

Rev. Lisa Schrott
September 11, 2022
Genesis 8:6-12; 9:8-17
The Trust to Rebuild

For the next several weeks, the scripture passages for our Sunday services will come from the Narrative Lectionary. Some of you may be familiar with the Revised Common Lectionary, a three-year cycle of scriptures used in many denominations. The Narrative Lectionary is a four-year cycle that captures the arc of God's love for humanity and the gift of Jesus' ministry and salvific death. Through mid-October, we will explore beautiful narratives from Genesis and Exodus that shape and deepen our faith, as well as New Testament teachings that further our understanding of these Old Testament passages. We begin this morning with the end of a familiar story – Noah's Ark. Hear now these words from the 8th and the 9th chapters of Genesis.

Genesis 8:6-12: 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. Noah 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 Noah waited another seven days and sent out the dove, and it did not return to him anymore.

Genesis 9:8-17: 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." **This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

The picture on the whiteboard immediately grabbed my attention. A house, with a sun shining above, waves covering all but the top of the roof, fish floating in the front yard. The caption read "Living Like Sponge Bob." The whiteboard was at the exhibit titled *1.5°C* at the MSU Museum. Rebekah and I attended the opening reception on Friday night and I highly recommend you check out this compelling and thought-provoking exhibit on the global climate crisis.¹

¹ <https://museum.msu.edu/?exhibition=1-5-celsius>

The exhibit includes whiteboards where visitors can record their expectations and fears about climate change. I found the comments to be insightful and prescient, considering “Living Like Sponge Bob” is exactly what many people around the world are facing following catastrophic floods - floods that are due in part and exacerbated by human behavior. In Pakistan torrents of floodwater have ripped away mountainsides, swept buildings off their foundations and roared through the countryside, turning whole districts into inland seas. More than 1,100 people have died so far, and more than one million homes have been damaged or destroyed. Much of Pakistan’s farmland is now underwater.² In Jackson, Mississippi and Chatoga County, Georgia, the infrastructure to provide clean water has been severely damaged by recent heavy rains and flooding. The story of Noah and the ark are all too real to the people of Pakistan, Mississippi and Georgia; people waiting for the promise of the rainbow.

In *The Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible*, Michael Williams sets up today’s scripture passage this way... “The humans on the boat could not wait to get out of that thing. To be sure it was their salvation from death, but it had become more like a floating casket, so long as they had been cooped up inside. And the beasts! Their growling, snarling, baying, barking, and even cooing had become unbearable. The ramp was only half-way down when Ham, Shem, and Japheth – Noah’s sons -were scrambling for the open air. All looked with wonder at the new-washed earth. Even the camels ceased their swaying gait and gazed longingly at the dew-splashed sunrise.”³

A new-washed earth and a dew-splashed sunrise. A new creation. After being cooped up in the ark, after days and days of rain, after devastation upon devastation, we can imagine what it would be like to gaze longingly at the dew-splashed sunrise and a new-washed earth – sparkling in sweet-smelling splendor.

And then the reality of the clean-up sets in. And the anxiety and fear of the next big storm began to percolate in Noah’s brain. What is next? Will there be more rain? Do we rebuild?

In the *Genesis Rabbah* - a Midrash - a textual interpretation of a Hebrew scripture by Jewish rabbis and scholars – one authority reflects on this quandary saying, “When Noah was instructed to exit the ark he hesitated. “Am I supposed to go out and start this all over again, just to have you (God) wash everything away the next time you get mad or disappointed?”⁴ That was when God promised never to destroy the earth again.

The rainbow following the flood is a universal covenant – a covenant God makes not just with Noah and his family, but with all living things, a promise that the world will never be destroyed by waters again. Other covenants God makes are narrower in scope – the covenant God makes with Abraham is with a particular individual and his descendants. In Exodus, God makes a covenant with a particular people – those who will become the nation Israel. We will hear about these covenants over the next several weeks. But the covenant of the rainbow is universal – all people and all creation.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/29/climate/pakistan-floods-monsoon.html>

³ Williams, Michael E. *The Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible. Genesis*. Abingdon Press. 1991. p58

⁴ *Ibid*, p59

To understand the significance of this covenant, we need take a look back as to what prompted the flood. In the first chapter of Genesis, God creates the world, plants and animals; God creates people in God's own image. And God declares that this creation – all of it – is good.

It doesn't take long for us humans to start going down the wrong path. We think we know better than God, and soon all manner of sin erupts. So a mere six chapters later, God declares "God saw how corrupt the earth had become... 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."⁵

But as we see in scripture again and again, destruction is not the end of the story. It is a chapter, but the next chapter opens with God's redeeming love. And God promises that this redeeming love is forever. As Jewish writer Blu Greenberg says, God admits, "I'm never, ever, going to pick up my marbles and walk away when things go bad." That is the beginning of a permanent relationship between God and humanity, the covenantal relationship which is about staying together."⁶

God chooses to meet us in the messiness of the world – in our pain, in our sorrow, in the deep chasms and places where sin festers like an open wound. And God's promise of meeting us came in human form in the person of Jesus Christ, whose death on the cross was the ultimate redemption. Both the rainbow and the cross are powerful symbols of where God meets us and redeems us.

The apostle Peter recognized the importance of reminding the early followers of Christ that again and again God meets us. And that God chose to meet us by becoming flesh and dwelling with us. We heard Rebekah share the words from 1 Peter, words that remind us of the connection between the cleansing of sin during the flood and the cleansing of sin in baptism. "God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Our Prayer of Confession this morning echoed this connection between the waters of the flood that cleansed the sin of the world and waters of baptism that cleanse us as individuals.

The biblical story from creation to revelation is future-oriented: God will complete what God began. For Christians, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are signs and guarantees of God's promise. They are assurances that God remains faithful to God's redemptive purpose and plan. And yet we live in a world that is broken, with bodies that decay, with relationships that splinter, with microscopic viruses that bring life to a standstill and with reminders of how sin separates us from God and each other. Today is the 21st anniversary of that day in 2001 when we knew that in many our lives would never be the same. We had to learn how to live into the promise and the hope of our future glory, while living the day-to-day realities of our world.

⁵ Genesis 6:11-13

⁶ P124 Bill Moyers. *Genesis. A Living Conversation*. Ed. By Betty Sue Flowers. Doubleday, 1983 p124.

I appreciate Jewish author Blu Greenberg's perspective on this text. She says, "What I take away from this story is that there is life after destruction and that there is a chance to rebuild. You don't have to abandon a vision of perfection of the universe, or of humanity, or of relationships, but sometimes you have to accept flaws and accept the imperfect partner in getting there. It also teaches me that there is an ongoing relationship between God and humanity that will never be broken; that human beings have responsibility for each other; and that the covenantal relationship between God and humanity is a paradigm for relationship between human beings."⁷

It is this ongoing and unbreakable relationship – this covenant - between God and humanity that we celebrate each week in worship. We are sent out from worship with the reminder that this relationship is the model for our relationships with each other. We are responsible to each other. And that there is always a chance to rebuild – to rebuild relationships, to rebuild communities, to rebuild the church, to rebuild the world.

We are in a season of rebuilding here at the Presbyterian Church of Okemos. Like most communities of faith, there was loss during the pandemic. It may not have been complete devastation like that following the flood, but our structures have been shaken up a bit. Our foundation may be secure, but to mix metaphors, in the quilt of our common life, some threads have been pulled out and the fabric is fraying in places. Our connections are looser – some maybe even disconnected. Superimposed on the fragmentation caused by COVID, the staffing transitions in the church mean that we are different than we were three years, two years ago, even last year on Rally Day. In fact, it was one year ago tomorrow – September 12 - that I preached my candidating sermon in this pulpit and you voted to extend to me a call as your Pastor/Head of Staff. The last 10 months have been a time of relationship building for me, learning the culture of this congregation, the hopes and dreams for the next chapter. Rebekah is now in place as our Associate Pastor and we are moving - have moved - from transition to building and rebuilding.

And yet there is a question that remains – a question that each of us as individuals and us as a congregation have to answer, especially as we begin a new program year. Do we have the trust to rebuild? If a new structure is built on the past foundation that doesn't look exactly the same, will we trust in the rainbow. I am grateful that this universal covenant is a reminder that the covenantal relationship between God and humanity is a model for relationships between humans, and that humans have responsibility for each other. This is the foundation on which Noah and his family rebuilt after the floods and it is on this foundation that we rebuild. We can trust that the Holy Spirit will guide us. We can trust that we have been called as a church to be the body of Christ in this place and time. We can trust that God will walk beside us on this journey.

We can put our trust in rebuilding because as theologian Shirley Guthrie reminds us, the best insight into what God will do is found by looking at what God has done.⁸ Again and again God has met us. Again and again and again, God meets us. Again and again God will continue to meet us. And it is with this sure and certain knowledge that we rebuild following the floods of our life. I invite you to join in the adventure as we create and re-create, as we shape and

⁷ *Ibid* p.152

⁸ Shirley C. Guthrie. *Christian Doctrine*. Westminster John Knox Press; 1994 p.385

reshape, as we mold and re-mold, as we build and rebuild the ark that is the Presbyterian Church of Okemos. **Join me in prayer.**