

**Again & Again: God Meets Us
Genesis 9: 8-17 / Mark 1: 9-15
Don Lincoln**

The church I served for 10 years prior to Westminster was a new church development in its early years of formation. They had just finished their first building when I arrived there, essentially 3 programmatic spaces along with restrooms, a kitchen, and two tiny offices. The main space was a multipurpose room – it was sometimes sanctuary, sometimes fellowship hall, sometimes recess room for Vacation Bible School if it was raining, a gathering space – whatever it needed to be.

The other two program spaces were large classrooms, which like when Westminster opened this building for the first time, they started immediately as a preschool to provide a needed community ministry and to generate income to offset building costs. Those two rooms were full of preschool appropriate furniture, equipment and decorations.

But those classrooms were also the congregation's only meeting rooms – for committees, Session meetings, bible studies, and most importantly for Sunday school classes on Sunday morning. As the congregation's ministry expanded – and we divided children's Sunday school into two groups, one older, one younger – folks wanted to make the younger students' classroom a little more faith oriented. So one parent offered to paint a mural on a wall – and chose Noah's ark. And why not? It's a classic nursery image. There's a Playschool Noah's Ark set.

Over the summer a 12-foot long, floor to ceiling mural was painted – and along with animals peaking out of the ark windows and a giraffe through the rooftop hatch, the artist added a grand, spouting whale in the waters. Perhaps doubling as a teaching tool for a Jonah story someday. It was wonderful and colorful, and added such life to the classroom.

The first day the preschool students from the neighborhood returned in September, one little preschool boy, back for his second year – who I assume had never heard the story of Noah's ark – walked into his classroom, took one look at the mural and ran screaming toward the door out to the parking lot. He told his mother that there was a huge scary shark on the wall and he never wanted to go back to that room.

Frankly, the little boy wasn't all wrong. While the story of Noah and the Flood is usually portrayed as a cheery children's tale, it is anything but. Sure, we teach the children the G-rated version, and sing songs of "The sun.....came out.....and dried up the landy, landy.....Everything was fine and dandy, dandy....." After all, we like happy endings.¹

We read this story's happy ending today, but the story has a pretty rough start.

It begins in Genesis 6, when we learn God is "sorry" for ever creating humanity. Sorry because, as the text says "...the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually." ONLY EVIL CONTINUALLY. The text goes on to tell us, God – **NOT out of anger, but out of grief** – grieving at the direction ALL humanity was taking – God wants to start over.²

God wants a "tabula rasa" – a clean slate. God wants a do-over. So, in today's language, God does a hard reboot. God sends flood waters to blot out the flawed creation from the face of the earth, wiping out all the people and animals and birds and creepy-crawly things God had made. Not exactly nursery playset material.

Biblical theologians call this story pre-history; from a time when there was no one around recording the unfolding earth. After all, writing hadn't been invented yet. But the story has deep roots. This story is markedly similar to ancient flood epics in other religious traditions and cultural tales.

Perhaps a widely told, tribal explanation for a great and ancient flood, and an interpretation of the divine initiative in it. It is surely a story of what God could choose to do in the face of human depravity; what God could always do with the widespread wickedness into which humanity can fall. Start over. System reboot.

But whatever you think of the historicity of this narrative, the point of this story – the good news of this story is that what God COULD do does not equal what God WILL DO.

This story first tells us God leaves a possibility in place. The renewal of creation through one household, the household of Noah. Noah – who the Bible says has found favor in the sight of the Lord – a righteous man – which doesn't mean Noah was without sin (and if you know what happens the minute Noah gets off the ark you know he wasn't perfect). "Righteous" just means God sensed the possibility of him heading in the right direction.

But here's the best part of the story – the text we read today. God offers Noah, his descendants (meaning **all humanity**), and every living creature and even all creation, an all-encompassing promise, vowing never to flood the earth again. "Never again," God says twice in this text, "Never again."

The repetition of "never again" sounds like a tolling bell. It is God's repeated promise never again to respond to human sin with such devastating judgement, even if it is deserved. "Never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. I promise" God says. Despite humanity's evil ways, God limits God's self and **alone** is the accountable party in this covenant. God requires nothing of humanity or the entirety of Creation in return.³

Of course what you and I know, from the continuing story of Scripture, and the story of our own lives, what did **NOT** change when the flood waters receded was "the inclination of the human heart." God's intervention through a flood did not eliminate the tide of corruption and wickedness and violence on earth. But God doesn't count on human beings to change. God is the one who changes **God's** approach. God meets us where we are. Always.

And what scripture confirms for us is that God is true to God's word. While evil may not have been eradicated from creation, humanity is now assured that catastrophic disasters are not rooted in the anger or rejection of God.⁴ And of all things, out of the very chaos of human sin, we see the true heart of God – the One who is for us, no matter what.⁵

Which is why, again and again – our Lenten theme – the story of God's people tells of a God who keeps coming back; a God who keeps loving; who keeps promising; who keeps redeeming; who keeps offering guidance again and again; who meets us where we are; who keeps God's own self from ever throwing up God's arms in the air and giving up and giving in again – even if it takes going to a cross to keep that promise in its fullness.

It's a great story. A story that tells us the last word will not be our sin, but rather the Creator's awesome love. Humanity is forgiven, the human saga begins again, and a rainbow is given as a sign of God's promise that the flood will "never be again." The story ends in good news because God is determined to have the last word in our story.

But it is an adult story. Of a creator who could choose to do whatever the creator wants to do – even to the point of starting over. But the story, instead, tells us of a God who places a rainbow covenant in the sky, not only as a promise to all creation, but as a reminder for God. God says in the text, "It will be a reminder to me of my promise – for whenever I'm about ready to throw in the towel once again – a reminder to me – God - to stay the course."

It's God's promise – unless us – to never try to solve violence by inflicting more violence, but instead, to love the world toward its fulfillment by extending God's own self in gracious engagement with us – His covenant partners.⁶ And that is the God you and I know in Jesus Christ.

As we begin our Lenten journey we remember how God limits God's self completely in Jesus – in self-emptying, and putting on human form, and facing trials and temptations almost the minute after He hears about His belovedness. A God who limits God's self to the point of tackling death itself. For us.

One of the things I love about Jackie Steinmetz, our preschool director, has led our Preschool all the years she's been here, is she teaches all of the children the good news, that in the midst of the chaos of our lives, or whatever scary things we confront, God offers a sacred refrain: "Again and again, I choose you. Again and again, I am for you, I love you, I will lead you into a place of repair and new life."

Friends, again and again, God breaks the cycle of our brokenness and offers us a new way – the way we see in the love of Jesus Christ.⁷

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Homiletics, 2009
2. Phyllis Kersten Christian Century, February 20, 2012.
3. Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman; Sanctified Art, 2021; *Again and Again*.
4. Walter Brueggeman, Interpretation Commentary on Genesis.
5. William Willimon, Pulpit Resource
6. MaryAnn McKibben Dana, Christian Century, Feb 21, 2021.
7. Pittman, op. cit.