echoes of Abel's sacrifice?) and **God said in his heart**, "Never again will I curse the ground because of man (echoes of Eden?), even though every inclination of his heart is evil (echoes of the reason for the flood in the first place).

Gen 9:1ff... God tells Noah and his family to be fruitful and multiply (echoes of Gen 1:28)

Gen 9:8-11... **God said to Noah and his family**: I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants and every living creature on earth - the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals. Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood. The re-creating God acted to promote and affirm all life, not just human life.

Gen 9:12-17... God said, "This is the sign of the covenant... I have set my **rainbow** in the clouds... Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and **all living creatures of every kind on the earth.**" In these verses we see themes familiar to us today - **inclusion and creation care**. Each a big topic unto itself.

Every appearance of a rainbow is a reminder of God's pledge to care for all of creation, all humans, all animals. God set aside his righteous anger and "set his bow in the clouds." The Hebrew word for rainbow is the same as that for "war-bow." (Richardson p. 112)

Two powerful symbols of peace, proclaiming God's intent for all creation - a **dove** bearing an **olive leaf**... and a **war-bow transformed** into a beautiful rainbow calling an end to violence, corruption and wickedness.

I would guess that all of us grew up thinking that this story ends with a beautiful rainbow. It doesn't end that way. It ends with Noah lying naked and drunk in his tent.

I take this disgusting scene as a dramatic punctuation mark, driving home the point that God's promise of "never again" holds true regardless of any vile behaviour of humanity. No one is cut off from God, unless they so choose to be cut off. But even then, God does not abandon anyone. The rainbow hovers over everyone with loving embrace.

As we sit on the edge of nuclear disaster (the clock moved recently closer to midnight) and with the rising global temperature and sea levels, it is quite understandable to wonder whether this covenant of “never again” will prevent the near annihilation of life on earth. Will the novel by Michael Purves-Smith be prophetic?

Whatever the answer may be, this we know from this narrative... God’s patience will never run out. God will continue to allow humanity the freedom to destroy itself. That freedom has not been revoked even if humanity continues to be utterly evil (Gen 8:21). This story assures us that God’s action will always be toward creation and not destruction.

The idea of covenant is fundamental to our scriptures. It is distinctive to Biblical religion because it implies a unique relationship between God and humanity. A binding together of two dissimilar parties. God binds himself to his people as a voluntary act of mercy and love. It is unconditional: There is no “but if” or “unless” or “except for.”

What is my “take-away” from the Flood story?

At the macro level:

We have God’s promise of “never again” will all the earth be destroyed, balanced with the freedom of humanity to continue the very behaviour that caused God’s pain and anger - wickedness, violence and corruption... the perfect storm for self-inflicted destruction which God, in the flood, took to its ghastly conclusion.

Why, or why, does so much of humanity continue in its self-destructive ways?

In 2013, a report commissioned by the Pentagon on climate change stated that “due to climate change in the southern hemisphere the US needs to protect itself from starving migrants.” (From *The Mennonite*, January 2018, p.35)

This report was issued 15 years ago. So, what is the US doing about this report? Some high level officials today deny climate change, or alternatively, some say, OK, the climate is getting warmer, but people do better in warmer climates.

Will building walls to keep out “hungry migrants” people work?... Forecasters estimate that there will be between 25 million and one billion “environmental migrants” by 2050 with 200 million being the most widely cited estimate. (UN sources)

The beautiful South African city of Cape Town, 4 million residents, is the first major city in the world to completely run out of water. April 21 will be Day Zero when the city’s taps will be closed... the result of a long drought, mismanagement, residents not cutting back as requested. Greed? After Day Zero, the majority of residents will have to line up at communal water points to collect their daily allotment of 6.6 gallons—under the gaze of armed guards. A local South African paper (*John’s Telegram*) declares that the world view of greed has to change - because

“eventually, in a whole host of ways, just like Cape Town, we will all face our own Day Zeros. We’re going to ride the personal greed train right over the cliff.”

There are over 15,000 nuclear weapons in the world (90% in the US and Russia), enough to obliterate life on earth several times over. Will humanity self-destruct? Will God allow it since he said never again?

What I take from the flood story is that God will not push humanity over the cliff. Humanity may take us close. But the rainbow of promise hovers over us forever. God will not abandon his creation to self-destruction.

At the micro level:

I see in the Flood story the willingness of God to say to each of us: People make mistakes - we miss the mark (sin). Let’s turn this around (repentance means turning around) and start over. Reset and re-create.

Several decades ago I recall giving a series of sermons on the sermon on the mount. When I came to the section on divorce and remarriage, I was tempted to skip that section, hoping no one would catch on. It was a hot potato issue back then. A typical comment was something like this: OK, separation is understandable. But remarriage?

If we allow this, then anything goes! In the congregation there were about 5 couples who had joined our congregation, as divorced and remarried couples. What would I say? In brief, I recall saying something like this: The good news of Jesus Christ is forgiveness and new starts. There is not a couple in this congregation who set out wishing for a divorce. It was painful, a failure, a missing of the mark. But they also have clearly learned from the past, letting go of the failure, and working at their current marriage perhaps in ways that those who remain together can learn from. I don’t think I would change my message.

In the Flood story, humanity had grossly failed. It was evil. God was fed up. But instead of closing the book, he cleaned the slate and said let’s start over again, knowing full well that we humans will continue to do bad things, just like Noah did after being saved by the Ark.

I see in this story God’s promise never to destroy life on earth again most fully realized in the birth, teaching/life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, where God takes the judgment for sin upon himself rather than upon humanity.

I see two bookends of an amazing story... First bookend, humanity descending in a form of evil self-destruction, God taking that destruction to its end, and then making a covenant with humanity never to do that again. Second bookend, through the birth, teachings, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, God taking the sins of the world upon himself.

May the rainbow be a constant sign to everyone of us that God’s spirit hovers over us at all times in love and mercy.

I close with an adaptation of an ancient blessing:

May the Lord bless us and keep us. May the very face of God shine on us and be gracious unto us. May God's presence embrace us, hover over us like a glorious rainbow after a storm and give us peace, deep peace.