

GENESIS 6-11

The stories of creation (1-3), Cain and Abel (4), the great flood (6-9), and the tower of Babel (11), possess some common characteristics. God creates life and offers human creatures in particular, rich opportunities for responsible care and enjoyment of creation. But human beings misuse their responsibility and sever their relationship of intimacy with God. God is very grieved by this and initially responds with questioning, judgement, punishment, and anger. But in the end, God provides lovingly for humans and creation as a whole in spite of human mismanagement and misbehaviour.

God may seem all too human in changing God's mind. If God is all-powerful and all-knowing, is God not prepared for everything that may happen with human disobedience and chaos? Actually, Genesis introduces us to the gospel, namely, that God's power and wisdom are related to God's character as Love. Love that is strong and consistent grieves, becomes upset, and ultimately seeks to find ever new ways to re-establish relationship when basic trust in the relationship has been broken.

1) By the 10th generation of humanity since Adam and Eve, and in spite of the few examples of those who have 'invoked the name of the Lord', the world has become a wicked place of violence, selfishness, and negligence. The command to 'be fruitful and multiply' has led to the multiplication of sin and separation from God, leading to an increase of human evil and divine grief over it.

2) The story of the flood has precedents in the ancient Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh. Yet in this epic, the flood is a result of bickering among the gods and the grief in the story is of lone human survivors. The Genesis account is not only a shift from polytheism to monotheism, but from the grief of human survivors to the grief of God. Immorality and evil are of no concern to the gods of the epic, whereas the sorry state of humanity is what moves God to grief and action in Genesis.

3) God is not an angry tyrant but a troubled parent. Parents get angry, yes. They discipline and sometimes punish, yes. But a parent's ultimate hope is the well-being of the child, the rehabilitation of the youth, the re-establishment of the relationship on a foundation of integrity and trust. From the human side, the flood looks like judgement. From God's side it is more like sadness. The 40 days and 40 nights of rain are the figurative tears of God.

4) After the flood, Noah represents a new start to humanity 'made in the image of God.' Noah and his family are encouraged to 'be fruitful and multiply', and to exercise responsible dominion over all life on the earth.

5) Just because things are starting fresh again, God is not naive about human inclination to evil (8:21). What has changed is not humanity but God. God is committed to never again severing the relationship with the earth and its creatures by a flood. God will continue to be reminded of this covenant of eternal fidelity in spite of human evil. Here are two examples:

'Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you.... My steadfast love shall not depart from you, my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you.' (Isaiah 54:9-10)

'My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger... for I am God and no mortal, the holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.' (Hosea 11: 8-9)

This also means that the evil in the world, whether committed by humans or by natural disaster, is not caused by God or willed by God. God grieves it happening. But God is also committed to allow freedom for a world and for life in the world to be, independent of God.

6) Does God 'repent' of willing the flood, then? And if so, does this admit of error, imperfection, or a mistake in God? Actually, as suggested above, God is totally consistent in God's nature which is love. In fact, God is the very movement and flow of true love. Love may appear to waffle and change on the surface. But this is part of the constant agony and struggle to do the right thing when the beloved acts in destructive ways. God gets angry, as love always does when outrages are committed, or love is betrayed. God is pushed, it seems, to the end of God's rope. If God did not love, God would be unmoveable. But the opposite is the case. In the end, God resolves that Love will bind itself to its fallen children no matter what happens, and no matter what they have to go through in order to grow up. God will not protect humanity from the consequences of human evil. But God will walk with them (with us) and suffer with us no matter how low we sink, until new doors are opened to new life.

7) Noah and his family are a new start, but even here, evil is lurking at the door ready to invade. Chap, 9:18ff tell of a strange event after Noah had become drunk one night from wine made out of his own vineyard. To understand the full impact of what happens that is shameful, we need to understand the cultural aspects of the time. However, out of this episode, curses are spoken, and the stage is set for Noah's sons to build relationships of inequality, where some dominate and possibly enslave others. More recent arguments for justifying slavery (in the U.S and U.K) for example, are based on these passages. For more on all this, join us next Wednesday night for discussion.

7) These developments set the stage the stage for the next story (chap 11), which is the

building of the tower of Babel. Human autonomy against God becomes arrogance, abuse of the earth and those who inhabit it, and a bid for colonial domination. Is there any hope at all? Another 10 generations after Noah we come to Abraham. With Abraham, God will give it another go, but this time, no flood. The rest of Genesis will tell the story of Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants.