

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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Starting Over
Genesis 6-8 and II Corinthians 5.17-19
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Before reading the Genesis text:

Within the Genesis account there are 2 distinct stories of the flood which have been woven together to essentially make a third story. Almost all religions have their own version of a flood narrative. “That Israel would have preserved several versions of the flood story is not surprising since numerous versions circulated in the ancient Near East . . . The existence of numerous flood stories has stimulated efforts to discern the basis of the story. The [preserved stories] are set in the Tigris-Euphrates River valley; alluvial deposits show that it was periodically flooded in ancient times. No such deposits have been found in the land of Canaan, and archaeological and geological remains provide no evidence of a worldwide flood. These factors suggest that the Genesis account should be related to major flood in the Mesopotamian valley, which in time was interpreted as a flood that covered the then known world (one severe flood has been dated around 3000 BCE). Stories from other cultures should be tracked back to their own local flood traditions. No credence should be given to the occasional rumors regarding the discovery of Noah’s ark!” (The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume 1, Terence E. Fretheim, page 388)

Read portions of Genesis 6-8

A cyclone hits a world away and there is devastation. And a government that is more opposed to freedom than anything else it would seem resists help which creates more devastation. An earthquake shakes another world away. . . . and there is destruction. And aftershocks continue, escalating the fear, and people sleep on the streets because they are afraid to go inside buildings which creates more destruction. Tornadoes blow right here in our own land and there is desolation. And ‘tis the season for more tornadoes to blow and hurricanes to build – lest we forget Katrina - which will create more desolation. And what, if anything, does the Church have to say about any of this?

With headlines about cyclones and earthquakes and tornadoes, I was a little surprised a few weeks ago to see that the text for today was the Biblical narrative of the Flood. Do I dare

even mention what the text says, just before recounting the story? *The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created – people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them."* A difficult word, but one that is all too familiar to our ears. The wrathful, vengeful God who destroys to teach us lessons. Ah, but we can't stop there, because the text does go on to say *but Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.* (Genesis 6.1-8) Most all religions have a flood story – a natural disaster/wipe out the world – story. The destruction is usually initiated by God who is at wits end about humanity and, not knowing what else to do, decides to destroy everything. I think we all know something of that feeling. It's the throwing our hands in air and giving up approach; it's the "I've had it" tag line; it's the I'm done, I'm through, it's just no use mentality that always gets attributed to God in these stories. And I think that is one reason some religious folks are so quick to accuse God is because we are always looking for someone to blame or some explanation for the unexplainable – our first choice is often to point to God.

You hear it all the time: Katrina was God's punishment for the wickedness of the Big Easy – and it's not just Christians who are saying these things. I read in Newsweek magazine a couple of weeks ago about a man in Myanmar praying to Buddha, asking for forgiveness to save him from the destruction. For many people – even people who would renounce such a God of punishment and vengeance – there are remnants of this kind of theology: What did I do to deserve this? What sin am I being punished for? Or then there's survivor's remorse: Why not me? Why was I saved? But all of these folks quit reading story before it really even begins,

because they think they know the ending. God destroys the world because of the wickedness of humanity and every single generation since Noah's has believed that they are possibly living in a time when God is on the brink of losing it again. But God didn't destroy the whole world because there was Noah. We get so caught up in the drama of it all – we are so drawn to the horrific that we overlook the simple line at the very beginning of the tale: *But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.* The story – did they go in by twos or by sevens? were there unclean animals allowed on board the ark or not? was it forty days and forty nights of rain or 150 days? – the story is what we get caught up in and we miss it – right there in the beginning – one of the best words in our whole Biblical narrative: *But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.* My translation would go like this: But in Noah, God started over – for that is how God works.

Do I think God sent the cyclone to Myanmar? No. Do I think God caused the earthquake in China? No. Do I think God had anything to do with the tornadoes in the Midwest. Absolutely not. I think for all time people have sought to explain the unexplainable randomness and freedom of the universe by saying it was God's will. It's the easiest and perhaps most damaging explanation. And they can point all the way back to the Flood story. The writers of the Biblical text fall into the same trap that so many today are inclined to – a punishing, vengeful, wrathful God – ready at any moment to zap humanity and all creation if we step out of line far enough. But God didn't zap us. God used the remnants and started over.

You see, there wasn't total devastation and destruction and desolation – even in the Flood account, there was an opportunity for starting over. In Myanmar, finally the government has opened up ever so slightly to allow for some relief efforts and for years to come we will hear stories of starting over in the midst of chaos in that place – if we are watching and listening for it, and if we find a way to be a part of it ourselves. God was with them in the turmoil. God was

among them in their grief. God was there and is there – even as they begin the process of rebuilding their lives. And it is the same in China and in the Midwest and in New Orleans – and in all the places everywhere that there is pain and fear and disorder. God is present – at work in ways beyond our knowing – working, I believe, for Good. We hear about the Flood that destroyed the earth – but it was not so – because there was a *but Noah* we read of a God who is a part of the starting over of broken lives.

So if we can leave Myanmar and China and the Midwest and all the natural disasters by which we are so baffled and saddened, and bring this story into our own lives today – what is the take home? Your marriage is about 3 good arguments away from divorce? Remind yourself, *but Noah* started over. You and your teenager rebelling against one another in a battle for who has the strongest will? Remind yourself, *but Noah* started over. The dreams that you hoped for your children when you carried them in your womb are not to be? Remind yourself, *but Noah* started over. Illness wreaking havoc in your body and the treatment is worse than the disease? Remind yourself, *but Noah* started over. Drowning in debt? You guessed it, *but Noah* started over. Devastation. Destruction. Desolation. From natural disasters to tragedies of our own making – we all know something about the story of the Flood, for I have not randomly made up my examples – I know them to be true, and so do you.

And the *but Noah line* - oh, I make it sound so easy. It is not. It's why the story peaks our interest. The labor alone in building the Ark. The gathering of animals. The death of friends and extended family. The torrential rain. The overcrowded accommodations. The complaining. The stench. The fear. The isolation. The noise. The loneliness. There was nothing easy about Noah's starting over. But the Good News of the text is that he did it. God did not destroy the world. God was in Noah – recreating life. And everything was not perfectly rosy from the time that the dove

brought back the olive leaf and forevermore. Why, even Noah, after opening the doors of his boat and building an altar to worship God, proceeded to get drunk and lie around naked causing even more pain and devastation for years and generations to come. Be glad I spared you the details of that part of the story! But it's there – I'm not making it up.

While there are many truths to be found in the well-known Biblical account, a few stand out to me: 1) we are not perfect and as frustrating as this is – for us and for God – God will not ultimately destroy us because we do not live up to all that God created us to be - - - so we should stop blaming God and while most folks in this room would not connect cyclones and earthquakes and tornadoes to God's punishment of people –we too easily fall into despair and wonder where God is in our world of more bad news than good – God is there and here – in the midst; 2) if there is one consistent theme in all of Scripture it is that God never forsakes us – the Biblical writers take great pains to let us know that God is always with us – in the storms and in the worship and at all times in between; 3) God is a God of second chances and God is always looking for ways to offer us opportunities to start over. And there are some among us who need that Good News today. Not with some Pollyanna dream that in the starting over everything will always be easy or happy – but with a real sense of the abundance of life that has been shown most completely to us in the life of Jesus.

For Myanmar. For China. For the Midwest. For each of us. I pray that each moment will be filled with the Holy Possibility of starting over – again and again and again – for we are constantly becoming new creations. May it be so.

