

**SERMON TITLE** – “But God Remembered Noah...”

**TEXT** – Genesis 8:1-9:1

**PREACHED AT** – Neighbourhood Church

**DATE** – October 12, 2008

## **INTRODUCTION**

Today is Thanksgiving Sunday – a day when we pause to remember the graciousness of God and the goodness of his gifts to us, and how we are to move this blessing outward to others by living generously and graciously with those around us. We surely have a lot to be thankful for. But perhaps at this point in our fall series you’re beginning to wonder if our sermon series falls into this category...

The past few Sundays have focused on some dark texts. Two weeks ago we talked about the fall, the introduction of evil into the *shalom* of the garden. Last week James led us through the first murder in Scripture in the story of Cain and Abel. In both cases we saw that human choice is taken seriously by God, and that we alone have the ability to either honour God in obedience, or crash and burn in disobedience and violence. Well at first glance it would appear that things aren’t going to get much more sunny this week. Today’s text is Genesis 6-8 and the famous story of the flood.

## **NOAH AND THE ARK**

There are few biblical stories that are as well-known as the Flood. Mention old Noah and his ark to the average person on the street and I’m willing to bet that you would get a fairly decent outline of the story—animals, water, rainbows, the whole deal. The story of the flood and Noah and the ark still captures our imaginations—it’s not at all difficult to find toy arks and Fisher Price animals to fill them (if I’m not mistaken, there is a set lurking deep in the caverns of our own basement somewhere), or even to find a toy Noah himself – usually wearing a brown robe, and a long, flowing white beard. Kids love the idea of all the animals on the boat and the grand exotic adventure that the story seems to signify.

And it is a great story, after all. A true underdog tale, and we all love an underdog. One righteous man in a world of wickedness with his family and a herd of animals all alone on the raging seas, for day after day as the rains pounded down, and the winds blew, and the animals stank, and the people got sick, and the quarters began to feel cramped... Yet Noah and his ark rode out the storm and made it to the other side. They emerged victorious, ready to begin afresh. A great story indeed!

Except that there’s a dark side to the story too. In the prelude to the “children’s story-version” of the Flood, we read:

*The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on earth, and his heart was deeply*

*troubled. So the Lord said, "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created – and with them the animals, the birds, and the creatures that move along the ground – for I regret that I have made them." (Genesis 6:5-8)*

A little later, the nature of the wickedness that so grieved the Lord is spelled out more clearly:

*Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth." (Genesis 6:11-13)*

And of course this brings us to how God is going to accomplish this destruction:

*I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish. (Genesis 6:17)*

## **SYMBOLISM OF THE SEA**

As Island residents, I think most of us would say that we have an appreciation of the sea and are happy to live close to it. As one who has spent 29 of my 33 years on the prairies, I still routinely marvel at the sheer awe-inspiring beauty of the ocean. I wrote part of this sermon on the ferry Wednesday afternoon as I was heading over to Vancouver for a lecture at Regent College. On the way over, I stopped writing for a moment and just watched and felt us gliding smoothly across the Strait of Georgia on a mostly clear, calm, fall day. The water was smooth as glass and the Vancouver skyline was marvelous as we approached it. Water is a beautiful thing, and our mastery of various forms of technology allows us to enjoy it in ways that many before us could not. We want to be by the water, we want to vacation where there is water, we want to lie on beaches, go on cruises, etc, etc.

But in the ancient world, the sea had a more sinister symbolic association. The water was something to be combated, and delivered from. There are numerous examples of this:

- In the Old Testament, the most famous example comes from the book of Exodus where the Lord parts the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to pass through and escape Pharaoh's army. We have this image of walls of water being held back while the Israelites walk across and then, when Moses gives the command, the waters coming crashing back down in all their destructive force, wiping out the enemies of God's people
- The story of Jonah where the stormy sea is again an instrument of judgment and a means of getting Jonah turned around in the right direction
- In the Gospels we have Jesus stilling the storm and walking on water—both times demonstrating his sovereignty over chaos and disorder, announcing that he was God among us, doing the things that YHWH did, the things which shaped Israel's understanding and hope as God's people

The sea, in the ancient world, was often a symbol of chaos, darkness, disorder, and nothingness. Despite our attraction to the sea, we too know something of this ourselves. From the tsunami in Indonesia in 2005 to Hurricane Katrina in 2006, we have seen the power of the sea. We, too, know—if only from our television or computer screens, the terror and loss that can come when the waters are turned loose on the dry land.

So with this in mind, let's go back to the story of the Flood. In Gen 7:11b, it says that

*“the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened.”*

In context, this represents a frightful reversal of the initial creation (Gen 1:9) where waters are separated, marked out, and ordered. Now, water becomes a terrible destroyer. In the biblical view, however, God is sovereign over even the sea. God's speech to Job out of the whirlwind, after thirty-odd chapters of lament, makes this clear:

*Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, ‘This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt’? (Job 38:8-11)*

The flood is not just an arbitrary way for God to take care of the wicked people that were defacing his creation with violence—as if a plague or fire would have been just as effective. Nor is it, like in other ancient accounts of floods, a way of dealing with a problem of overpopulation or jealousy of the gods. **It is, rather, a sign of the depth of God's despair and anger at what his world had become.** God, with great pain and regret, chooses to wipe out humanity because humanity is destroying itself and his world.

In a sense, the Flood is a kind of “un-creation” or at least as close to this as God was prepared to go. Rather than the order and harmony we see in Genesis 1 and Job 38, where the sea is given boundaries and held back, where human beings and nature seem made for each other, nature is turned loose on humanity. What we were meant to experience as a delight and a blessing—much like my experience on the ferry this week or any number of our trips to the beach this past summer—will now turn into an instrument of judgment, and a sign of God's sorrow at what his image-bearers had become.

We're a long way from a nice children's story and Noah figurines here aren't we? I doubt you'll be finding any of this on the description on the back of the Fisher Price Noah and his ark box any time soon!

## **THE REASON FOR THE FLOOD**

So now we know *what* the flood symbolized. Let's return to the matter of *why* the flood was sent. In my opinion, there are few sadder sentences in Scripture than Genesis 6:6:

*The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth and his heart was deeply troubled.*

So far this fall we've seen God create a good world, we've seen it go bad, we've seen an example of the evil human beings are capable of, and now, it seems, things can't get much worse.

God was *sorry* that he made us.

There are all kinds of interesting and complicated theological questions around what this statement communicates about the nature of God (didn't he know we were going to mess up? Did he make a mistake? How can a perfect God "regret" something he does?") but the most important thing we can say about this passage is that **we, as human beings, have the capacity to break God's hearts with our actions.**

### **THE MESSAGE OF THE STORY**

Well, as we know, the story doesn't end with God's sorrow over what his people had done. The flood comes and God preserves Noah and his family.

**What this story tells us is that God doesn't give up on his creation.**

God could have just called an end to the whole "creation" experiment one millisecond after Eve's lips touched the forbidden fruit, but he didn't.

He could have written off humanity when he saw Cain murder his brother, but he didn't.

He could have called the whole show off

- When the Israelites were complaining in the desert, longing to go back to Egypt
- when they cowered in fear on the outskirts of Jericho
- when they went chasing after idols once they had entered the promised land
- when they wanted to have kings like all the other nations despite warnings to the contrary
- during any of the reigns of the rotten series of kings that followed
- when they ignored the warnings from the prophets to pursue justice and compassion and were sent into exile
- when his chosen people refused to embrace the kingdom of God that Jesus came preaching and instead had him executed like a political criminal
- when the church that began after the resurrection began to fight amongst themselves
- or at any other point in the story of the Bible or the two thousand years that followed when God's people acted more like the devil than the God whose image they bore...

**But he didn't. Genesis 8:1 – the verse quoted on the front of your bulletins – says that**

*God remembered Noah....*

The Hebrew word for “remember” is not exactly the same as our English word – it has to do with much more than mental recall of things forgotten. In this case, it means **“to act upon a previous commitment to a covenant partner.”** It has to do with aligning one's actions with one's words; it has to do with faithfulness of character.

God doesn't give up on Noah or his world and he doesn't give up on you and I either. No matter what we've done, or where we've been or who we've hurt or been hurt by, or how little faith we've been able to muster, God refuses to abandon his children to the nightmarish situations they bring about and go through.

Of course the theme of judgment is prominent in the story of the Flood. It's not just a feel-good story of how God just keeps loving and tolerating our actions in the hope that we'll see the light and change our ways. Far from it!

When God's judgment comes, it is a fearsome thing. People die. Perhaps people had grown so wicked that ending their lives was a mercy, for their own sake and for the sake of the planet. We're not told, although the text does indicate that the situation had gotten pretty dire.

God has expectations of his image-bearers, there are right and wrong ways of living, there are God-honouring and God-dishonouring ways of being in the world. God will not tolerate our violence—whether it's physical, spiritual, emotional, or whatever—forever. He loves us and his world too much for that. We need to hear this. We need to hear that our actions and our lack of obedience anger, frustrate, and grieve our holy God.

But we also need to hear that with this God there is always hope. And I think that this is something worth celebrating on Thanksgiving Sunday.

The most obvious sign of this hope is the covenant God makes with Noah in Genesis 8—our “official” text this morning. Noah exits the ark and the first thing he does is build an altar to worship the Lord. God's response is found in 8:21:

*The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.*

Remarkably, God acknowledges that he knows that human wickedness will continue. And despite this knowledge, God's promise is followed by a remarkable renewal of his initial creation covenant with humanity in 9:1 and echoed in 9:7:

*Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth."*

A fresh start. Noah is here cast as a new Adam who is given the same command Adam was. Go out. Make something fruitful and pleasing of yourself and of the good world I have made.

And so the story of the Flood is not *just* there to pass on information to us about what happened a long time ago, or to give us a nice kids story with animals and interesting characters, and a big boat, or to make us afraid of God's judgment and anger. Each of these dimensions might be appropriate to varying degrees, but fundamentally, the story sets three truths before us:

1. Our actions can and do cause God great pain
  - a. "he was sorry he made them..."
  - b. when we do wrong, we are not just hurting those around us or ourselves, but God. Failing to live up to what we were created to be causes God pain!
2. God "remembers" us
  - a. cf. 1:28 – God is a faithful covenant partner
  - b. despite our evil, God resolves to work with us
3. New beginnings are possible with God
  - a. Be fruitful! Sin is real, but it doesn't define who we are – God does

And so, the questions that we are faced with on this Thanksgiving Sunday are:

- Are there areas in your life from which you need a fresh start?
  - a. We all fall short in various areas of our lives, *but these shortcomings do not need to define us or close off different futures for us.*
- What will you do with the fresh starts you are given?
  - a. How will we be fruitful and make the best of the situations we are placed in?

When Noah's ark comes to a rest on Mt. Ararat and he is waiting and waiting for the water to recede, he sends out a dove to check on the state of affairs in the watery, formless void of God's "uncreation." The dove comes back the first time because there is nowhere for it to land; but the second time it comes back with an olive leaf in its mouth. The olive leaf is a historical symbol of peace and flourishing life and it is a sign—to Noah and to us—that God remembers his people and his promises to them.

As we go from this place, I pray that no matter what chaos or darkness we happen to be facing right now, no matter how formless and void our lives or the lives of those we care about may appear to be, that we would keep this vision in our minds and hearts—this vision of a tiny little olive leaf in the midst of a vast expanse of uninhabitable watery darkness, held up as a sign of hope that God "remembers" us, that he is not finished with us or his world, that God has promised that he will not "uncreate" his world again, that

new beginnings are possible and necessary, and that God's purposes for the world have not changed.

This tiny little olive leaf may not look like much in the context of endless miles of water but just as it did for Noah and his family on the ark, it represents the possibility of life, and peace, and flourishing, and hope. Like Noah, we are "remembered" by a trustworthy God. And this is something truly worth being thankful for on this Thanksgiving Sunday.

Thanks be to God.