

## A God Who Promises (Lent 1)

### Prayer of Illumination

Present God,  
Settle our hearts.  
Still our minds.  
And stir our imaginations,  
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

### Genesis 9:8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth."

God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

The Word of the Lord.  
Thanks be to God.

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### A God Who Promises

I own a lot of Bibles, but perhaps the most unusual are two slim volumes that are part of a series titled, *Awkward Moments (Not Found in Your Average) Children's Bible*. Each volume takes problematic passages from the Bible and pairs them with whimsical illustrations to create a sense of cognitive dissonance that is designed to encourage people to think more deeply about the Bible and the stories we find in it.

The story of Noah and his ark is a perfect example. We put images of it everywhere—there is one down in the youth room that used to be the church nursery, my kids had a Noah's Ark bath toy that was passed down to us from another church family when we first got pregnant. And it is a story that can be found on the cover of many children's bibles. It is one of those

stories with seeming universal appeal. One author refers to it as the story of the mobile zoo, which perhaps sums up why we so often connect it to children.<sup>1</sup> Except, of course, that the mobile zoo, the ark, is only part of the story. Here is the rest of the story, as depicted in the first volume of the Awkward Moments books.

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<sup>1</sup> Bible Story for Grown-Ups Video

# Floaters

The Lord regretted ever creating human beings. And He was sad. So the Lord said, "I will wipe all the human race off the face of the earth! While I'm at it, I'll kill the livestock and the crawling things, too! I'll even kill all the birds in the sky. I wish I had never created any of them in the first place!"

*Genesis 6:6-7*



The story is titled Floaters and reads, "The Lord regretted ever creating human beings. And God was sad. So the Lord said, "I will wipe all the human race off the face of the earth! While

I'm at it, I'll kill all the livestock and the crawling things, too! I will even kill all the birds in the sky. I wish I had never created any of them in the first place."

While we might question the tastefulness of the drawing, the text is quite faithful scripture. Genesis chapter 6, verses 5 through 7 read, "The Lord saw that humanity had become thoroughly evil on the earth and that every idea their minds thought up was always completely evil. The Lord regretted making human beings on the earth, and God was heartbroken. So, the Lord said, 'I will wipe off of the land the human race that I've created: from human beings to livestock to the crawling things to the birds in the skies, because I regret I ever made them."

This is the part of the story we do not always tell and often try hard to avoid thinking about—the fate of all those who were not on that mobile zoo—the people and animals and plants who did not survive the flood. Regardless of whether you want to take this story literally or not, whether you believe it happened or not, the story is problematic.

To begin with, it is an awkward story to tell children. Unlike most adults who have come to just accept the story of Noah as straightforward, children who hear the story of Noah and the ark do not often miss the unspoken fact that there were lots of people who were not on that boat. And while adults tend not to ask the obvious question, what kind of God would do that, for fear that the answer might bring a lifetime's worth of religious indoctrination to a grinding halt, many children have no such inhibitions.

So, let us pause for a moment and consider what kind of God would drown almost the whole of creation, including, one must assume, animals and children, who surely were not (or at least not yet) guilty of violence. Because here we are, a mere six chapters into this story of God's creation and already things are falling apart. Adam and Eve disobeyed God's instructions, Cain killed his brother Abel, and now humanity has become thoroughly evil.

It has all gone so bad that the text says that God regrets making humankind. God wants a clean sweep, a chance to try again. It is easy to skip over this part to the drama of building an ark and surviving a flood, but this is a profound theological statement. We are a mere six chapters into the story of God and God's creation and what we are learning is that God does not actually seem to be in control of creation. More than that, this is a God who is capable of making mistakes, of regretting their actions. Six chapters in and what we are learning about God is that They seem to be figuring this whole creation thing out as They go—that God is improvising, trying to figure out how to work with creation. Six chapters in and what we learn is that God is not infallible.

And this is problematic. This is problematic because it goes against so many ingrained beliefs. Because we want to believe in a God who is in control. We might struggle with how to make sense of a God who would allow bad things to happen or how our own free will fits into the picture, but those struggles are often far preferable to the alternative belief that God is not in control. After all, if God can make mistakes, then who exactly is making sure everything happens for a reason or that all will, in fact, be well?

So, we have a God who is capable of massacre and a God who is not infallible nor in complete control of what is going on earth and we are only six chapters in. Honestly, part of me wants a clean sweep at this point. But let us pause here for a moment and acknowledge three things. First, there are plenty of other places in the Bible where God is depicted as infallible and loving, so this is not the only depiction we get of God. Second, this is not a story that is meant to be read literally as if it were journalistic news. The story of the flood existed in almost every culture. Israel's neighbors had a flood story as did cultures on the other side of the globe. Flood stories were foundational myths that have been found in over 200 different cultures, which leads us to the third point. In their effort to distinguish their beliefs from the beliefs of other cultures, our religious ancestors changed the flood story.

As author Matthew Myer Boulton says, "when the authors of Genesis sat down to write their version of the story, or to collect the versions already circulating, the importance or legitimacy of the subject would have been taken for granted. Every educated person in the ancient world would have been aware of the stories of the Great Flood.

"And from their point of view, only God could have caused it. The open questions were, why? And what does it say about God? And what does it say about us?

"On the face of it, the very idea of a primordial divinely caused destructive flood seems to say that God is violent, that God operates through violence. A brutal divine warrior. And by extension, what it seems to say about us is that if we know what's good for us, we ought to live in fear of God's brutality, of God's anger, of the divine warrior's vindictive, callous power."<sup>2</sup>

But that is not the message that the writers of the Bible gave to this primordial myth. Instead, the story of Noah's ark is a story about a God who loves humanity and who is grieved about the state of humanity. It tells the story not of a divine punishment but of a divine realization. What is fascinating about the story of Noah's ark is that the only thing that changes from the beginning of the story to end of the story is God. In chapter 8, God acknowledges that flooding the world has not changed who humans are, "the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth," God admits in verse 21. And yet, God decides that never again will God destroy every living thing. The flood has not changed humanity, it has changed God.

We hear about the bow in the sky and picture a rainbow, but the word 'bow' in Genesis refers to an archer's bow. God is hanging up Their weapon. God is choosing to permanently lay aside violence as a response to human evil. This divine, all-powerful God who created the world and then basically wiped it clean again, is choosing to place limits on Themselves for the sake of being in relationship with us. Listen again to the text from our passage for this morning, ""This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.saltproject.org/podcast-strange-new-world/2024/2/13/understanding-easter-part-one-the-beginning>

of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and [I will] remember the everlasting covenant ..." The bow is placed in the sky not to remind us, but to remind God. The story of Noah's ark may begin as a story about human evil and violence, but it becomes a story about God's promise to never again respond to violence with violence.

All Lent we will be hearing stories and passages from the Bible that talk about God's Covenant—God's promise to be in relationship with us, and beginning next week, we will see that this Covenant is going to ask us to be in partnership with God. But it is important to note, here at the very beginning, that God's very first Covenant with humanity is one in which nothing is asked of us. God chooses this act freely and without condition. Nothing we do or say or do not do or do not say will change God's desire to be in relationship with us and God's promise not to do us harm.

This means, of course, that we will need to rethink the belief that everything happens for a reason. We will need to shift from worrying that God is allowing bad things to happen to us to trusting that God takes the bad things that happen and works for them for good.

In the story of Noah's ark, we get to see God choose a particular way of being in relationship with us. It is a choice and a promise. The promise is not that we will never find ourselves overwhelmed by the floods of misfortune, but that when we do, we can be confident they have not been sent by God. That, should we find ourselves adrift in an ark, afraid that everything we know has been washed away, we would do better to look for God not in the clouds or the storm, but with us in the boat.

Thanks be to God for a love like that. Amen.