

Emily Stockert
FPC Santa Rosa
10/17/2021

Note to Readers: This is a rough draft of the sermon text provided for listeners who may follow along better with the written word. **It has not been edited for grammar, typos, or to follow “proper” formal writing conventions.**

Noah and the Ark: A Flood of Losses

We're continuing on our way through our fall sermon series on Genesis "Living with Love and Loss" in which we're exploring the opening chapters of Genesis using the lens of the intertwining nature of love and loss.

So far we've been in the garden with the first humans, and followed up with Cain and Abel. We talked about the idea that sin - which is defined as a disruption or corruption of our relationships with God, each other, and creation - is both personal and systemic.

One of the insights into the human condition that came from the story of Genesis 1-3 with the humans in the garden of Eden which I preached about a few weeks ago is that we humans all know there is a difference between doing good and evil - and we live in the tension between the two - with the ability to exercise free choice - while not possessing the true, complete knowledge of the difference between the two - and with the ability to choose the evil even when we do know what is truly good. Last week, Kent gave us his perspective on the story of Cain and Abel, focusing on how the disruption of the sibling relationship between Cain and Abel led to murder is related to our epidemic of mass shootings in the modern world.

Today we're starting on the story of Noah and the flood, and I'm preaching twice in a row again, so we get to do another two-parter. Today we will do the flood, and next week we will do the fresh start after the flood - the covenant and the rainbow. I'm guessing that the story of Noah is familiar to many of you? You've heard this story before?

Every time we talk about Genesis we need to remember that Genesis is a rich text that has been studied and preached on for hundreds - even thousands of years - which means that for every story there is a multiplicity of interpretations. The story of Noah is no exception. "Noah and the flood" has been put to many

uses over the generations within the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. As early as 30 BCE - that's 30 years before Jesus - the Jewish Greek Philosophical thinker Philo treated this story as allegorical, interpreting it as being about the movement of the soul and the folly of striving for the goals of fame and pleasure. Ancient rabbis explored it too, covering a wide range of opinions in exploring the text, including understanding it in terms of Jewish people's sense of history and the relationship of the people with God. Early Christian writers who were orthodox in their beliefs saw elements of the story as typological - that is as prefiguring people and events that were to come in the Christian Scriptures. Some Christian gnostics had their own relationship with the story for their own purposes that were ultimately deemed as heretical. And Muslim interpreters used the story to redefine biblical figures like Noah in terms of a specific Muslim point of view.

There's a long history of interpretations of Noah - over time there've been many ways to read Noah, and that is part of the power of the Scripture: all kinds of people in many times and places find something of value in studying this story.

Obviously, this means that we have to narrow our focus to cover the relevance of Noah and the flood for us today in 20 minutes or less. So, I have chosen specific verses using the lens of "love and loss" in order to focus the message once again on the question, "What insight does this text give us about the human condition?"

Right now, our scripture reading will cover the first half of the story up to the flood which means we will be talking mainly about loss. Next week, the scripture reading will cover the second half of the Noah story - and we will look more towards love.

So take a breath, clear your mind, open your heart, and invite the Spirit in. Let's listen as the Scripture is read.

Thinking about Noah brought to mind for me how much Noah's ark inspired playthings and art there is for children. When I was noodling around with researching for this sermon, I went on google to see what came up for "Noah's ark" and you get everything from playskool plastic ones to stuffed animals to

giant actual playground equipment. Martha Stewart even has a recipe for a sugar cookie Noah's ark. It seems that in the popular imagination this story is often treated as a sweet story for children about animals and rainbows.

I found it really jarring to jump from cookie animals to the biblical version which is filled with the evil of humanity and an angry God who wants to wipe out his whole creation and start over again. Confronting the actual story is...a lot!

Let's break the story down.

First, we hear that humanity is thoroughly, irredeemably evil and incapable of doing anything but making evil choices at every turn. Humanity is so evil that they've corrupted everything - the whole world filled with violence and horror.

And God the Creator is heartbroken by the mess, filled with regret, and wants to start over.

Except, God thinks Noah's kind of ok. In one of the verses I didn't include, Genesis 6:9, it says Noah was "righteous man, blameless in his generation" the meaning of which is debatable with some taking it to mean that this generation is so terrible that Noah only stands out as pretty good among them - but among other generations - he might not be so great. And if you read on ahead in Genesis, you'll see that Noah doesn't make the best choices with his new start after the flood. The way I read this is that Noah is great in a lot of ways, especially compared to everybody else, and he does listen to God when God tells him to build an ark so he's definitely obedient, but not perfect.

So, Noah builds the ark, gets all the animals together and brings his family along with them into the ark and the door gets closed. Then, the floodwaters rise and every creature that lives on the land, including all the other people, drowns. And the water keeps on rising.

This is where we stopped - leaving Noah and his family all alone on the water.

I opened with the question "What insight does this text give us about the human condition?" particularly in light of the lens of "love and loss."

In terms of the human condition, I'd like for us to think about the verse that says "humanity had become thoroughly evil on the earth and that every idea their minds thought up was always completely evil" in terms of sin. "Sin" is such a Christian-buzzword that using it causes misunderstandings and so I always define it when I use it.

Remember that sin is not mere violation of a moral code or a deviation from conventional behavior or doing something commonly considered "bad." Jesus' himself actually did all of those things - he violated moral codes and religious laws - like healing on the sabbath and hanging out with women and sinners.

Instead, sin is the refusal to live in right relationship with God and others, the denial of God's grace, and the refusal to live in just and peaceful community with one another as God calls us to do.

Often, sin is treated as an issue with individual people - and it is - but from the story of Noah we can see that the bible also treats sin as a universal condition - the whole of humanity finds itself in a state of captivity to sin. This universal captivity to sin isn't limited to Noah's story - most of the biblical books from the prophets to the gospels address systemic sin directly and repeatedly.

Sin affects every aspect of human life and all human beings - sin infects all of our systems, all of the ways we organize our lives together. This can take many forms, but is sometimes called the "will to power" - seeking power over others, or using people or nature to serve your own ends. Sin can come in the form of a spirit of racial, national, or ethnic superiority, or of treating one gender as superior than another. Sin can also take the form of passivity - of acquiescing to the group ego or losing yourself in a group - as well as being apathetic towards injustice inflicted on those with less power.

In the story of Noah, we hear that humanity's universal captivity to sin breaks God's heart. God has great love for humanity, but humanity has become so corrupt - so far from God's intentions for their relationships with one another and God - that it hurts God. The root word in the biblical Hebrew means to hurt or to grieve. In the story, God has such a personal relationship with all of humanity that their bad behaviour causes God pain and grief.

What follows on this sin and brokenheartedness is great destruction.

Yes, as modern readers, many of us may wish to debate the theology of the story - would a God of love really destroy everything?

I don't know - and that is a worthwhile point of reflection - and something that ultimately will remain a mystery.

How I would go with the destruction in the story here is to say that it's possible that the original tellers of this story experienced a catastrophic environmental devastation that they interpreted as being punishment from God for corruption throughout the population.

This story is several thousand years old but it points us to a truth about the human condition: **systemic sin creates devastating losses to humanity and to creation.**

There are just so many examples of this that I don't even know where to start - let's pick one close to the story of Noah - the environment - climate change - we're all participants in economic systems, transportation systems, food systems and governmental systems that contribute to the destruction of the environment. Even the most righteous among us in this area - the Noahs, shall we say - are righteous only in comparison with the rest of us gas-guzzling, plastic-using energy hogs. So, the environmental prophets among us have been crying out for decades about our need to change, but we remain seemingly paralyzed while in some places fires come, droughts come, and in other places the waters literally rise around us.

When we confront the whole story of Noah, rather than reducing it down to nursery paintings and sweet treats we see the truth that **systemic sin creates devastating losses to humanity and to creation.**

As people of faith, we are uniquely positioned to witness to the biblical truth of systemic sin and we can apply this framework of systemic sin and loss in many other areas: racism, colonialism, economic and other barriers to shelter, food, education, and healthcare. When we name the core problem as a problem of sin that has infected all the systems of our lives together, then the core starter

solution - not the only solution - but the start - to that problem for us is repentance.

“Repentance” in the bible literally means “to turn around.” Biblical repentance is about turning back to God, and responding to God with a change of mind and heart, and then after your heart and mind are changed, your actions are changed. Repentance is a change in thinking that leads to a change in action. As Paul put it, “Don’t be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what is the good, well-pleasing, and perfect will of God.”

For us as Christians, I think the call of the scripture for us today is about opening our eyes - asking God to show us more clearly how universal our captivity to sin is and to pray for the courage to begin to repent, and to turn back to the Jesus of the gospels. The Jesus of the gospels demonstrated unconditional love of God and inclusive love of others, his shocking forgiveness of sinners, his solidarity with the poor, and his teaching and enactment of the coming kingdom of God - and his way is the way we are called to follow.

The problem of systemic sin is a problem in the systems and patterns of behavior that were built before most of us - but individual people make up the systems - we participate in them now - and therefore we - individually - each one of us - can repent, and ask God to change our hearts and our individual behavior - and then when we as individuals - can collectively come together to make change in the world.

Next week I will be reflecting on Noah after the flood, and we see how having a fresh start starts with God first rather than being dependent upon our own actions and will power.

Of course, as I said before, when we talk about the problem of “sin” we need to acknowledge that the word “sin” is a Christian-buzzword, and has been often wielded by Christians in ways contrary to the person and work of Jesus, so it must always be carefully defined...and in witnessing the the destructive nature of systemic sin we probably shouldn’t run like old-timey fire-and-brimstone preachers calling out everyone as a sinner on the road to destruction.

Instead, as followers of Jesus, let us call *ourselves* out as sinners for breaking God's heart, and repent and seek forgiveness, and let us offer the good news of God's grace to other people. Yes, the good news is that Jesus offers us a path away from sin and towards grace, towards mercy, and towards living with love for God and our neighbors. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Call to Worship

1 Come, let us sing to the Lord; *
let us shout for joy to the rock of our salvation.
Let us come before the presence of the Lord with thanksgiving *

and raise a loud shout to God with psalms.
For you, O Lord, are a great God, *
and a great sovereign above all gods.

In your hand are the caverns of the earth, *
and the heights of the hills are yours also.
5 The sea is yours, for you made it, *
and your hands have moulded the dry land.
6 Come, let us bow down, and bend the knee, *
and kneel before the Lord our Maker.
For you are our God,
and we are the people of your pasture and the sheep of your hand. *
Oh, that today we would hearken to your voice!

Benediction

Live in peace. Have courage! Hold fast to what is good. Return no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak, help the suffering. Honor all people. Love and serve the Lord your God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And may the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you. Alleluia, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- How does knowing that there have been many ways that the story of Noah has been interpreted over several thousand years influence your understanding of the biblical message?
- The central theme of the sermon based on the story of Noah and the flood was *“systemic sin creates devastating losses to humanity and to creation.”* Try to put this idea into your own words. How would you say it?
- What does it mean to break someone’s heart? Now, reflect on the idea that humanity has the capacity to break God’s heart. Would you live differently if you truly believed that you had the power to break God’s heart?