

Even Though

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Genesis 8:20-22, 9:7-17

An important part of the beginning of any movie or book is character development. When a book or a movie starts, you meet these characters and you wonder, who are these people? What are they like? Do I like them? Are they good guys or bad guys. Are they safe or are they dangerous? What's going on inside of them? What's in their heart?

It's hard for us to read the Bible this way, because we've heard the stories so often, we've already formed our opinions. But imagine you'd never read the Bible before. Imagine you knew nothing about the characters in it. In Genesis 6-9, in the story of Noah and his ark, you would still be in the character development stage. We're still figuring out: Who is God? What is this world that he has made?

We think of Noah's Ark as a children's story, and it is, but it's so much more than that. It's a story that addresses the most basic questions of our life. Questions like: Who is God? What's in his character? Is God friendly? Is he taking care of things, is he smiling on us? Or is God angry; angry with the world, angry with me? Is he fed up? And what about the world? Is it a good place or is it a place of danger? Is it a place of chaos? Because there are some really awful things out there. One moment you feel healthy and you're making plans, but in the next minutes the test results come back and you're fighting for your life. One moment you're living happily; the next moment the flood comes. How you answer those questions will affect how you carry yourself in this world. Are you walking around full of fear or full of hope?

The story of Noah and the flood addresses these questions, and the answer to these questions is complicated and nuanced. Let's see what the story says about these important questions. First, what does the story say about the temperament of God. If we go back to the beginning of the flood story, God is definitely angry. He's angry at the state of the world and he is ready to bring the hammer down. Do you remember why God is angry? Genesis 6:5. "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." It was only 5 chapters before that when God stood over the creation he had made, took a step back, put his hands on his hips and said, "Wow! This is really good!" But things have really changed. Adam and Eve started messing up God's good world; now the rest of humanity is following in their footsteps. Now God is standing over creation with his hands on his hips and he's not saying, 'This is really good;' he's saying, 'this is a mess.' God is pretty upset about that, upset enough that he sends a flood to wash away human sinfulness

And when you see God's anger and the flood it brings, you might say to yourself, 'OK, we have our answer. We know who God is. He's a law-and-order guy.' What's at the heart of God? A sense of right and wrong. A sense of justice. God wants people to follow the rules. When people follow the rules, he's happy. When people don't follow the rules, he's angry and he brings the hammer down. In this case by sending a flood to wipe out wickedness.

But a close reading shows that it's a little more complicated than that. God certainly does care about justice and right and wrong. But when God looks and sees that the human heart is evil all the time, Genesis doesn't say, 'God was angry, or God was enraged, or God was furious' – the Holy Spirit chooses a different word to describe God's reaction. Do you remember how the Bible describes God's reaction? You can find it in Genesis 6:6. God is grieved.

Different translations use slightly different words. Our translation, the NIV, says that when the Lord saw human evil, he was 'deeply troubled.' The King James Version and the ESV and the NRSV all say that human sin 'grieved him in his heart.' That's more complicated than anger. There's anger in this reaction, but the Hebrew word ('atsab) has pain and worry and hurt in it as well.

The difference matters. Really matters. Say you come to church on a Sunday morning and you find out that someone has thrown a rock through the front door of church and sprayed an expletive over the door. How do you feel? You are angry. Who did this? We need to find this person! This person needs to be held accountable! But now suppose that you find out that the person who did this is your child. Now you are not just angry, now you are grieved. You're still angry, but now your heart is breaking too. It would be an almost unbearable flood of both anger and sorrow, right? Can you feel it?

That's the feeling which Genesis puts at the heart of God. When God sees what his children have done to the world, his own heart floods with anger and grief and sorrow. Of course, the anger of God does work itself out in a terrible way in the story. There's nothing easy about the judgment God brings. He wipes out a lot of people. But he also acts to preserve. He rescues Noah. He makes a way through the water so that we can survive. It's not just anger. In the midst of the anger there is something else. Out of God's grief flows a stream of mercy and it is stronger than the flood.

At the end of the flood story, that stream of mercy broadens into something bigger. God rescues Noah, God blesses him, and God tells him the same thing he told Adam; be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. But God also gives something more to Noah, something new. He makes a promise. He makes a covenant with creation. He says to him, "Never again will I destroy all living creatures as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease." This promise is meant to be a sign of love and stability. No matter how crazy things get, you can count on my love through the steady goodness and provision of this world. I promise.

Here's an important question: Does God do this because the flood has eliminated all the sinners from the world and now only Noah is left and Noah is a good guy, so he's earned an extra promise from God? No. Human beings are still just as messy as they always were. Look at 8:21 – "even though every inclination of the heart is as wicked as ever." So, people are no better! Noah's heart is no improvement over the rest of humanity. Noah will prove that by the end of the chapter when he gets fall-down drunk in his tent. No one has earned this promise; God makes it "even though." Even though. Such important words. The gospel is in those words. Even though you are a mess I give you this promise. Even though you will let me down again, I promise to give you the blessing of the natural world. Even though I know that you will grieve me again I promise to sustain you.

So, at the beginning of the story, in the grief of God, there is a stream of mercy that comes from the heart of God, and it's enough to preserve Noah and his family. By the end of the passage, in the promise to creation, that stream has widened into a promise of care that extends to the earth and every living thing. The stream of mercy has become a sea.

How wide and deep will that sea become? Well let's see. Can you think of another time when human sin had built up to a boiling point? Another time when God looks at the wickedness of human beings and is grieved and moves to wash that sin away? I can think of another story. In the story I'm thinking of, God unleashes another flood of judgment, only this time Jesus is the one who is swept away by the flood. Even though it was our sin, Jesus is the one swept away. Even though it's our hearts that are a mess, God takes the flood into himself.

So, who is God? Early in the book, just six chapters in, God shows himself as a God who cares about justice, who cares about right and wrong, but in the middle of his heart there is something deeper and more wonderful than just rules. There is a love for this world. There is a love for every living thing. There is a love for you and me. And it's an 'even though' love. It moves towards us even though we are a mess. In this story that grace is a stream; at the cross that grace will become a flood; a flood into which we baptize our children.

I asked those questions at the beginning of the sermon. What kind of a world is this? Is it a fearful world presided over by an angry God? Or is it a good and beautiful world? Is there grace in it? Is there love in it? Can I walk out of my front door with joy and hope? In this story, God points us towards his goodness in the middle of things. In his covenant with creation he gives us a visible and consistent sign of that goodness. 'No

matter how bad things get in the world, my care for creation, the cycle of the seasons, the fruitfulness of the earth, the beauty of the world, the order of things will be a sign to you of my goodness, my love.'

I am convinced that not only is this covenant with creation real, I am convinced that the love and grace of this covenant is something every human being can feel. Do you remember 2020 and how miserable we all were in the spring of Covid? We were all shut inside and isolated because of the pandemic. The news was full of uncertainty and fear and conflict. But do you also remember what a nice spring it was? Do you remember how it was so green and warm here in Michigan? And what did we all do? We all went outside, and we watched the world come to life. We watched the grass green. We saw the tulips come up; we felt the warmth of the sun on our face. How did that make us feel? Hopeful. Good. Encouraged. The coming of spring made us feel like we will get through this. I put it to you that what we were all feeling is the power of the covenant of Genesis 9. I put it to you that what you were feeling is the goodness of God's promise that as long as the earth endures, he will always bring the seasons. We see the flowers come up and something happens in our spirits – God communicates goodness and grace and hope to our souls. "Even though there is a lot of trouble, I'm still here and my promises are strong."

Last summer was the summer of the Northern Lights. Many of you saw them. There was one night in particular last May when they really popped. You could see them clearly in Grand Rapids. I remember that night clearly because I missed it! I was down south in New Orleans. The Lights didn't make it down there. But even in my New Orleans hotel room I could tell that you were all having a moment. You filled social media with beautiful pictures. You wrote about how beautiful they were. Everyone was full of a sense of wonder and delight. Again, something was happening in your spirit. Joy. Delight. Wonder. I put it to you that what you were all feeling was the power of God's covenant in Genesis 9. God was saying to you, "Even though life can be crazy, I am still here and my promises are strong."

Over the last two weekends Linda and I have been opening up our cottage. We spend part of Saturday putting out the dock and getting the boat in. Tidying up. It never fails to amaze me how being at the cottage has restorative powers for my soul. No matter how crazy things get at work, no matter how crazy things get in the world, sitting at the end of my dock on a sunny afternoon in May makes me feel better. Like everything is going to be OK. What is that? I'm convinced that it's God speaking his Genesis 9 promise into my tired soul. "Don't worry, I am here, and my promises are strong."

You've all felt it too, right? Somewhere out there. On a hiking trail. At the top of a mountain. Watching a Lake Michigan sunset. Holding the hand of a newborn child in your fingertips. We've all felt it. I'm just here telling you that this is from God. It's a kind of grace that you are feeling. It's God saying, "Even though life can be hard, I love you. Even though you can be a bit of a mess, I will stick with you because I am not a God who gives up on the things he loves. Even though the wrong seems oft so strong, I am the ruler yet."

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