

## **“To Begin Again” based on Genesis 9:8-17 and Mark 1:9-15**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on February 18, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

The story of Noah is a relatively long story in scripture, taking up a little over three chapters in the book of Genesis. We think we all know the story well because it is in every children’s bible.

And so, we know God says a flood is coming upon the earth and tasks Noah with building the ark. Noah is portrayed as a good guy, so he’s going to do it and there’s always an element of people around him thinking he’s crazy. But he builds the ark anyway and the animals go in two by two into the three-story boat with its rooms. Then the rain comes, the flood waters rise, and they are adrift for 40 days. When the waters go away, Noah sacrifices some animals and then God says, “I will not destroy the world again by a flood.” That’s the basic summary.

Yet beyond this, there are things in the story that are important to notice. God’s frustration with humanity is that God had put the Spirit, God’s breath of life, into humanity and all flesh. But what was happening was a disregard for the Spirit, resulting in violence and murder. Then there were the weird angelic beings, the Nephilim, who were marrying human women, and trying to give humanity immortality again through their offspring. So, God sets a clock and says that in 120 years, all of this will end.

In that span, God notices Noah, whose name means rest. The story tells us that God decides to spare Noah. The original plan had been to destroy everyone. It makes it sound like God is changing God’s mind here, but the reality is that God is recognizing that to destroy all of humanity would be to change God’s mind. After all, God made us in God’s image, creating us to reflect God’s presence in the world around us.

Because we failed at that, God could have chosen to scrap the whole project. But instead, God chose to be consistent with the original plan for humanity to bear the image of God. Noah is then spared. One of the things that jumps out is that in the first descriptions of all the life on earth, there is a notion of God’s Spirit in them. But in the end of the story, it changes to a description of “fleshly” beings. But in the passage which we read today, every living being, a word often translated as soul, is preserved and life would not be destroyed.

In this God is indicating perhaps a sparing of the Holy Spirit that brings order and is God’s presence with us. The Spirit then goes to be with God’s people who are called to be a light to all nations. This ties into the reading from Mark, in which the Spirit drags Jesus into the wilderness. The Spirit goes “into” Jesus, Mark tells us, and drags him into the wilderness, the danger, the place where only the beasts are present, along with angels ministering to Jesus. Matthew and Luke give us the specifics of the testing, but Mark simply says Jesus was tested.

In light of this, I think we should look at the multiple ways the Spirit is at work. The Spirit comes to us as believers to bless us, meaning to bring us closer to God. But the Spirit is also present to correct us, train us, and fix things. God could have destroyed all things. We often translate this as a “rainbow” in the clouds. But the text says God’s “bow in the clouds,” which is an instrument of war, which God sets down.

We do well to remember this when we look out on the world and think it could never have been worse than it is right now. We are tempted to think that clearly, when we’ve done enough wrong,

God is simply going to come and destroy us all. When we feel this way, we can forget God's covenant promise. God's promise though, when first expressed, is not limited as if it is limited to a flood. But in the text, God's first expression was that God would not destroy all life, which I have just done.

As believers in a hostile world, we have a tendency to slip back into thinking God will surely destroy all things. God could do this at any time, but God's promise is not to do this again. Indeed, God's promise instead is to make all things new not by destruction, but redemption. God's promise is to use humanity, as flawed and strange as we are, for this redemption of the world.

One of the things I love about Hebrew scripture is that it really shows God in all of our emotions. The Greeks introduced the idea that the prime mover as Aristotle called God and the animating and creative force as Plato described God is unchangeable. This is true, but they then say that this means God cannot be hurt. God cannot suffer because suffering changes us and therefore it would change God. Yet they would allow for God to have anger. Who among us is not changed by our outbursts of anger. Any emotion then can change us, but yet theologians often say one emotion like compassion can change God, but another like anger cannot.

Yes, God is unchangeable, but what we see in scripture is a personal God who allows for God's own self to feel as we feel. The Hebrew scriptures are very obvious about that and this is the foundation of the New Testament as well. Christ coming into our humanity to live as we live and suffer hunger, loss, pain and extreme suffering in the crucifixion to die for us and rise for us reveals this same willingness of God to endure.

God's desire is to be with us. That is the good news – God with us. There's a double standard that somehow crying is emotional weakness, but anger is acceptable, even strong. No, these are all emotions and these are the emotions God chooses to feel on our behalf. That is the God we love and serve – the God who knows you inside and out and cares for you inside and out. This God is committed to you and all humanity, just as God expressed this commitment to and through Noah.

Now, this does not mean that we can do no wrong and we have license to do what we want since God will forgive and everything will be ok. But it does mean that in the end, that God's desire is to redeem all flesh. It is not to destroy all flesh. God longs to fill us with the Holy Spirit, not to withdraw the Spirit from us.

In our modern world, we see many awful things happening around us. There's violence still. There's suffering still. There's all those things that when we see them on the news make us think, "How Long, O Lord? How long?" Yet the more I study ancient history, the more I realize that if you asked me a hypothetical question about what period of time I might most like to live in, I would say, "Right now." The key word is "live."

The Roman Empire was not a good place to live. Diarrhea was possibly the leading cause of death then, not to mention the violent and oppressive powers that ruled. Life was short and there is a correlation in history that when life is short in a civilization, it is valued less, since it is assumed death is around the corner no matter how well you live.

But we need not look back that far. Yes, we understand that more than half of all children died before adulthood in the ancient world, but as recently as the 1950s, 27 percent of all children died before the age of 15. Today, worldwide, less than 4 percent of children die before 15, and it is less

than 1 percent in the United States, Europe, and even China, according to the United Nations Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality (2021).

I'd rather live today than even then. We have a tendency to look back at the "Good Old Days" and think life was better back then, when what the Scripture shows us is that God is always offering us in our time right now, a new beginning – a chance to start over on a better footing in a better place. The amount of change since Jesus died on that cross for us to now is amazing. The world is a very different place, while the 2000 years before Jesus to the time of Jesus was pretty much the same. It was awful.

We have seen an amazing progress in these last 2,000 years. The world is being remade. Let us not slip into the nihilism and nothingness philosophies that tell us it is all terrible and always going to get worse, but instead trust that at all times, God is at work doing a new thing. The Spirit is changing each and every one of us – yes, by correcting us at times, but God has vowed never to destroy us all again.

In the story of Noah, we read that God saved the world by saving one man who was deemed righteous, or just, to save all of humanity. But in Christ, we see God again acting in one man – fully human and fully God's own self – to redeem all of humanity not by sparing him, but by allowing all the power of sin and death to come upon Jesus on that cross as God in our flesh so that all of us might be redeemed.

Do you see the difference? In each story, there is one declared righteous. In the first, the righteous one was spared to keep the project going with a remnant. But in the one man who was not spared and bore the brunt of it all – our iniquities and sins – on the cross, the redemption project is made complete. This shows us that sin and death have no authority over us. This is what we should put our trust in.

As we go out into the world and see things we don't like, be hopeful. The world is not going to "hell in a handbasket," as the proverbial phrase goes. (Side note, a favorite author Brant Hansen makes a good point that it's a shame we only use this perfectly nice word "handbasket" in this context). The world is not in the handbasket. There is hope because there is Christ. The world is changing. I challenge us to see God at work so we can be a faithful presence in the world around us.

Yes, there's plenty to fix still, but we are not alone in meeting the challenge to make this world still an even better place. Indeed, God is with us. Amen.