



LESSONS IN LIVING

What We Can Learn from the Creation Myth in Genesis?

“Part 7: The Flood”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: From Genesis 6, 7, and 8 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

These are the generations of Noah: Noah was just and blameless among his contemporaries, and walked in accord with God. Noah had three children: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. It was clear to God that the world was corrupt and full of violence. God looked at the earth, and saw that it had gone to ruin: all flesh had defiled its way upon the earth. So God said to Noah, “The end of all flesh has come before me, for they are the cause of all its violence. I will destroy them, and the earth as well.”

For forty days the flood continued, and the rising water lifted the ark so that it rose high above the earth. The waters rose and rose throughout the whole earth, and the ark rose with them. The waters rose so high over the earth that all the high mountains under heaven were covered—the waters rose above the mountaintops by more than 250 feet. All life on the earth perished—birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures, and all humankind. Everything that had once had the breath of life in its nostrils, everything on the earth, died. God destroyed all living things that existed on earth, from humans to animals, from things that crawled to things that flew; all were wiped out throughout the world. Only Noah and those with him in the ark survived. The waters rose for 150 days.

Noah built an altar to YHWH, and choosing from every clean animal and every clean bird, offered burnt offerings on it. YHWH smelled the sweet fragrance and said, & “Never again will I curse the earth because of humankind, since the evil their hearts contrive begins from infancy. Never again will I strike down every living thing as I have done. So long as the earth lasts, sowing and reaping, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.”*

* YHWH represents the divine name found in the Hebrew text. It represents the Divine Mystery and, traditionally, is not pronounced. Instead, we say “God” or some other term of reverence.

Sermon

I was taught this story in a very traditional way, where God first makes us, but then realizes this is defective handiwork, so then decides to punish us because God didn't make us very well. That

makes sense, doesn't it? I was taught the story as a divine tantrum, where you destroy everybody and everything because of a subgroup. I remember in high school asking, *“What did the bunnies do? How come the fish got off scot-free?”* (Laughter) This is a really bad plan if you're trying to punish everybody.

Christianity very easily falls into a religion of fear. Any religion that focuses on salvation is undergirded by fear. It may not admit it, it may not say it publicly. But if there isn't a Hell, then what is Jesus saving us from? If God is the one who made Hell, then that's like somebody setting your house on fire and then putting it out and waiting for a “thank you.”

What I'd like to do today, and actually in this whole series on Genesis, what I'm trying to do is help understand scripture mythologically. To realize many of these are very, very ancient stories. I find it very exciting to realize the larger framework some of these stories were developed in. We're going to look at one of those today. Let's go to the first slide.



This is actually a picture not of Noah and his ark, but from the Epic of Gilgamesh. It's a Babylonian version of the flood story. One of the gifts of my life was taking a classics course at the University of Texas before they prohibited. . . . (Laughter) We'll all be so much better if we don't deal with controversial issues, right?

But back in that day, controversy was okay. In fact, it was seen as how you develop a first-rate mind. Good to remember that. But we studied the Epic of Gilgamesh. What I realized as a young Christian from Dallas is the Genesis story was really about someplace else. There's a story of a flood in the Gilgamesh epic, and it's got the whole story, including releasing the birds to sea. Polytheistic religions have an advantage that you don't have to try to abstract everything because when your gods are crazy, then you just say, *“Okay, well, life is like that sometimes.”* In the Babylonian version, it's not that people had sinned, it's that they were too loud. The gods wanted to get some sleep. So, What do you do?

I think it's important that the Jewish wisdom teaching was trying to say that violence brings chaos into the world. But you really can't make sense of life. Life is not logical. Logical is a quality of human speech, not of the real world.

One of the advantages of studying other religions mythically is that you ask the question about, *"How is this true in my life?"* And not, *"How is this true in the world?"* Nothing will make you crazy faster than trying to understand the universe in terms of your life and what happens to you. It's a very human thing to do. But when you have to justify every horrible thing that happens in terms of one being that's making it all happen, you have to go further and further out on the limb to do it.

But you'll get wiser and wiser if you try to understand your life in terms of the universe. What do you see in nature? What do you see in the life around you? Because our personality, as important as it is for us, is not something nature really cares about. Nature doesn't seem to care much about my ambitions. Maybe you've had more luck, but I think wisdom means tuning our heart to the universe the way it is. Stop trying to make it fit into one theory based on our own experiences.

If the flood is not about a punishment that took place in the Middle East, then perhaps it's about what life is like when it unravels. That sense of life being chaos. That sense that you're drowning, that you have this fledgling grasp on life and you're being swept along in a direction you're not choosing. In the ancient world, one of the things to really understand about the creation story, including in Judaism, is that we think of the universe as a clock, and it operates by the laws of physics most of the time. But when it doesn't, then we pray and say, *"God, please fix the clock."*

In these ancient mythologies, God stuck God's hands in between the waters of chaos above and below to form a safe place for humans. When you look at the universe, most of it's chaos. But on little planet Earth, there's a balance.

Jewish wisdom people believe that it was a goddess Sophia. Wisdom, the creative principle that brings us into being that kept us in that safe space. And when we became cruel, when we became greedy, it wasn't that God was punishing us, it's that we had left the protected zone. You can't stay in a protected zone and hate other people. You can't be in a protected zone and violate the ways of nature. So this isn't a story about punishment. It's a story about endurance and survival. Could we look at the next slide?



That's another version of the boat. Think of the boat, the ark, the manger, all as microcosms that have animals and people that you care about. Your life is not restricted to your ego. The people you love and care about, the animals that tie you to nature, are essential for your health, spiritually. And so the survival vessel carries all of that with it into the flood. Let's go to this next slide.

from the Epic of Gilgamesh:

“...Tear down your house and build a boat, abandon possessions and look for life, despise worldly goods and save your soul alive. Tear down your house, I say, and build a boat.”

This is, I think, the punchline of the flood story. This is from the Babylonian version of the story. The whole thing, to me, makes a lot more sense if we approach it from this way. The Noah character in Babylon/Sumeria lives in a reed house and feels incredibly threatened by all that's happening. So one of the gods speaks to him and says, *“Tear down your house and build a boat.”* See, unlike the Jewish and Christian story, he's going to build this boat, but he has to build it from what he's familiar with. *“Abandon possessions and look for life. Despise worldly goods and save your soul alive. Tear down your house, I say, and build a boat.”*

In other words, stop thinking of yourself, your life as a possession, and realize you are a vessel of Life, that Life is change. There are times when the difference between Heaven and Hell is whether you can let go of possessions and go where Life is leading you. Hell is trying to hold on to former happiness. Think of that feeling of unraveling. That's the flood. Think of that sense of it's just too hard to get up in the morning. That sense that you're just overwhelmed, that you're being swept along by forces that are beyond your control. That's the flood.

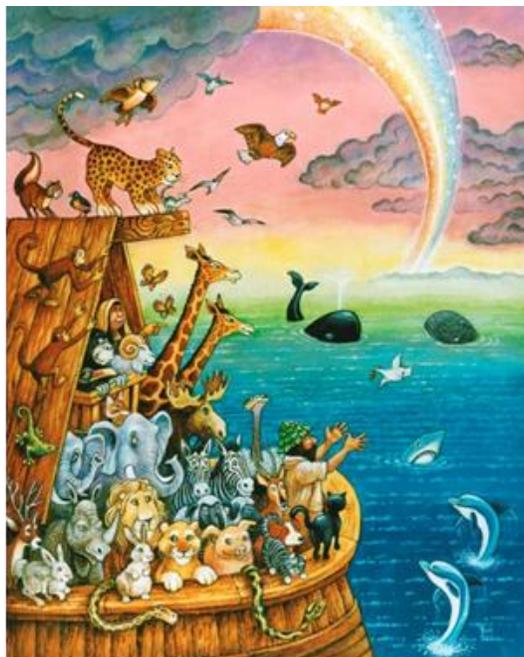
But that's not the punchline of the story. The punchline of the story is that wisdom can lead you through the flood. Wisdom being the creative principles of the universe. The word of God is not the Bible. The word of God is the pattern by which God makes everything or makes God. We don't know. The more we snag on the symbols and try to make them something that we understand, the less those lenses help us understand our own life. Because what we're talking about is the feeling of interconnectedness. We're not talking about just an understanding in our head. To feel our roots into the earth, to feel our connections to each other, to *feel* them, not just *think* them, but to *feel* those connections. These ancient people believe that wisdom guides us through the storms.

When this god says to the Babylonian Noah, *“Tear your reed house down. . .”* think about how we try to hold our lives together, and it feels so hopeless, helpless. If we can let go of our possessions, even in here for just a second, and realize we are the life within us. And change is not evil. Change is Life. And Life is change. And if we can't say “no” to that, then our possessions become our Hell. They become the sources of violence.

It's been 40 years that I've been warning that somebody like Trump is going to come along, because that's where capitalism leads. It doesn't matter if we want to hear it or not. If you love possessions more than people, and that's what capitalism is ... you don't got money, you starve ... you don't got money, you don't get medical help. When you get your values from that, violence enters the world by definition. Because poverty is also violence. Indentured servitude is violence. Any sense of domination is violent to the human spirit.

The voice from thousands of years ago, it's been 4,000 years maybe, is saying, *“let go of the forms of life, at times when you feel yourself drowning in the flood, let go of the forms of life and say ‘yes’ to the flow.”* Go with it. That's what faith is.

Now, here's the last thing from the Jewish story that the Babylonian story didn't have, and that is the rainbow.



I chose a cartoon version because it's supposed to be happy. I don't know if you saw on the other picture of the flood, their arms sticking up. Those are the liberals. *(Laughter)* I don't know if you recognize my hand or not, but that was me. I don't know why the dolphins are happy. They haven't been punished at all. *(Laughter)*

But in both stories, the gods repent for having done that destruction. And of course, this isn't what happened in reality. But it's saying, *“you don't have to worry about the anger of God. I needed to talk about God as angry and have a tantrum for this story.”* But they leave a little place in there that says, *“you don't have to worry about that ever again.”*

Now, unfortunately, what some Christians do is say that means we don't have to care about the environment. God said that the Earth would never be destroyed again. Well, we're doing a real good job of it.

Do you remember the Doors song, “*Riders on the Storm?*” I just love this week that they're loosening the controls so that coal companies can poison us now. But they're also bringing lawsuits against basically sports bras. Because they're saying that's what transgender people use to disguise and hide. Insanity is never far away when people take religion literally. Almost always, they're just using it to get what they really want. Donald Trump did not become a Christian fascist by reading the Bible. That was the starting place. “*Riders on the Storm. Into this house we're born, into this world we're thrown.*” And it takes a dive on the lyrics and says, “*Like a dog without a bone, an actor all alone.*” But it's the spirit of the poem, “*Riders on the Storm.*”

One of my favorite gods in the Babylonian story is the one that says “*Do not lose hope, even if you feel like you're being overwhelmed right now. That you were made for this. You are not the frightened little human in a reed hut. You are the rider on the Storm. All you need to do is realign your life, from possessions to being a vessel for life and say ‘yes’ to life in all of its forms.*”

The rainbow was understood as a promise that we *can* make it. That doesn't mean our form is going to make it. The form belongs to time. All of our possessions belong to time. But there's a *part* of us that belongs to Life. And what our story today is saying is “*Choose Life.*” This is not a story about a divine tantrum. It may be that way now in some churches. But it was always about hope, about when life gets too hard to bear and you can't hold it together anymore, how you can realign your life. You are not the frightened little human quivering in a reed hut. You are the rider on the storm. Release all your possessions, just for a second in your mind, and realize that's not who you are. It's never been who you are. You are Life. And you can endure any storm that time throws at you.

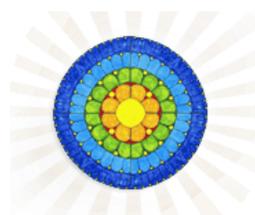
Well, that's my understanding of the text. We'll take a moment for you to think about how you would have preached it.

Benediction

Rev. Babs Miller

As you go out from here, I would remind you once again that each of you is a child of that wonderful spirit of love that we sometimes call God. And that spirit knows when you skin your knee or your heart. That spirit knows when you admire a butterfly or cry in the darkness. So go out into this wonderful creation and tell the whole world that they are loved just exactly as they are. Go and kiss the hurts of this world. Go and laugh and play in the fields of grace and love. Go in peace. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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