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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: Repentance and Renewal

For our fall sermon series, we've been exploring the opening chapters of the book of Genesis. This sermon series tells us of God's good creation in the beginning, and humankind's failure to align with God's purposes. The focus and the title of the series are "Living with Love and Loss" because in Genesis we see the story of humanity as a story of being created in love but suffering great loss.

Last week, our scripture and sermon was on Noah and the flood. In the scripture reading, we heard that God was heartbroken over humanity's universal captivity to sin, and sent a flood to cover the earth which destroyed almost everything that had breath in it - everything except Noah and his family, and a set of every kind of living creature - who were put on board an ark that Noah had built.

In examining this scripture, I spoke about the idea in the bible stories like Noah's, we can see that the bible treats sin as a universal condition - in other words, the whole of humanity finds itself in a state of captivity to sin. 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 a disruption or corruption of relationship with God, other people, or creation. 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.

In the bible, sin is treated as a collective problem with collective repercussions in most of the books from Genesis to the prophets to the gospels. With the idea of collective sin in mind, I suggested that one insight from the story of Noah and the flood is that systemic sin creates devastating losses to humanity and to creation and that one solution - the start to the solution to the problems caused by systemic sin is repentance - is 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 God.

Today, we will be picking up on this theme of repentance with our scripture reading from Genesis 8 and 9.

As always, with a text like Genesis 8 and 9 that is very familiar to many people, there will have been a variety of interpretations of the scripture over all the hundreds or thousands of years that it has been told. There are more and less theologically correct or historically sound interpretations but there is no single overarching best interpretation. I'm using the lens of love and loss to ask the Spirit to help us discern what insight the text has for us about the human condition today.

Additionally, the scripture may raise questions for you that I won't answer today because I've narrowed my focus to two points (and that's ok - there's always room for more study and conversation). The two points for today are: one, Noah repents in the story and God accepts humanity as we are. Two, that the covenant that God makes is with all creation - all of us and all of creation are under God's covenantal care.

Last week, we left Noah and company on the ark in the middle of the water. This week, we will hear what happens as the waters begin to recede. As you listen to the reading, listen for the themes of repentance and acceptance, and for God's universal covenantal care.

Let us listen as the scripture is read.

Think for a minute about summertime. The smell of barbecue on the grill wafting through the air - a pleasing scent evoking good times, friends and families getting together eating delicious food and spending time together. We even had hot dogs on the church lawn this summer which was really fun.

Now that the weather has turned cold and rainy - thank God! - we are out of the season of BBQs and cook-outs but I'm connecting summertime cookouts to the text because everytime I smell barbecue in the air, I think of biblical passages like this one in Genesis 8 where the Lord smells the pleasing odor of the burnt offerings which in the case of Noah are essentially roasted meat.

You see, in the scripture for today, God remembered Noah and all of the animals, and the waters have abated. Noah waited some time until he could confirm that the land was dry and it was safe to disembark. God tells him it is safe to leave the ark and that everyone should exit - and be fruitful and multiply.

Then, Noah builds an altar to the Lord and makes a sacrifice of all the animals, and the Lord smells the pleasing odor and says in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done."

It may be a little odd - and very anthropomorphic - to think of God smelling something like roasting meat and being moved by it. But this way of thinking is part of how the ancient Israelites thought about God - and how other ancient peoples thought about their deities as well. Many ancient religions, including the ancient Israelite religion, included a sacrificial system as part of their religious beliefs and practices.

The sacrificial system was understood as offering something of value to God for a variety of reasons, and the bible tells us that both grain and meat offerings were made. In the world of the early books of the bible, these sacrifices had several functions, including: to appease God, to thank God, or to try to motivate God to do something. On another level, the sacrificial animals and other offerings were considered to be a meal for God, presented on the altar which served as a table. The choicest portions - that is the fattiest and easiest to burn - were given up to God (who smelled the pleasing odor) while the worshippers might eat the other portions. The sacrifice and eating of the meat may have been seen as a shared meal between God and the worshippers - basically, a kind of *communion*.

Though a world where the religious sacrifice of animals is common may seem foreign to us, we can understand Noah's intent: Noah was communicating with God. Noah may have been thanking God for the safety of his family or asking God for forgiveness. Noah was offering up many valuable animals which may have been a way of recognizing that all of those animals belonged to God in the first place. Noah may also have been having communion with God - just like we do when we eat the bread and drink the cup.

In any case, after the flood as his first act on dry land, Noah was turning towards God - he was repenting, which literally means to turn towards God.

So, Noah repents and makes a fresh start with God. Does it work?

The bible tells us that God's heart moved by Noah's sacrifice but God's mind isn't really changed here - God still thinks humanity is evil - but God promises not to destroy life again and to preserve the earth's cycles and seasons.

Again, this might feel strange or uncomfortable thinking about Noah's sacrifice, and God's viewing the inclination of the human heart as evil but promising not to flood the world again. God's promise not to destroy every living creature is written about in Genesis in a way and in a context that might feel far away from us - but there are theological similarities and consistencies in this ancient Noah story that do connect to us today:

In the theology of our church, we confess and believe that all people are sinners - that is we all have the capacity to be inclined towards evil and are incapable of doing good without God's help. Remember that sin is the disruption or corruption of relationship with God, others, and creation, and that sin corrodes all the systems of our lives. 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 - and we participate in them now. We have to have systems to organize our lives together - and we need government and education and health care and food - there's no way around it we're built to live in community with one another - the solution isn't to withdraw into the illusion of self-sufficiency or isolationism.

When we repent, we confess that God knows our sins, and that God in God's grace, despite our sins, forgives us and redeems us. Therefore we - individually - each one of us - without fear - can 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 through us as we seek to move closer to living in ways that honor the Jesus of the gospels.

The gospels tell us that Jesus loved God unconditionally and was inclusive in his love of others, he had solidarity with the poor and the outcast, he was

shocking in his forgiveness of sinners. With his teaching and his actions, he enacted the coming kingdom of God - and his way is the way we are called to follow.

The idea that God redeems us and changes us individually, and that individual change impacts us collectively, brings me to my second point: God's covenant in Genesis 9 is with all of creation. God establishes a covenant with Noah and all of Noah's descendants, and with every living creature. God makes an everlasting covenantal promise with all of the earth, and sets a rainbow in the sky as a reminder.

Notice that this covenantal promise includes everybody - there's no distinction made between believers and non-believers, there's not even a distinction made between humans and other living creatures. All are covered by God's care.

Genesis 8 and 9 are relevant to us today in several ways:

First, like Noah, we must repent. Repentance - or turning towards God - involves opening our hearts to God's activity in our lives and allowing ourselves to be changed by God's presence. Noah's sacrifice and God smelling the sweet odor of barbecue might seem strange to us - but think about them sharing a meal together - there's an intimacy of relationship between God and Noah.

Intimacy in relationships takes work and daily effort, and it's no different in our relationship with God. God's always there, but where are we? Usually busy doing other stuff.

Turning towards God can take a variety of forms including prayer, bible study, and participating in worship, and sharing in the life of the church together. It also may take the form of asking God to open our eyes to see where we are contributing to and participating in systems of sin in the

world, and praying for ways to change. Turning towards God must be a meaningful part of everyday life.

Second, like Noah and the sacrifice he makes, we too are called to offer something of value in thanksgiving to God for God's grace in our lives. In our lives, we won't be building altars and making animal sacrifices - but the intention is the same - to offer a sacrifice that is meaningful in a way that helps us feel a closer relationship with God.

Offering of ourselves to God can also take a variety of forms according to our gifts and skills and may include volunteering our time at church or serving in other places in the community that care for our neighbors, and financial offerings specifically to the ministry of church, as well as financial offerings in other ways towards organizations and activities that seek to promote the well-being of others and the movement towards justice and peace in the world in a way that aligns with the ministry of Jesus.

Finally, recognizing that the covenant in Genesis 9 is a covenant with all people and all creation gives us a basis for a respectful relationship with all people and the earth that is rooted in our faith. In this covenant, there is no me-vs-you or us-vs-them, only unity under the rainbow of God's grace.

God's covenantal care for all is consistent with the life and ministry of Christ who taught us to turn back to God, and to love our neighbors - and our enemies. There is no me-vs-you, us-vs-them. As the apostle Paul said in his letter to the church in Galatia: There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for [we] are all one in Christ Jesus. The good news of the story of Genesis 8 and 9 is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ! Thanks be to God. Amen.

Opening Prayer (Genesis 9, Psalm 25, Mark 1)

Faithful God,
you called all creatures into being,
and you care for each one.
Send your grace upon your people gathered here,
that we may follow your ways of truth,
and walk in the paths of steadfast love,
proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Charge & Benediction

Go and testify to God's faithful promises.
God's covenant is everlasting.
Go and follow God's ways.
The ways of the Lord are steadfast love
and faithfulness.
Go and proclaim God's good news.
The time is now. Turn to God.
May the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the
communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Alleluia, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

- Do you ever struggle with understanding Bible stories, like the story of Noah? Why might it be valuable to study texts that challenge us or make us uncomfortable?
- Think about a close relationship you value. This can be with a friend, a relative, a spouse or partner, a child, or even a beloved pet. How much effort do you put forth on a regular basis in that relationship? Now, ask yourself if you desire a closer relationship with God. If you do, would you approach your relationship with God differently if you thought of God as a valuable "person" in your life?

- Do you agree with the point in the sermon that individual repentance can lead to collective change towards a more just and peaceful world?
- Bonus Question: In Genesis 9, the rainbow is a sign and seal of God's covenantal care. In the sermon, Emily said she thinks about God (and communion) when she smells summertime barbecue. Are there images, scents, or other tangible things that help you feel closer to God?