

February 18, 2024
Sermon Manuscript

Genesis 9:8-17

⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: ⁹ “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you ¹⁰ and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

¹² And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: ¹³ I have set my rainbow* in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow* appears in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. ¹⁶ Whenever the rainbow* appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.”

¹⁷ So God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.”

* Hebrew: *bow*

God’s Bow in the Sky

With this season of Lent being one of self-examination, today I want to invite us to consider how we respond in relationships with others when things aren’t going our way . When people aren’t doing what we want, whether because of their own sin or selfishness or just due to a conflict in priorities or concerns, what do we do when loved ones fail to meet our expectations?

One morning, not too long ago, I was taking the morning off to accompany Amanda to an appointment with the kids outside of Oakdale, but I was kinda doing so half-heartedly, because it was toward the end of the week and I was stressed about what I needed to get done at work to be ready for Sunday. So we were trying to get out the door but one thing after another was going wrong: one kid wasn’t doing what I was asking them to do, the other was beginning to have a meltdown. So to add to my stress about work, I began feeling powerless as a parent. Until finally, I said to Amanda in front of one of the kids, “Look, I can’t handle this; I’m just gonna go to work.” Now, there were other things I could have done instead. I could have shared my internal struggle and stress, but instead I had chosen what I call a power play, which was basically a threat of everybody start doing what I want and make this situation better for me, or “I’m outta here and y’all can do the morning without me.” Now, Amanda graciously told me to take a break and sacrificed what she was doing to take over for me with the kids. And I didn’t end up going to work, but calmed myself down and eventually we ended up piling in the van; though the emotional hangover I had from pulling the power play was with me for most of the day. My power play hadn’t been good for *any of them*, and the impact was even worse for me.

As sinful humans, we’re often inclined to exercise power in order to get what we want, whether in relationships or in group dynamics and society at large, but in the long run this isn’t good for anybody. And I want to suggest to you that this is one of the primary lessons of the story of the great flood, where *God Himself* responds to humans not doing what He wants with a power play of his own. But after the floodwaters recede, God appoints the rainbow - or His bow in the sky - as a sign that the effects of human sin will only be overcome through sacrificial love, not power plays. And the good news is that God has not only revealed this to us, but He wants to help us respond to wrongs or slights done to us in the same way: through practicing vulnerability and forgiveness.

Just to be clear on why the flood came about, we need to back up to the beginning of the story from Genesis chapter 6, which I included on your insert.¹ There, it says in verse 5 that “the LORD saw how

¹ Genesis 6:5-14

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. ⁶ The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled ⁷ So the Lord said, “I will wipe

great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth.” Since the fall of Adam & Eve, sin had spread like a contagious disease - and worsened - such that “every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.” And verse 6 says, “The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled.” The depth of human sin pained God’s heart and His plan for living in relationship with humankind had become an utter disaster.

So verse 7 says that God decides to wipe all of these sinners out. Hurt by human sin, God decides to respond by exerting His superior power. Now, if it disturbs you that God would do this, that’s probably a good sign; it should!² And it just so happens that my first Lenten Wednesday will be about how to understand the violence of God in the Old Testament. So if that bothers you or you’d like to explore it more, come join us at 6pm! But for today’s purposes, let’s just observe that God responds to His hurt at human behavior with a power play: by exerting His superior power over them with a flood. Now, in verse 8 of chapter 6 we learn there *is* one righteous man in Noah. So God decides to spare Noah and his family. And y’all know what happens next. God tells Noah to start building a boat - an ark - and load a male and a female of every animal onto it. And once Noah gets the ark built, the earth begins to flood, and it rains for 40 days and 40 nights.

Now, most scholars (that aren’t fundamentalists) believe the Bible is describing a localized, regional flood, since there are endless reasons why it couldn’t have been a global flood,³ *and* there’s a lot of evidence for a major flood occurring in the area around 2,900 B.C.⁴ But what should not be ignored is that what resulted from this exercise of God’s power would not have been pretty! This is humorously pointed out on the insert, where I included an excerpt from a book from Diary of a Wimpy Kid series that Brooke shared with me recently. It notes how children’s Bibles tend to call this story Noah’s Ark and usually depict it like a fun boat ride for the select few people and animals on the boat, while ignoring that absolute carnage and death that a natural disaster like this would’ve wrought!

So by God responding to humanity’s wickedness and refusal to do what He wants with the flood, this violent power play (1) seriously adds to the harm, (2) it makes it so that an earthly relationship between God and those who die in the flood is no longer even possible,⁵ and (3) it doesn’t actually change the sinful human heart for the better. And the continuing story of Noah is a case in point.

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.”⁸ But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.

⁹ *This is the account of Noah and his family.*

Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God.¹⁰ Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth.

¹¹ *Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was full of violence.¹² God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways.¹³ 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.¹⁴ So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out.*

[^] *Or it pained God’s heart*

² Although many believe there is evidence that God did not actually do this, but that the writer of Genesis took existing stories about the regional flood that occurred around 2,900 BC and made it into a story where the true God causes the flood. For example, Matthew Lynch writes, “The story itself suggests a nonliteral (or at least noncosmic) event. For instance, Cain’s descendants are allegedly the progenitors of all nomads and musicians, but they would’ve been cut off in the flood (Gen 4:20-21). The Nephilim and warriors described in Genesis 6:1-4 exist before and after the flood (Num 13:33)...the Genesis flood story uses a popular cultural story of a great flood (employing the genre of founding or primordial stories) that usually featured violence between gods to tell the story of one God whose purposes for creation could not ultimately be thwarted.”

³ A few offered by Matthew Lynch:

- “There are serious scientific problems with the idea of a global flood that covered the earth’s highest mountains, as well as the water pressure that it would have required, and so on. The backdrop to this story may include the memory of local (yet major) floods that often inundated the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.¹⁷
- “The story was written before humans knew that there are approximately 6.5 million land species in the world. The idea that they all fit into a 107,000-square-foot ark stretches credulity. That would’ve required about 0.2 square inches per species, or 0.1 square inches per animal, before even considering their food needs or offspring!

⁴ Jon Garvey: “many believe that the great flood described in Genesis corresponds to the Akkadian Atrahasis flood, which is probably in part a recollection of the river flood that affected the region of Shuruppak around 2,900 BCE, an inundation amply confirmed by archaeology.”

⁵ Although Peter says that Jesus did usher them into afterlife with God in 1 Peter 3:19-20- “¹⁹ After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits—²⁰ to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water...”

Literally four verses after our passage from Genesis 9 ends, the more 'righteous' Noah gets drunk to the point of passing out!⁶ But let's bring this back to how we may be inclined to respond when people aren't doing what we want or when loved ones fail to meet our expectations. The power plays we often respond with are unforgiveness or retaliation. Unforgiveness *can* result in physical violence, but even if it doesn't: unforgiveness is relational and emotional violence. With unforgiveness, we punish people for what they have done by withholding love, with passive aggression such as the silent treatment or even straight-up aggression in the way we relate to them. But the problem with a power play like this is that it doesn't change people's hearts - if anything it hardens them - and it only *adds* to harm, multiplies it.

Have you ever gotten caught in a cycle with a loved one where you keep just hurting each other? Each person keeps feeling slighted by the other, and instead of someone pressing pause and taking responsibility for any wrong they've done, everybody just keeps focusing on the other person's wrongs and before you know it the harm has really mounted up, cuz you've been just destroying each other? [Just me? 😊]

Well, after the floodwaters recede, God appoints the rainbow - or His bow in the sky - as a sign that the effects of human sin will only be overcome through sacrificial love, not power plays. And the good news is that God has not only revealed this to us, but He wants to help us respond to wrongs or slights done to us in the same way: through practicing vulnerability and forgiveness.

So, after the flood, with God having shown the insufficiency of power plays to deal with human sin - if it doesn't work for the most powerful being in the universe, it's not gonna work for us - after the flood, God promises to deal with humanity (and the reality of human sin) in a different way, not through exercises of His power, but through sacrificial love (of vulnerability & forgiveness).

In our reading from Genesis 9, God says to Noah in verse 12, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth." And God promises to never send a flood like that again. But the Hebrew word translated 'rainbow' here is really just 'bow'. Scholar Matthew Lynch explains that "this is the same word used throughout the Old Testament for the arrow-shooting weapon of war and hunt". And when it's translated as 'rainbow' it hides the full intention of the image God is using. Where in the flood God directed violent power toward humanity, after the flood God directs a bow toward Himself: if a rainbow represents a bow weapon, it is pointed the arrow would be pointed toward the sky, at God!!

And so, with this bow in the sky, God is promising to henceforth address human sin not through power plays, but by making himself vulnerable: to be harmed by humankind and yet forgive. God's bow in the sky points forward to His incarnation and the cross. In Jesus, God would make himself vulnerable to the effects of sin and forgive it, and to the world's surprise: the effects of sin were (stunningly) overcome!

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And the same can be true when we are hurt. When we respond with power plays of unforgiveness or retaliation, we are not only trying to control others we are doing the *opposite* of staying vulnerable, and

⁶ Genesis 9:18-23-

"18 The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.) 19 These were the three sons of Noah, and from them came the people who were scattered over the whole earth. 20 Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded[a] to plant a vineyard. 21 When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. 22 Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father naked and told his two brothers outside. 23 But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backward and covered their father's naked body. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father naked."

everybody loses: us included. Because what we really want is love; it is only in our faithlessness that we settle for power and control.

Back to that story from my own life after pulling the power play, which just made a challenging situation worse, on the drive I was eventually able to do what I should have in the first place: to share with Amanda about the stress and overwhelm I was feeling about my week and the feelings of inadequacy as a parent that morning's challenges had provoked. And I was able to receive grace & encouragement from her and I was able to forgive the kids in my heart for not doing what I wanted, not that it was necessarily sin. And my hangover from my powerplay didn't completely dissipate, it still lingered for a while. But I was reminded that sacrificial love - through the practices of vulnerability & forgiveness - are the way of Jesus, and He has called us to follow Him in those practices for a reason: because they are what's best and the only way we can overcome effects of human sin.

Well, through God taking this tack with us in Jesus Christ, we not only have a model for how to respond when others hurt us, but we actually have somewhere to take our hurt. N.T. Wright explains that "when we are hurting, it is incumbent upon us to take that hurt to the Lord and get to the place of forgiveness, which means that in any situation where we feel justified to respond out of our hurt, God calls us to respond from a place of grace, in love."

When we are hurt, we always have a choice to forgive, whether the other person apologizes or not. Now, if someone has truly wronged us and we aren't just upset they aren't doing what we want, we need to understand that forgiveness is *not* forgetting. Forgiveness doesn't mean we immediately trust the person who has wronged us, and it doesn't mean we don't make someone accountable for serious offenses; it just means we are not going to be their punisher. And the way to get to that place is by turning to Jesus in our hurt, receive His love, and give over the right to punish that person to Him; if needed, ask Him to give us the grace to forgive. Then, we can share with the offender how we've been hurt when it is safe to do so, and be open to reconciliation if they're willing to take responsibility and accept consequences.

And so the further good news is we don't have to do this alone. Jesus knows that learning vulnerability and forgiveness are gonna take a lot of practice; those habits of opting for power plays are well worn!

So will you pray with me?

Father in Heaven, we give you thanks for choosing to relate to us through sacrificial love, when you had every right to choose power plays of punishment. Would you reveal to each of us any earthly relationships where you're calling us to begin following your lead, by practicing vulnerability and forgiveness rather than power plays and defensiveness.? Or would you help us in the coming days to notice opportunities when this choice is before us and give us the courage to try it - even if we mess it up? Surely the impact couldn't be worse than the effects of a power play. Or God, if there is any way we are holding onto unforgiveness against someone who has hurt us, give us empathy for *their* brokenness and vision for how resenting them harms us a lot more than them. And help us to release our right to be their punisher, give us the grace to forgive, and where appropriate to share with them how we have been hurt so we can move toward reconciliation.

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

