

A STORY-SHAPED GOD: READING GENESIS

Compassion: The Great Flood

Genesis 9:12-17

January 19, 2025

Late September. We were watching the weather closely. Hurricane season. Helene had gained strength in the Gulf of Mexico, and the path pointed toward western North Carolina. Where my parents moved in retirement. Home to my sister, brother-in-law, nephew, and niece.

On Friday morning, a text from my mother. *We're evacuating.* For the next twenty-eight hours, we heard nothing. Calls went to voicemail. Texts went unanswered. We called their church and friends in the area, but no one had heard from them. No one had information about them. We watched the news coverage with increasingly anxious hearts. Finally, late Saturday morning, the phone rang. I heard my mother's voice, and relief washed over me. The relief was short-lived, quickly followed by sadness as we heard firsthand accounts of the utter devastation Helene had left behind. Lives lost. Homes destroyed. Whole communities wiped out by the unrelenting rush of water and wind. The images were unimaginable, the stories heartbreaking.

In the weeks that followed those days, a familiar pattern took hold. First, we were witnesses to the wonder of human compassion. Emergency service personnel risking their own safety and lives to rescue people trapped in their homes. Neighbors who selflessly shared essential supplies and empathy with each other. Congregations near and far rallying to collect food and baby formula, medicine and generators, drinkable water. An outpouring of support from around the globe. The stories lifted our hearts.

But they were not the only responses to this natural disaster. They never are. In what has become tragically commonplace and increasingly soon, blame and recrimination followed. Some of this was directed toward political leaders and government agencies, but

what turned my stomach were the voices confidently proclaiming God's judgment against their chosen evil. The presumed grounds for this divine wrath spanned the ideological spectrum, and we've seen the same in recent weeks as wildfires cause immense suffering and unthinkable loss in southern California. There are extraordinary, heroic responses of neighbors near and far. And, there are the smug, self-righteous screeds certain that the devastation denotes divine displeasure.

From at least the days when televangelists pinned the blame for Hurricane Katrina on America's abandoning of Godly morals, this morning's story from the Book of Genesis has been trotted out time and again as a Biblical basis for connecting these dots. The line is so clearly and unambiguously drawn that even those of us who are uncomfortable with the connection may find ourselves begrudgingly granting it credence.

Let's take another look. The story of a great and destructive flood is common, nearly ubiquitous, across the literature of Ancient Near Eastern cultures. The distinctiveness of the Biblical version in Genesis should therefore be instructive to us. There is, as we noted last week, an unquestioned assumption of God's providence and power. That is never on trial here. But it is not the only marker of divine identity. Marilynne Robinson suggests that the story of flood and ark, as told in Genesis, gives us a parable, one that I would suggest is more true than fact.

God, benevolent and sovereign, creates a world of beauty and goodness. Humankind is the crown of this creation. They are given freedom, the choice to act humanely or to defy God's design, and therefore cause themselves and the creation itself great pain. From Cain's murder of his brother, we see the human

inclination to violence and destruction. It is only worse from there. There are weapons, and there is war. There is poverty and crime. Human creativity and ingenuity as means to monstrous ends.

And so, we read in the sixth chapter of Genesis, "The Lord looked over the earth and saw the wickedness of humankind. God observed the inclination of human hearts for evil. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind. It grieved him to his heart."

This is the first instructive distinction in the story Genesis tells. It finds no parallel across ancient literature. God is moved by human choice. Moved not to fury, but to grief. Listen. Our insistence on evil breaks God's heart.

The text continues, and God considers how to respond. "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created...together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." Again, God's discernment here comes not from rage, but from regret. God briefly considers the path of obliteration, not out of some avenging anger but in the grip of grief. And, here, the story might have ended.

Creation reversed. Mischief managed.
Experiment extinguished.

But Noah. They are the most important words for creation's threatened future. *But Noah.* A brake on the wheels of judgment. "*But Noah* found favor in the sight of the Lord." Please note that we know nothing of this man at this point in the story, except that he is a descendent of Adam (but then again, aren't we all?) and father of three sons. Now we learn something else. Noah's faithfulness is a sign for God that all is not lost. And so, rather than utter destruction, God chooses new creation. In the waters of the flood, God begins again, filling a boat with all that is needed for a second start. The ark, teeming with life of every kind, is our first symbol of hope in God's gracious plan.

Readers of this story might reasonably expect that the product of this second creation would be better than the

first one. Surely God has learned from the mistakes of the earlier model. Keep reading. Noah quickly confirms that his righteousness is episodic at best. His sons will leave no room for doubt. This crowning creature remains inclined toward evil. And God insists on the continuation of human agency, and we insist on using that agency for destruction and violence. Drunk on our power and obsessed with more of everything in every way, we threaten creation's future by ever more imaginative and catastrophic means. Once unthinkable capacities for violence and a faculty for denying the divine image in those we are determined to despise.

And so, you might say, in this second iteration, humankind is tragically unchanged in fundamental ways. *But.* The shift signified by this story occurs in the heavenly realm. It takes the shape of a bow pointed in the direction of the divine. A string wrapped around God's finger. Its message a promise. *Never again.* No matter how widespread the evil. *Never again.* No matter how depraved the deeds. *Never again.* Never again will God wipe it all out. *Never again.* Do I risk heresy in suggesting it? Well, the text precedes the creed. God is changed by this story.

And we, too, should remember well. This story would tell us that we're on the same boat. One interdependent, created family. The story would tell us that we will all get there together, or none of us will get there at all.

What the God of Genesis offers at the close of this captivating and, yes, troubling story is a new beginning. God makes a promise. God sets a covenant to act with restraint and compassion. Now, the human end of the bargain is vague. What is expected of us? We who will retain our autonomy, our freedom, our choice. Well, we have been given a powerful picture of the threat we pose to ourselves and the world God created. It could stand as a reminder and a command. We are capable of immense destruction, yes, but that is not our primary capacity. We can choose a different way. We can build. We can care. We can love this earth and each other.

Many centuries later, writing to the Christians living in Corinth, the Apostle Paul reflects on a spiritual reality and a divine mystery. Paul writes: when one member suffers, all suffer together. I wonder if this is a lesson we might take from the great flood, that the voices quick to claim God's mandate in the wake of crisis have it all wrong. Natural disasters do not tell us who to judge. They remind us of our call to love. Friends, it is the helpers and the healers, not the haters, who see most clearly the presence of God in a fallen world. Let us be among them.

Late April. A perfect spring evening. Our son Samuel and I had gone out for a jog, but we did so without checking the radar. Before long we found ourselves a far distance from home as threatening clouds hovered over our heads. Soon a clap of thunder. Then the skies opened, and the rain fell. Sam and I took shelter under some trees, waiting for the storm to pass. And once it did, we headed back, slower now, toward home. Sam was a bit ahead of me, and when we came out of the woods, he shouted back, "Dad! Come quick! You gotta see this!"

Right in front of us, a perfect full rainbow arced across the sky. We stood quietly for several moments because Sam is pretty good at that. Then we took a few pictures to share with Mom and Ben. Then, just before we headed home, Sam turned toward me and said, "Dad. You know what this means, right? I wish everyone in the world could see it."

Me too, son.

A picture of God's promise. A confirmation of our connectedness. A reminder of our responsibility. Amen.