

# REVERENCE LIFE

## Understanding the Noahic Covenant | Thicker Than Water (Pt 3)

Text: Genesis 6:18-21; 8:21-9:17

Few stories of the Bible are known as well – yet have more to teach us -- as the tale we're going to consider today. In fact, I heard this week of a woman who was reading to a grandchild from a children's Bible story book. At the close she decided to quiz the child on what they'd read. "*Adrienna*," she said, "*Who was the man with the big boat?*" "Noah," the girl replied confidently. Then, curious what the kid might say, the older woman asked a mischievous question, "*What was Noah's last name?*" "That's easy," the child rejoined: "Zark!"<sup>1</sup>

How many of you feel you know the story of Noah's Ark? Ever been to the Ark Encounter in Kentucky, where you can walk into a life-size version of the famous craft? Raise your hand if you've ever watched, *Evan Almighty*, where Steve Carell plays the notorious boat-builder? As I said, most of us quite familiar with the story. Are you open to learning a little bit more?

Many years ago, there was a best-selling book entitled, *Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. Some of you probably enjoyed the wisdom it had to share about the importance of not leaving messes behind and sharing with others and so much more. I recently came across a little piece entitled, ***Everything I Need to Know I Learned from Noah***. Permit me to share my paraphrase of a few of those helpful principles.

The first lesson is : 1. Stay in shape. When you're 600 years old, God may ask you to do something big. 2. Plan beyond today. It wasn't raining when Noah built the Ark. 3. Don't be crushed by critics. Noah had a lot of people who thought he was crazy. Just do the jobs God gives you to do. 4. Listen to science, but Don't idolize "experts." Keep in mind that the Ark was built by amateurs; the Titanic by professionals. 5. Travel in two's. Life's safer and more productive that way. 6. Remember: variety matters. Snails AND cheetahs, giraffes and porcupines made it onto the ark. Whatever color, shape, and gifts you bring, likely matter to God. 7. And this is really important, Don't miss the boat. When God invites you to go with him, accept it. You don't have forever. And finally, 8. Live with hope. No matter how big and bad the storm, if you are with God, there's a rainbow waiting.

Well, I suppose we can go home now. Wait, most of you ARE at home! So, let me take this story a little bit further. In fact, let me pull the camera back and invite you to look at this story with me in an even more important frame. You see, the tale of Noah is a crucial piece of a much larger storyline that has two major themes to it that I explored here two weeks ago. Those themes are: COVENANT and FULFILLMENT. The Bible tells the story of how God leads his people toward the fulfillment of his good

purposes for them, by establishing these particular covenantal arrangements. He basically draws this circle in the sand and says: Step into this way of life, this set of understandings with me. I'm asking you to do THIS and I promise to do THIS and as each of us keeps this covenant the result will be blessing all around. As I said in part one of our series, God draws SEVEN circles like that. To change the metaphor from sand to water, each covenant flows from the one before it, expanding the circle of God's purposes -- like concentric circles from a stone dropped in a pond -- until there comes the final covenant – the one Jesus came to fulfill and invite you and me into. But we're getting ahead of the story.

Last week, Pete Stearns unpacked for us the first of the seven circles – what has come to be called the Edenic Covenant. Here's the backstory. God has created this amazing universe out of nothing. He's formed within a vast cosmos a remarkably abundant world, symbolized in the book of Genesis by life in a garden. And, most important to understand, God has woven Four Life-Lines into this whole arrangement – four basic conditions which, if respected and observed, will result in a life for flourishing.

- The first is the line of COMMUNION: Human beings are to live in a daily, dependent relationship with their Source.
- The second is the COMMUNITY line: Human beings are to live in a transparent, caring relationship with each other. It's not good for you to try and do life alone. I want all of you to be helpmates to one another.
- The third arrangement God sows into the creation is what I will call the line of CUSTODY: Men and women are to be good stewards of the life of the garden – the flora and the fauna and everything God has given them temporary dominion over.
- And the last is a simple CAUTION line. God says, in effect, there are going to be some things that look good and pleasing to you that are not good for you or which I ask you to stay away from simply because I am GOD. In fact, if you can't respect that line, then it may be that you can't accept the notion of God at all.
- This, then, is the first covenant – the original circle – the core set of arrangements aimed at blessing. Respect these lines and life will be a flourishing one – for you, for others, for all that I have made. Do you see how all these things work together for good?

But, as Pete reminded us last week, our first forbearers couldn't keep their hands off the candy. They crossed the Caution line, broke their Communion with God, turned from Community into blaming, and lost their Custody of the garden. And, thus, begins the long, difficult, distorted era of human history that theologians have called "After the Fall" or we call "Reality Shows." In other words, when Adam and Eve tried to be as God and draw the lines in their way and not His, then the reality showed that this wasn't the path to greater flourishing that the Devil-figure in the story promised it would be.

On the contrary, the next chapters of Genesis are all about the fall-out of the Fall. Or, to change the metaphor to something more current, the next season of history is about the spread of the virus of sin and selfishness. We see it destroy the relationship between the brothers, Cain and Abel, and lead to the first murder. We watch it infiltrate commerce and city-building and grow to a towering arrogance. We watch as pride, lust, gluttony, envy, deceit, anger, and sloth sicken multiple families and societies, mutating into ever more devastating forms of the disease. I find it hard to read these chapters and watch these shows – until I get so used to watching them that I sort of let down my mask and breathe them in and am further filled by the illness myself, till I can't really taste or smell how unhealthy I or my world truly is. Do you know what I mean?

The Bible teaches that God never grows used to or senseless about sin. I imagine that he might like to, but He can't. He is good and holy to the core. And so we read in Genesis 6 these tremendously provocative words: **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. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the Lord said, "I will wipe 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."** (Genesis 6:1-7)

I hope you're noting this because that verse about the deep troubling of God's heart, may just be one of the most important verses in all the Bible. It explains the Flood that follows, the Ark that rode upon that flood and the next major covenant we'll touch on before going today. As Justin Buzzard, a pastor in San Jose CA, observes, this passage tells us "something huge about the personality of God. The text says that as God looks out and sees [what has become of his creation], it grieves him to his heart. Our God *feels*. Our God has voluntarily bound up his heart with his creation, with his people. God experiences pain—heart-shattering pain—when things go wrong in the life of his people. The philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff says this: '*The tears of God are the meaning of history.*' In the Garden [humanity] said to God, 'We don't want you, God. We're going to live life on our own.' And why wasn't that the end of the story right there? Why didn't God just wipe us all out right there?"

I think of a scene in the famous movie, THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL. Maybe you've seen it. In the remake of the old classic, Keanu Reeves plays an emissary from a vastly superior race of beings who have been watching the Earth for a very long time. Acquainted as they are with how almost infinitely rare and precious is this life-blessed speck of green and blue amidst the endless vacuum and darkness of space, the advanced beings are profoundly concerned over what has become of it. They see the hardness and violence and divisions and corruption and environmental destruction spreading on our planet and their Emissary tells the earthlings: "*I have come to save*

*the Earth.* "At first, everyone greets this as great news, until they figure out that in order to save the planet, the sin-sick human race must go.

Why was this moment in Genesis 6 not the end of the human story? People regularly express their outrage at the notion that a loving God could send a great flood, as not only the Bible but numerous other traditions say truly happened. But that only betrays how stuck we are in our thinking that we are somehow necessary to this planet, much less the universe. I mean, I fully get the horror of so many people perishing. I would not advocate for it. But why do we think we are so meritorious that, of course, any truly intelligent and good superior Being would have to prize us no matter how much we messed up the privilege of life we'd been given?

With Pastor Justin, I wonder: Why didn't the human experiment end long ago? Justin answers the question this way: *"Because God decided to have tears. God decided to stay in the game. God decided to suffer and love us."*<sup>2</sup> The Bible tells us that there was unconscionable, world-disfiguring sin spreading everywhere, **But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:8)**. It's important to know that the word rendered in English as "favor" is the Hebrew word for grace. The definition of grace is unmerited favor. It is receiving a good one has not earned or deserved. It's not that God looked at Noah and said: "At least I've found ONE righteous man totally or even partially worth saving." No, God freely, maybe even irrationally, decided to grace Noah and his family with the opportunity to continue life. God gave a still sinful man and his still messed up family the instructions for building that Ark and gathering the creatures and seeds needed to keep life going on this earth.

If you read on in Genesis chapters 6-9, you'll be re-acquainted with all those practical lessons I mentioned at the start that we might learn from the story of Noah. But what I want to focus us on before we go are the bigger messages. When Noah and his family finally emerge from the Ark on dry ground, we get a picture of what you might call a New Creation. We're told: **Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth...** I love this because it's another one of those "swinging door verses." It swings backward in time, pointing to God's original commission to human beings in Eden; but it also swings forward in time, pointing toward a vastly greater restoration of the creation to be described one day in the last two chapters of the Book of Revelation.

And then God says this: **Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you... But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it... And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being" (Gen 9:1-5)**. God is basically saying: "I'm restarting this project. From here on out, I want you to REVERENCE LIFE more than in the past. You can eat pretty much anything on land or in the sea but stay away from red meat as a reminder of how much I cherish the lifeblood of my creatures. And know this, says God: I will

ask you to give an account for any human life you take or, by extension, you could have saved but didn't.

I will confess to you that, on one level, this seems a little strange and even hypocritical. How can God give these instructions to reverence life after he's just sent a flood that took so many lives? I've wrestled a lot with that question, as perhaps you have too. ONE possibility that occurs to me is that maybe the flood was a necessary measure to establish a world where fewer people would suffer in the future? I suppose it's possible that life had become so barbaric and bloodthirsty that only a profound re-set could result in a less hostile world. The cross of Christ shows us that sometimes a great price must be paid, precious blood must be shed, to open the way to an even greater life.

The SECOND possibility is that, for its ultimate spiritual progress, the human race needed a sign like this. As I suggested before, maybe the flood was a wake-up call – a clear message that life is not a right to be used any way we choose but a privilege given by God to be used for good. In a sense, all of us are like Noah. We've found unmerited favor in God's eyes. We've been given the grace of life on this green and blue planet. We can't take that for granted. The way we respect the lines of communion and community, custody and caution we touched on earlier... is how we show Him and others that we truly reverence life.

What I do believe with all my heart is that God loves life and wants to see it flourish. We hear his heartbeat -- maybe even God's sorrow over the terrible necessity of what he had just done -- in these closing words. **Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: "I now establish my COVENANT with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you... Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood... I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth" (Gen 9:8-13).**

You can rest in that promise. While we should do all in our power to care for this earth and its climate, it will not be the rising seas that will bring an end to this era of history. One day, there will be a flood THICKER THAN WATER. God's love and justice will sweep across this earth -- bringing a final accounting and the ultimate renewal we long to see. Sometimes, I wonder if the raindrops of that day have not already begun to fall. In the meantime, let's cherish this season of grace and opportunity. Let's love our neighbors and keep working at building the new Ark that is the church of Jesus Christ. Let's not miss the boat and let's keep inviting others in.

Let's pray together...

---

<sup>1</sup> Donna M. Cotner, Hopewell, Virginia, "Kids of the Kingdom," *Christian Reader*, May/June 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Justin Buzzard, *Flood of Judgment, Flood of Grace*. Garden City Church, San Jose CA.