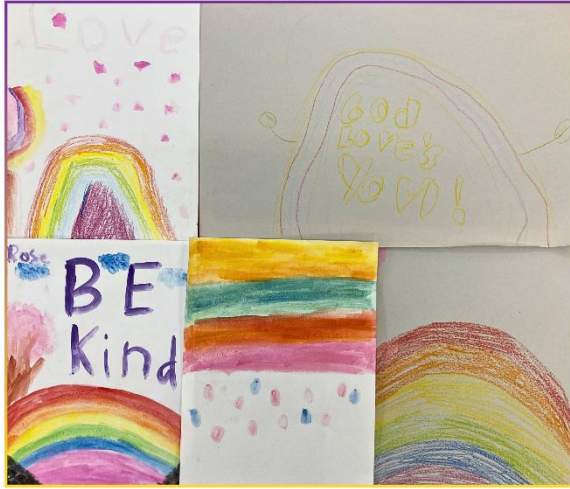




TODAY IN WORSHIP, WE'LL BEGIN READING THROUGH THE NARRATIVE LECTIONARY. If you've been around Calvary for a minute, you may (or may not) have noticed that in September we start at the beginning of the Bible and we slowly work our way through the Old Testament or Hebrew bible in the fall, and then after Christmas, we switch to the stories of Jesus in one of the gospels through Easter, and then we read from other books in the New Testament. The inside page of your bulletin lists readings for the week, if you'd like to dive deeper into the story we'll be preaching on Sundays. (And if you need a bible, let us know).

And today's reading is the story of Noah and the flood. To our modern ears, it seems unscientific to say the entire earth was flooded. There is not enough water in the earth's atmosphere to cover Cleveland, Paris, and Mt Everest.

But almost every culture in the ancient near east had a story about a cataclysmic flood. We have the story of Noah, which we'll read later in worship.

And we have the Epic of Gilgamesh, from ancient Mesopotamia, the oldest piece of literature still in existence, with a Noah-like story about a man named Utnapishtim who survived a great flood by building a boat and bringing his family and animals aboard. Sound familiar?

While it is impossible for the entire earth to flood, there was at least one cataclysmic flood in the ancient near east, and stories were told to make sense of a giant flood that covered the earth as they knew it. Google hadn't been invented yet. We can't fault them for not knowing that San Francisco, London, and Cape Town existed. The Mesopotamian valley, the world, as they knew it, flooded.

I suspect that's still true today for people in Nepal, the Grand Canyon, Hawaii, or other communities that have recently had devastating flooding. It doesn't matter if the whole planet has flooded. What matters is your whole world has flooded.

We still seek to derive meaning from the floods, and famines, and maybe even pandemics, that happen in our lives. Don't let your scientific minds keep you from hearing the truth God has for us in this story today. I'm grateful you are here with us this day, on the corner of Fillmore and Jackson, as we seek to hear ancient stories in new ways this day.

Genesis 6:5-22; 8:6-12; 9:8-17

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 they had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved God's heart. So the Lord said, 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.' But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.

These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God. And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks. For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive. Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them.' Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.

At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more.

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, '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.' God said, '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.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

WE OFTEN START OUT OUR PROGRAM YEAR WITH THE CREATION STORIES IN GENESIS.

But you may have noticed today's reading from Genesis isn't a creation story, as much as it is a destruction story. And it feels a little startling how quickly the story changes in six chapters.

At the end of the first chapter of Genesis, after God has created the world in six days, we're told: **"God saw everything they had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day."**

All of creation brought God delight. The hedgehogs, kittens, and puppies as much as the sea monsters, pterodactyls, and thistles.

The book of Proverbs personifies Wisdom and this is how Wisdom describes the act of creation, the beginning of the world in Proverbs 8:

²⁷ When God established the heavens, I was there,
when God drew a circle on the face of the deep,
²⁸ when he made firm the skies above,
when they established the fountains of the deep,
²⁹ when God assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress their command,
when the Lord marked out the foundations of the earth,
³⁰ then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily God's delight,
rejoicing before God always,
³¹ rejoicing in the inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.

We have solid scriptural evidence that says God made the world in love and that God loves what God has created, delighting in its variety, its beauty.

And we also have the story of the flood. The Lord saw the wickedness of humanity was great, that humans are inclined to evil continuously. God was grieved in their very heart that they had made humankind and regretted the decision they had made completely. The earth was filled with violence because of humanity, so God was going to destroy the earth. It's easy to read this story and wonder if God is vengeful. God buries the earth in water. All of humanity is wiped out. All of the earth is wiped out, wiped clean.

A close reading of the text, however, reminds us that this is a story of a loving God, a God who doubles down on the promise to be in relationship with a humanity that has broken God's heart and that has forgotten to be God's.

And if we're honest with ourselves, we understand the challenge God faced. We can look around and see the violence that seems deeply baked into our systems and structures, and even hidden away in our own hearts. The current administration is enthusiastic in its cruelty—destroying norms, expectations of decency, and celebrating racist ideology that is killing people.

Maybe this Genesis destruction story seems more apt because of the moment we are in. But you can look at any moment in American history, or human history, for that matter, and see the problems that have been there all along.

The second line of our Declaration of Independence reads: *"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."*

And we rightly lift that up to show the good ideals on which our country was founded. But what was self evident in 1776 was that land-owning white men were the only ones our founding fathers believed were created equal.

It took a Civil War for our country to end slavery. But long after 1865, we have been lynching black people, redlining real estate, displacing people from neighborhoods—like the Fillmore—in the name of "urban renewal", and using the structures of our government and society to make life difficult for the descendants of the people we enslaved.

And women certainly weren't included in who was considered equal by the founding fathers. It took 150 years for women to fight for and win the right to vote and we couldn't have credit cards in our own names until 1974. Rest in Peace, Gloria Steinem. And there is an active campaign now to remove that right to vote, to let husbands vote on behalf of the family.

I don't want to depress us too much—*just the right amount!*—but I don't want us to see the news today and believe that all of our problems started with a recent election of a particular president. They did not.

We are good and we can also be wicked.

One thing I appreciate about the authors of Genesis is that they fully embrace both the goodness and delight of what God has created AND also see clearly our shadow side. We are a multitude. We contain in us the goodness, love, and delight that we inherited from our Creator. And we also somehow contain in us seeds of wickedness and evil that create the cruelty and pain we see around us.

I think the church, broadly speaking—both across generations and across different flavors or denominations of Christianity—has emphasized one or the other side of the story rather than embrace both. I fully admit that I prefer the **goodness of creation** side. I'd prefer to explain away our darkness by blaming a few bad actors.

I think this is largely true of the PCUSA. We tend to celebrate the creation that God created in love, welcoming all into our congregations. And that is a good thing to do. *It also isn't the whole story.*

There are other churches who see the wickedness side more easily. They emphasize the importance of individuals getting themselves right with God, and they have lists of behaviors that are not allowed. *It also is not the whole story.*

Either position is especially problematic when you only see the goodness in yourself and people who agree with you and only see the wickedness in others and people who disagree with you. Our opponents are equally created good, made in the image of God, as you and I are. Our heroes are equally as flawed and imperfect as you and I are.

Humanity does not have a simple story. We are complicated. And if we can remember that, maybe we can withstand the simple narratives we see in the news that try to tell us otherwise.

This honest assessment of humanity that mirrors our passage from Genesis is deeply encoded in our theology and our liturgy too.

One of the reasons we say a prayer of confession in worship each and every week is to acknowledge this part of our reality. We acknowledge, together, that we make mistakes, that we hurt each other and the world we inhabit, and that we trust in God who has called us together in covenantal relationship.

It is not entirely clear to me why God chose to establish a covenant with Noah and every other living creature. The wickedness and depravity of humanity is clear to us. It was clear to God. It is unlikely that God had magical thinking about their creation. I don't think God looked at us and thought, *"Well, sure. They were terrible that one time, but I think they've changed."*

And why Noah? He isn't the best of humanity. He may have been 'blameless in his generation', but his generation was the one that made God want to destroy the whole planet, so I'm not sure it's a flex. The one good thing I will say about Noah is that God shows up with a fantastical set of directions for him and Noah says ***"okay. I'll build your giant boat so you can destroy my world, killing everyone I know, and I'll fill it with all the animals, even if I don't know right now how to separate the lions from the lambs to keep both of them safe."***

And Noah builds it.

Why Noah? Maybe God chose Noah because Noah knew he was not God, and Noah understood that God's ways are not our ways.

Why Noah? One possibility is that it isn't about Noah at all, it isn't about us. It is about God. This covenant is initiated by God because of the mysterious ways of God, not because of who Noah was. The covenant is something we participate in, but not something we earn.

Creation begins again with the people in the ark—people who are just normal people.

God's not looking for perfect people. God's looking for actual people, with whom to be in covenant relationship. God recommits to humanity. This first biblical covenant is all about God putting limits on how God will be in relationship with flawed and broken humanity from here on out.

*The limits are set on God,
not on humanity,
not on creation,
but on God's own behavior.*

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.

God chooses to promise to their creation an everlasting relationship. This covenant has marked our relationship with God all the way through. Our understanding of grace comes out of this covenant. Grace is the gift of God's unconditional and unearned love. When we baptize infants, we are reminded that God has chosen us before we could ever choose God. Remember this next week when we baptize baby Quinn.

We believe God's grace is present in our lives whether or not we ever ask for, deserve, or earn that love. Because of the story of Noah, we know God's love precedes any action on our part.

That's the promise in the sky, marked by God's bow when it rains.

Our response to this covenant of grace matters. We may be good and bad, all baked together, but we can still choose how we want to live in the world, how we want to care for and help our fellow travelers. We can apologize when we get it wrong and we can do better when we know better.

How do we want to respond to the covenant?

Think of a time when you expected judgment and instead received grace, forgiveness, welcome.

The earliest memory I have of this is when I was in 3rd grade. I was a messy kid. I still tend toward disorganization and clutter. But my room as a kid was a disaster. And my parents were always yelling at me to clean it. But I had books to read and the Brady Bunch to watch on TV.

And one day, while walking through the chaos of my room, I tripped over my cello and fell on it. I will never ever forget the sound and the feel of that cello breaking under me.

I knew I was in trouble. It was my fault. I had been told to clean my room. I could not blame it on my little brother, although I'm sure that thought passed through my mind. This was on me.

Also, I knew this was an expensive mistake I had made, a mistake I could not pay for. My dad had just gone blind and lost his job and my family did not have extra money laying around to rebuild school cellos.

And I knew I deserved to be grounded for life, or maybe sent to a factory somewhere in the 1800s that hired children as laborers, like a Dickens novel.

I also knew this was not a mistake I could hide under the bed that nobody would ever have to know about.

So I told my parents.

And my parents said, "okay. We'll take care of it."

And they did.

And they did not garnish my wages for life, or send me to a factory in the 1800s. They did not punish me in any way.

I'd like to tell you that after that terrible experience, my room was always neat as a pin. But it would not be true.

I have always taken better care of my cello, at least.

But grace when you deserve disaster is transformative. And it makes you more likely to be able to extend grace to others.

Our response to God's bow in the sky is to feel and receive that grace, deep in our bones, so that we can then live into the covenant God has given us. When we see the bow, when we remember the story of the flood, we are free to extend that grace we have received, to others. It is an important response we can make to the wickedness and evil we see in the world and in ourselves. We can care for each other as God has cared for us.

The covenant is something God initiated. The covenant doesn't make us perfect people who have it all figured out, but it does give us the opportunity to choose, each day, how to live, how to treat our neighbors, how to give back to God in gratitude.

Today after worship, we'll have coffee hour in the atrium and then you're invited into Calvin Hall to get connected with one of Calvary's ministry teams.

Your church leadership, both staff and elders, have been working on our new vision, mission, and values language, which is hanging on banners in the atrium. In working through this, it became clear to us that God has things for us to do. And that we have the capacity to live into God's dreams for us in ways we haven't yet. So we are working to build ministry teams so we can deploy the congregation to support those dreams.

There are a few committee meeting type opportunities for those of you who really love a good presbyterian committee. But we also recognize people are busy and so much of the work for us is on a more ad hoc basis. If you want to deliver packed lunches to ministry partners one Sunday afternoon, the Mission and Care team can sign you up for that at their table.

If you would like to volunteer in worship leadership, as an usher or liturgist or choir member, come to the Worship and Music table.

If you'd like to help Calvary develop our culture of hospitality and welcome, both for church events and for the groups that use our building, talk to the team at the Growth and Community Engagement table about how you can be an ambassador for Calvary.

If you want to help with education or fellowship events for children, youth, or adults—maybe casseroles, cookies, or bible studies are your spiritual gift—please meet with the team at the Faith Formation table.

And if you'd like to see the org chart David Foster has brilliantly created for us, or talk about spreadsheets, or have someone to nominate to serve in elected leadership, don't miss the Governance and Administration table.

Your bulletin has more details about all of this. If every person shows up in one way, we are confident that God will transform our life together and expand our ability to serve the community.

As part of the vision work, we also created a covenant for how we want to be in community with each other as we live into this new vision. Because to do all the new dreams, we'll have to let go of some old dreams. We'll have to support each other through change, and give each other grace when we don't get it quite right the first time.

So we wrote this covenant to guide our work and I invite you to rise in body or spirit as we say it together.

We promise:

~to show up, for each other and for the world.

~to speak, when silence would be easier.

~to keep learning, keep questioning, and keep our hearts open.

~to hold our faith with conviction and our convictions with humility.

~to care for our neighbors with compassion.

~to be, as best we can, the church we wish had always existed.

