

Flood and Promise

September 9, 2018

In the late 1800s, a British archeologist found stone tablets in the ancient city of Nineveh, in modern day southern Iraq. And when the writing on the tablets was deciphered, the archeologist found a story about a great flood. It went something like this. The Babylonian gods were discussing things one day, and it occurred to them that humans were making such a racket that the gods couldn't sleep at night. So Enlil said, Let's send a flood that will wipe out all the earth.

One of the other gods named Ea decided to have mercy on the earth, and he sent a dream to a man named Utnapishtim. He said, A huge flood is coming. Build a boat, and get on board the boat with your family and some villagers and representatives of all the animals. When Utnapishtim and his family were saved through the flood, they built a sacrifice. And the gods smelled the flesh of the sacrifice, and said they would never destroy the earth again.

Does that story sound familiar? Of course it sounds a lot like the flood story from Genesis. So we have three choices here: The Genesis story is based on the Babylonian story; or the Babylonian story is based on the Genesis story; or both stories are based on an even older story. When I looked up flood myths in Wikipedia, I came across 32 flood stories that are recounted in different civilizations. This Babylonian story is at least as old as 2200 BCE, which is at least 1200 years before Genesis was put together. Some scholars don't want to believe that the Genesis story is based on something else, so they distrust the dating of these tablets. They would say the Babylonians borrowed from Genesis.

But many of the scholars believe that the writers of Genesis adapted this flood story to write the story of their God and the Hebrew people. There is evidence of a huge flood in the ancient Middle East in 2800 BCE that would have been seen as worldwide, and these flood stories may be ways to interpret that event.

Obviously these ancient peoples didn't have the scientific knowledge we have today. They didn't have The Weather Channel. So when a natural phenomenon occurred, they tried to explain it in theological terms. They figured their G/god was up to something. If a flood destroyed their part of the world, then their G/god must

be angry. If an earthquake caused a hillside to bury their village, they were being punished for something.

We still hear this today, don't we? The televangelist Pat Robertson in 1998 was responding to a Gay Pride Parade in Orlando and said, "I would warn Orlando that you're right in the way of some serious hurricanes, and I don't think I'd be waving those flags in God's face if I were you." There were people who said New Orleans was being punished when Hurricane Katrina came through. A natural event happens, and some people feel they need to attach God to it.

So one theory is that the Hebrew writers who edited Genesis placed this story in their history as well, and used it to describe God's judgment, but also God's mercy. This story was a way to make some observations about the God they believed in. There is serious judgment in this story, isn't there? Somehow it has become a favorite children's story, probably because lots of furry animals take a ride on a boat.

But think about it: God becomes so angry at the corruption of the world that God says: I'm going to destroy most people and almost all of life, and start over. Remember, most of the people on earth die in this story, and they die by drowning, which is in my top three ways not to die. In fact, in the Babylonian story, the god Ea, who told Utnapishtim to build a boat, accuses Enlil, the god who sent the flood, of sending a disproportionate punishment. In other words, he says, you overdid it on the punishment. This god Ea reminds Enlil of the need for compassion.

So I find this a difficult story. It has some pretty sharp edges to it. But I like to remind you that the Bible is a library of theologies. It's a library of different stories and conversations about God. One of the ways we Lutherans read the Bible is through the lens of law and gospel. In any particular story, we ask: Where do we see God's demands on us (God's law) and where do we see God's promise (gospel)? Where do we see God's judgment? And where do we see God's mercy?

Well, in this story we certainly see God's expectations for us. God created us to care for the earth, and to care for each other. And we certainly fall short of that. Here is how the writer of Genesis describes what has happened since creation:

“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.”

God expects something different. It’s like a parent who looks at the behavior of a child, and says, That’s not the behavior that is acceptable around here. That will not do. This behavior of the world before the flood grieves God to the heart. And there need to be consequences. But that’s where the story gets difficult for me. God says, I’m going to basically wipe out almost everything.

This is one of the places where we can have a conversation about who God is. If this story is borrowed from the Babylonians to say that God punishes us through natural events, then the Hebrew people are buying into that theology as well. The Hebrews are saying, Our God does things like this. Here’s my question for us: Can we grow in our understanding of God? The view that God punishes us through acts of nature is a part of the story we might want to leave behind. I’ll leave that up to you.

But even in this story God changes. The people don’t change. People after the flood are just as corrupt as before. But *God* changes. Here’s where we see gospel. Here’s where we see grace. Not only does God have compassion on Noah and his family and the animals. God says, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” (Genesis 9)

God says, This will never happen again. I will never again be the cause of something like this. And even as the Hebrew people continue to tell their story, their view of God’s character changes throughout the Old Testament. Their understanding of God is that God becomes more compassionate and merciful. Here is God speaking in the Book of Isaiah, talking about the Jewish people who have disappointed God:

This is like the days of Noah to me:

Just as I swore that the waters of Noah
would never again go over the earth,
so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you
and will not rebuke you.

¹⁰ For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the LORD, who has compassion on you. (Isaiah 54)

As the Hebrew people continue to share their story, there is a movement towards an ever-more compassionate and merciful God. And if we believe that Jesus shows us the heart of God, we know that Jesus did not advocate destroying the enemy; he had dinner with the wrong people and fed the Gentiles and forgave those who put him on a cross. We don't need to stop with the theology of a God who almost wipes out the entire world. There is movement towards ever-more inclusion and mercy in the biblical story.

I want to point out something else about crime and the punishment in this story. The biblical text uses the same word for *corruption* that human beings bring on the earth before the flood and the *destruction* the flood brings to the earth. The punishment not only fits the crime, it *grows out of* the crime.

Let me show you another example. In the Book of Jonah, after the prophet Jonah finally preaches to the people of Nineveh, and they repent, God changes God's mind about the disaster God was going to bring on the people.

Here's how the text reads: "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it." The Hebrew word for evil is the same as calamity. The calamity God would bring grows out of their own evil. Maybe we are punished not so much for our sins but *by* our sins. When we turn away from our neighbor, when we turn away from God, there are consequences built into those actions.

When we abuse alcohol or drugs, it hurts our body and it removes us from those closest to us. Notice the consequences are built into the behavior. If we cheat on our spouse, our relationship will be harmed. Again, the consequences are built in. Our need to have more and more things has caused harm to our planet. Again, painful consequences are built into the actions. In this flood story, the word for humanity's *corruption* and God's *destruction* have the same root word. The one comes out of the other.

But I want you to notice that the focus of the story is not on the destruction of the flood, but on the mercy of God. Even though God punishes severely in this story, God has a commitment to carry on with all living things. Notice that God doesn't just save Noah and his family. God saves representatives of all living creatures. It's a reminder that God is concerned about all life on this planet.

God remembers Noah and the creatures on the ark. That doesn't mean God forgot about him and everybody and everything on the ark. It means God moved to act on their behalf. We have this also in Exodus, when God remembers the people who had been caught in slavery. God decides to act.

Do you notice how God acts? God sends a wind to dry up the waters. God sends a *ruach*. It's the same method God uses in Genesis chapter 1: God sends a wind to blow across the chaos and to begin to create the universe and the earth. God is continually re-creating, God is always renewing, in our lives and in our world.

And God makes a promise to never destroy the earth by a flood again. At the end of this story, God says, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.'

Notice that God puts a bow in the sky. It is a rainbow, but the word is not rainbow, but bow, as in a weapon. God hangs up God's bow, as if to say, I'm putting this instrument of destruction away. I'm not going to use it anymore.

Let me tell you a modern-day flood story. Father Greg Boyle runs Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles. He rehabilitates gang members, gives them job skills. He sometimes pays to have tattoos removed from their necks and their faces so they can more easily find work. Recently, he took two of his homeboys, Mario and Bobby, to Gonzaga University to talk about their lives and their transformation.

The two had never flown before, and they were very nervous. Mario is one of the most tattooed men Father Boyle has ever worked with. Father Boyle had never travelled with him before, and he could see people moving away from him when they saw the gang tattoo on his neck and the tattoos covering his face. When they got to the university, they were placed in front of a crowd of 1,000 people. Mario and Bobby spoke first, and told their stories of violence, of terror, of abuse of all kinds. After Father Boyle spoke, he asked the two men to join him for the question-and-answer period.

A woman near the front asked the first question. She said to Mario, “You say you’re a father, and your son and daughter are starting to reach their teenage years. What wisdom do you impart to them? What advice do you give them?” She sat, and Mario struggled with a response: “I just...”

He clutched the microphone and teared up; he stretched his arm toward her as if he were pleading with her. “I just, I just don’t want my kids to turn out to be like me.”

Now it was the woman’s turn to cry. “You are loving, you are kind,” she said. “I *hope* your kids turn out to be like you.” The audience stood and began to clap. All Mario could do was hold his face in his hands.

Father Boyle said this about the encounter: “A lanky, tattooed gang member revealed his wounds in front of a thousand strangers, who lost the temptation to despise him and recognized themselves in his brokenness.” (LA Times Opinion piece, November 28, 2017). That’s a flood story: Mario in his previous life, living in a way God didn’t want, hurting God’s heart; the consequences, the pain, the brokenness. But then the rescue, the compassion, the mercy, the wind of the Spirit blowing through Mario’s life to create a new chapter, blowing through *our* lives to create a new chapter. Flood and promise, judgment and mercy. Amen.

