

# Begin Again

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*Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)*  
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*Text: Genesis 6:5-22*

Where do you begin your story? Do you tell folks where you were born? Who your parents were? Do you talk about what it is you do (or did) as a profession, or your role in our family?

Where do you begin your story? Beginnings are a start, but often the most meaningful information comes later. Because so often we find that our stories begin again...

Queen Elizabeth II, who passed away this week, was born the daughter of the Duke of York, a younger brother who was never meant to inherit the throne. She was born a princess, but one who was meant to live out her life in the background, as others took central stage. But when her uncle abdicated the throne and her father became king, Elizabeth started preparing for a very different kind of life.

None of you are royalty, so far as I know, but maybe you've had to begin again. Maybe you've moved, letting go of one community and place and home and embracing a different one. Maybe you've experienced the end of a relationship that you thought would be more lasting. Maybe you've been through loss and out the other side. The beginning of our story is important, but so often it's these new beginnings that give us our shape, that help us understand who we really are.

This fall I've decided to come back to using the narrative lectionary, something I did a few years ago. What that means is that if you follow along with worship every week, you'll hear scriptures that follow a broad sweep through the story of God's people in the Bible, starting with Genesis today, and leading up to the birth of Jesus at Christmas, and then continuing through the gospels until Easter, and then the story of the early church until Pentecost.

So today's reading is meant to be about the beginning. It says so in the name of the book—Genesis is the Greek translation of the first Hebrew words in the Bible: *bereshith*, or "in the beginning..." But the flood story is really more of a *new* beginning, and it helps us to see a pattern in the relationship between human beings and God, a pattern that carries forward into our own time, into our own spiritual lives as individuals and as the whole human community. We lose our way. We choose the things that harm us and sweep us toward destruction. But God continues to look at us with favor, reaching out a hand to preserve life and make a new beginning.

Let's be clear—this is a hard story. I think sometimes we forget just how dark this story is, maybe because of all the cute ark toys and decorations that we put in children's nurseries.

A few years ago, as I was walking the dog up our street, I noticed that the grass on our neighbor's yard looked a little funny. It wasn't quite the right shade of green. The next day it got a little brown, and then over the course of a week or so it all died out. It turned out that he had decided to replace all the grass with fresh sod, so he killed off the old lawn, with all its crabgrass, clover, and imperfections, to make a fresh start.

And I get all of that, but it was chilling to see these living things wither and dry up to make that new beginning possible.

The flood story is about God doing this, not to grass, not to a patch of lawn, but to human beings and most of the living creatures on earth. If the Bible tells the story of God's relationship with the world, then the flood is about a time when God related to the world as a destroyer, as an all-powerful enemy of the creation God had made. It's hard to think of an idea more dark or disturbing than that. As God puts it, God intends "to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die."

Now what prompted the creator of all things to become their destroyer? What was it about what had happened on earth that convinced God there had to be a fresh start, and an end to all life? We had to condense the story this morning, but what happens is that God is dismayed at what the human beings God created have become. God sees them doing violence to themselves and the creation, and doesn't see any way that their behavior will change. As the Bible puts it, "every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5, p. 5). Only Noah seems to be singled out, with his family, as an exception. So God decides to preserve a seed of the creation, a single human family and breeding pairs of each animal, and to wipe out everything else.

So maybe a question we want to ask is, "Did it work?" Our neighbor ended up with a fantastic looking lawn. So did the flood succeed in giving the world a fresh start? Did it wash away what God calls the evil inclinations of the human heart? Did the flood change human beings? I'm going to show you two passages of scripture, side-by-side, showing God's assessment of the world, before and after (Genesis 6:5,7a; and Genesis 8:21b-22).

What's happening in this later passage, after the flood, is that Noah is making a burnt offering. He's slaughtered some animals and cooked them as an act of worship. Essentially, he's having a barbecue in God's honor, and God is really pleased. God says, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done." Before the flood, God says, "The human heart is inclined toward evil, so I need to wipe everybody out." After the flood, God says, "The human heart is inclined toward evil, so I need to have patience, to hold back, to be merciful." Before and after the flood, God looks at human beings and sees the same basic reality, the same inclination, the same destructive habits. The basic nature of human beings hasn't changed. God's response to that reality has changed.

Now, one thing you should know is that the ancient Hebrews weren't the only people to tell stories about a great flood. For thousands of years before the stories of Genesis were written down, people in the ancient Near East passed down a legend about a great flood, where the gods decided to spare one man and his family. Some of these stories are a little different than the one in the Bible. In one story, one of the gods complains that he can hardly get any sleep because there are too many people making so much noise, and that's why they've got to be wiped out.<sup>1</sup> But in most of these stories there's more than just a passing resemblance to Genesis. The gods tell the man they've chosen to save to build a giant boat, and to bring animals on board. And when the rains die down, the man sends out birds to see if they find land. And after he gets out of the boat, the man pleases the gods by making a sacrifice of animals. All these things happen to Noah, too. We have to understand that when the Bible tells a story about a great

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1 "Atrahasis," Old Babylonian Version. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Ed. James B. Pritchard. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978. p. 104.

flood, it's contributing to a legend that has been circulating for millennia. So the fact that there was a flood or that God chose someone to build an ark is not the important part of the story. We want to focus in on what's different, what's unique about the Bible's telling of this ancient story.

What's unique, what you don't find in any other ancient epic, is the connection of the flood story to a *covenant* with all humankind, and not just with humans, but with all living things. After the flood is over, God addresses Noah and his sons and tells them that God is establishing a covenant with them, and with their descendants, and with every living creature. Let's read these words, because they're important...

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."

Notice that word, "covenant." There's no English word that does justice to the Hebrew word *berit*, that gets translated as "covenant." It means an unbreakable promise. An ordinary contract is void when one party breaches their obligations. If you and I have a contract that says I am going to deliver one hundred sandwiches and you are going to pay me \$300, and I don't deliver the sandwiches, then you don't have to pay me. But a covenant is something stronger. In a covenant, the failure of one party to fulfill their obligations doesn't free the other party of theirs.

As I read the story of the flood this week, I couldn't help thinking of all the images I've seen coming out of Pakistan, where over 33 million people have been affected by flooding. With many villages entirely covered by water, the photos of the flooding make it look like the country has been submerged by the sea. In this, as well as other extreme weather, many climate scientists point to the effects of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and they warn of more catastrophes to come. What's particularly tragic is that Pakistan itself is responsible for such a tiny fraction of carbon emissions, and yet it bears the burden in such a disproportionate way. And it occurs to me that the promise God made, not to flood the earth again, is about God's choices, God's destructive power. What God promised not to do, we seem poised to do to ourselves, unless we make a change. We are made in the image of God... do we have the capacity to set aside our destructiveness in the same way that God has done?

In the flood story, God is making a binding promise, a rainbow promise, not to make any more new beginnings by destroying the creatures God has made. Our failure to live up to whatever hopes, whatever expectations God has for us doesn't invalidate this promise. There has been a transformation in the relationship between God and the creation. Before, God was capable of being for us or against us. God was capable of destroying or preserving, of giving life or bringing death. But now God has chosen to eliminate one of those possibilities. God has chosen to be for us. God has chosen to preserve life in this world. If there's going to be a new beginning—and boy do we still need one!—it's not going to come through our annihilation, our obliteration, but through our transformation, a transformation that's going to come as God works through all the implications of the rainbow promise.

New beginnings don't come easy. We're flawed and finite creatures, and so we

can make new beginnings only at the expense of what we already have. We shuffle the furniture around in our houses. We obliterate our lawns. We run away from toxic relationships—and sometimes that's the best thing we're capable of doing. When it's up to us to make a new beginning for ourselves, we usually lose something good in the process. In spite of our best intentions, we still let ourselves be driven by selfish or fearful motives. We still have a problem with the inclination of our hearts. But we have a God who loves us in spite of our ill-inclined hearts, a God who won't let go of us, whose creative energy presses forward toward a new beginning where everything good is preserved, a new beginning where there is room for you and me. God's rainbow promise says, "I am for you, I am with you, I am your God and you are my people, now and for all time."

Amen.