

## “The Cost of Covenant”

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Sunday, October 13<sup>th</sup>

### **Genesis 6:5-14 & Genesis 8:20-9:17; Luke 18:31-34**

Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

The story of Noah is probably familiar to all of us. I learned it as a child. I don't know about you, but what I usually think about when I think of this story is the ark and the animals. You can find toy versions of this all over the place and, somewhat recently, Disney even made a Fantasia cartoon version of this story with Donald Duck starring as Noah and the graduation song, Pomp and Circumstance, playing in the background as the animals all get on the ark. I can't actually hear that graduation song anymore without seeing this cartoon in my head or thinking about this story.

But the story of the flood and Noah's ark really isn't about Noah, the animals or the ark. This story is about God. The main part of the story that we read today is all about what God sees, feels, does and says, and it's ultimately about God's covenant with the world. So that's what I want to focus on this morning.

The story begins with a stunning revelation: God has an outburst of anger where God regrets having created humanity because, according to the text, we are evil. The story says that every inclination of the human heart is wicked, all the time—not just our actions or our words, and not just once in a while. God believes that *everything* we are inclined to do or think about is evil, continually. Moreover, because of this, God is grieved in God's heart.

This image of a remorseful, grieving God is very sad to me. I have often wondered what happened right before God has this angry outburst. Had God just glimpsed the future and seen the Holocaust, or chattel slavery in the United States? And I wonder if we can relate to God's outburst at all? Have you ever had a moment when a child, or a sibling, or maybe a friend or a parent has deeply disappointed or even betrayed you? The disappointment is so unexpected or extreme that you think something like, “I don't even know this person anymore?!” In the case of a betrayal, that sense of shock and anger can be profound; it can rock our entire sense of self and can certainly change the way we think about the world. If we have that moment at the same time when we're paying close attention to the negative parts of the world news—where there is violence, war, and rape--we really might get the feeling, deep in our hearts, that all people are wicked.

This is the profound grief and regret that God feels at the beginning of the story. And I can just see God being so done with almost everyone that God just wanted to wipe everything away and start over!

But after expressing this regret and sadness, after blotting out many of the creatures that live on the earth, God seems to have another change of heart. The story tells us that God promises to “never again to destroy a living creature.” God makes this promise for all of creation—not just for humanity, saying, “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 long as the earth endures,  
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,  
summer and winter, day and night,  
shall not cease.”

Then God promises that the rainbow will be a reminder to God of this covenant, so that any time we look up and see a rainbow, we will know that God keeps God’s promises.

This is such a strange change of heart. I actually really understand God’s initial feelings and desire to destroy the earth. I get God’s desire to start over. But why does God now promise never to destroy creation again? Who knows, maybe after 40 days and nights of flooding, and seeing good folks like Noah, his family, and the animals all struggle to survive, God starts to feel good about creation again. Or maybe God feels sad about all the destruction. We can’t really know. But what the story tells us about why God offers the world this covenant is that God looks at the survivors and says, “the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth.” So there’s nothing new here. Noah and his family do everything they are told and even give God offerings of thanksgiving for their salvation. Still, when God looks in their hearts, God says, “the inclinations of their hearts are still wicked.” But for some reason, this time God says, ‘and because people have evil inclinations in their hearts, I’m going to promise never to destroy the world again.’ In other words, the same thing that seemed to make God want to destroy the world in the first place now makes God promise to never destroy the world again.

Something has transpired within God that seems to have led God to this new decision. God has decided to forgive people and to accept suffering upon Godself. Now, the fact that God is willing to suffer for humanity is not a new idea to Christians. Our scripture from Luke is entirely about this willingness. And whether we believe that God sent Jesus to suffer and die for us, or whether we think God sent Jesus to walk among us, knowing that people would capture, torture and murder Jesus...whatever we believe, through the life, death and crucifixion of Jesus Christ, we have seen that God is willing to accept suffering.

But how do we know that this first covenant with humanity is also formed from this acceptance of suffering? Because when God first sees the evil of the world, God “grieves in God’s heart.” So we know that seeing the violence and anger of this world causes God to suffer. But after the flood, instead of destroying all of the world once and for all, God accepts the world as it is, promising to love and protect it, no matter what.

This is really incredible. We know from this story and from the other stories earlier in Genesis that God is all-powerful. As the Creator, God could do anything God wants. But in response to seeing some human wickedness, God makes a promise to every living thing that limits God's own power. Right? Knowing that people sin and there will be violence throughout the earth, God could reserve the right to completely destroy it. Or God could hold the threat of destruction over our heads all the time, warning us that if we make any mistakes or sin at all, God will rain terror and death upon us all. Or God could take away our free will and force us to be some kind of robot so that God never has to hurt again. But instead, God promises to do just the opposite, thus limiting God's future choices and actions. God's promise binds God for all time. And God does this, *knowing* how painful it is to see God's creation sinning and hurting others. In other words, God chooses to limit God's own power, accepting suffering and sadness, so that God's imperfect creation can survive and hopefully thrive. This is an almost unbelievably costly, outrageous covenant.

Moreover, even after the destruction of the flood, and even after saying that people hold wickedness in their hearts, God reminds Noah and his family that all people are made in God's image. So despite a very realistic understanding of the limits of the human heart, God also remembers the inherent good in all people—that we are made in God's image. I wonder if this is part of the reason why God decides to make this covenant?

In the end, God's regret and sadness about creation give way to hope and trust. Like a parent who has to stand back and allow her teenagers to make their own decisions, like a friend who can give advice, but not force the outcome, or like a person entering into a marriage, God has decided to place hope in us, trust the goodness in us that exists side-by-side with the bad, and risk the pain that comes with that trust by offering us an eternal promise of love and protection. *This* is what the story of Noah's Ark is really about. Thanks be to God! Amen.