

## **“Put it in Writing: Noah”**

*Reading: Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:8-22*

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Welcome to Lent. Welcome to a difficult season of the year. Welcome to a time when our focus shifts inward, and our inward gaze makes our seats a little uncomfortable. Welcome to a season that is characterized by ashes and darkness, by fasting and repentance. Lent is a time when holiness is our goal, and holiness can feel like having to eat your broccoli. But hopefully, as we grow older and hopefully wiser, our tastes mature along with the rest of us, so that we can appreciate broccoli for what it is. Hopefully, if we subsist on a diet of sugar, we grow to have a longing for food with substance. Hopefully in a world of noise and pleasure and entertainment, we can arrive at a point where we want to balance our lives with some quiet, some depth, some focus.

As you’ve heard me say many times before, Lent is a season of preparation and fasting before the celebration and feasting of Easter. We start on Ash Wednesday by putting the ashes of last year’s Palms on our foreheads as a sign of our sorrow for our sins and a recognition of our mortality, and therefore our dependence on the goodness and grace of God. And from our ashes we move on to a growing darkness, as we draw closer to the time when Jesus was opposed, confronted, attacked, shamed, and crucified. And though in our easily distracted, desperate-to-be-entertained states we may be tempted to call such things gloomy and dull, it’s what our souls are crying out for: deep holiness, beautiful repentance, and fearless self-examination. You can’t live on a diet of sugar and fat; trust me, whenever Pastor Carey goes out of town for a few days, I usually try to do just that, and it’s not good.

This year our Lenten focus is on covenants. There are certain key points in history in which God did remarkable things by making a covenant with a person or a group of people. It goes deeper than an agreement, deeper than a promise, deeper than a contract. It’s a binding declaration of relationship and commitment for the future. The parties in the covenant are binding themselves to one another, and there are consequences for breaking that bond. A covenant is not something to be entered into lightly, so if you’re going to do it, you’d better be serious. More than just carving some words into stone, it’s almost as though you’re carving yourself into stone. So when God covenants with us or with Noah or with Moses, it’s worth taking note of what He thinks is so important that He’s willing to put it in writing. What new era does this covenant begin? What does this covenant put a stop to? What does this covenant add to our lives that was not there before? These are critical steps forward in God’s work of salvation, so why are they so critical? And then, since the goal of Lent is our preparation in holiness, how does this covenant guide us in the way of holiness?

We’re beginning these Lenten covenants by looking not at the Bible, but by looking slightly to the side of the Bible. Our Scripture readings for today deal with Noah, and we start not with him, but with a man whom the Akkadians called Atrahasis. Or, as the Sumerians called him, Ziusudra. Or Utnapishtim, as he’s called in the Epic of Gilgamesh. They’re much more fun names to say than Noah, but they’re describing a very similar figure to the hero of our familiar Bible story. There are several examples of very ancient stories, some of them easily as old as the oldest parts of our Bible, that have remarkable parallels to the biblical story of the Flood. Many of the stories are not complete, but it’s striking how often they tell the story of the gods deciding to destroy humanity, only to have one man — Atrahasis, Utnapishtim, or whoever — secretly forewarned by one of the gods and instructed in

how to build an ark. The details are not always the same — sometimes it's just the man and his family that are saved, and sometimes many more people are included — but Atrahasis builds his ark, survives the massive deluge, and saves the future of humanity and creation.

When you first read some of these stories, it's really kind of shocking how close they are to the story of Noah. The story of Ziusudra, for example, specifically mentions that as the flood subsides, Ziusudra opens a window in the boat to receive the rays of the sun-god to know when it's safe to come out; the Genesis story mentions the window in Noah's ark. Utnapishtim is even more familiar, since he sends out birds as his method of determining safety, and, like Noah, his first attempts can only fly around and return since they can't find land.

But what is equally striking when you read these stories is how different they are than our story of Noah. So many of the details are so similar that there can be no question that they were written with an awareness of one another, and yet some of their foundations are so different that there also can be no question that Noah's story makes a very different point. The gods in these other stories are very, very different than the God of the Bible. The reasons for the flood in Genesis aren't entirely clear, but we learn that humanity had become so thoroughly wicked that there was no hope of redemption for them; "every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time." In some of the other stories, though, the reason that the gods decide to flood the world is because of overcrowding; there are simply too many humans. The story of Atrahasis is my favorite, though: the chief god Enlil decides to destroy humanity because, "Oppressive has become the clamor of mankind. By their uproar they prevent sleep." He tries a number of plagues and famines before settling on the flood, but his plan is foiled by one of the other gods sneakily warning Atrahasis ahead of time.

But the God of our Bible is not like Enlil or any other of those gods worshipped by the nations around the Israelites. Enlil is so petty, so impulsive, so capricious, and so uncaring toward humanity that's he's willing to wipe out the whole of creation because he can't sleep. The gods of these cultures are so fractured and angry and scheming that the only reason anyone survives the flood is because one god doesn't like the other god and decides to foil the plan to kill everyone by warning one person to build a boat. These gods are so distant and removed from humanity that the survivors of the flood have to start all kinds of sacrifices and ritual practices to keep the gods from wiping them out again.

Contrast that with the God who makes a covenant with Noah. We may not fully understand God's decision to wipe out humanity and start again with Noah, but He is not capricious, and He is not vindictive, and He is not distant. At the end of the crisis, God comes near to His creation and covenants with it, and He covenants with Noah as a new forefather of the human race. He re-establishes the precept that life belongs to God, and therefore even animals are not to be killed frivolously. He re-establishes the precept that humans bear the image of God. Creation, and especially humans, are not noise in our God's ears. And even more than that, God covenants with Noah and with all life on the earth to restrain Himself: He hangs His bow in the sky; He puts it up so that whenever He sees it, He remembers His promise not to destroy humanity like that again. "Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life." Certainly there are still floods and hurricanes today that cause great destruction, but we do not have to wonder, each time it rains, whether God has finally had too much of us.

And so this is a covenant that challenges us to believe the audacious claim that God can be trusted. This is a covenant that challenges us with the character of God in the face of unimaginable tragedy. The entire human race and the entire animal population of the planet has just been reduced to a handful; this is the original disaster of biblical proportions, and at the end of it, God comes near and promises that it won't happen again, that He is a God who blesses, that He wants to be near to His creation and intimately involved in its growth and goodness, and we have to ask ourselves whether we believe Him.

Not everyone did back then, and not everyone does today. Right after the story of the flood comes the story of the Tower of Babel, in which the peoples united together to build a tower to challenge the heavens and God confused their languages to stop them. At least some people in history have speculated that their motivation was to build a waterproof refuge in case there was another flood; they didn't trust God's covenant. At the very least, they intended to challenge God's authority, and so they doubted His character. And that, of course, is just the beginning, as generation after generation strays further and further from God, and other gods are worshipped in His place.

We still question God's character and faithfulness today. We may not build Towers of Babel any longer, but we do insist on hedging our bets rather than trusting that what God says is good. We still trust our money or possessions or politics or strength before we trust God's promise of provision in response to our generosity and grace. We still decide, in times of trouble, that maybe God isn't really all that good or powerful or trustworthy. We still take God's call to live in loving relationship with Him and reduce it to a list of do's and don't's, and we hope that we'll get to heaven by doing more good things than bad, because I'm not sure I can really trust that God is the sort of God who would covenant with a person like me.

God's covenant with Noah and with all of creation after that terrible flood is a powerful statement of the enduring goodness of God. It is a statement to us that holiness is not merely a set of actions that we undertake to appease God's wrath, as though we must perform certain magic incantations or do enough good things to keep God from smiting us. No, God is good, and holiness is a gift and a precious calling. Even in the times of deep darkness, God is good and He is trustworthy; His character does not fail because our circumstances are uncertain. Even in this season of Lent, when we watch as God's anointed one is taken to be spat upon and executed as a state criminal, when it seems like the plan of salvation has failed and all the suffering and planning and praying has come to nothing, we still know that God has covenanted with us, and He is trustworthy.

This covenant challenges us to believe the words of Peter: "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing." And later: "it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil." He's writing to Christians who are tempted to lash out in retaliation for the persecution they face, and he challenges them to trust in God's promises of redemption and resurrection rather than their desire to fight against their enemies. God's promise of salvation is more sure than the hope of temporary salvation that can come through fighting. And Peter draws from the imagery of the flood: Noah and his family were "saved through water." They become an image of the baptism that Christians still participate in today; in those waters, we die and are raised as new people because of God's faithfulness. The darkness of the flood is never the end of the story when a covenanting God is in the picture.

It is too easy to say simply that God will bring good out of a terrible situation. It is too easy, and it minimizes the pain we rightfully feel in those times, and it's not necessarily true, since sometimes evil is just evil. But this covenant calls us to believe and proclaim that in spite of the danger of the waters and the terror of the darkness, God is and will remain good. And so in this season of Lent, the call to you is to put your faith in writing. God has covenanted with us; He has made a commitment and put it into words for us, and so the question for you is what step you will take forward in your commitment to holiness in response. How will you commit to trusting in the goodness and faithfulness of God this Lenten season? You might decide to make worship of God for His goodness a regular part of your prayer time. You might read a Psalm every day as an act of praise, or listen to music to praise Him. You might need to confess to God your reluctance to trust Him, or your doubt about His goodness. You might release to Him the fears you have about a situation you're facing. God has made promises to you: how will you respond to Him?



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