

**“Noah and the Flood”**  
**Genesis 6:5-9:19**  
**A Sermon Preached by Carla Pratt Keyes**  
**Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA**  
**July 11, 2010**

Last week I told a friend I was going to preach about Noah and the flood this Sunday, and she laughed and said, “Funny choice, with all of us praying for rain this summer.” That’s true, I suppose. Amidst a drought, like the one we’ve been experiencing here in Richmond, we focus sharply on the good things water can do: how we need rain to nourish the earth and to *drink* and to cleanse and refresh everything. It’s a strange time to consider the flood story.

Better now than when we’re inundated, though. The last time I thought much about Noah and the flood, I was telling Bible stories weekly in the preschool of the church I served, and this was one of the stories in my book. Hurricane Katrina had just wiped out New Orleans and the surrounding areas. The images of a real life flood were fresh in everyone’s mind. We were meeting people who’d displaced by the flood. We understood how awful it had been. That year I skipped right over the story of Noah, because I didn’t want those children to associate such horror and heartache with God. And I didn’t know how else to tell the story.

After we talked about it last week (on our way to preparing for today) Doug Brown pointed me to a version of the story I hadn’t heard before – a rendition by the comedian Eddie Izzard. In the sketch I saw, Eddie tells about creation first . . . Adam and Eve, then some things that followed.

Stuff happened, [Eddie says]. Yes, it did, it unfolded, and Cain killed Abel, and there came a period later, a number of centuries later, when God said, “No, no, everything is bad. I’ll send a flood and kill everything – start again.” I think it was the Etch-A-Sketch end of the world, basically. (Shaking an imaginary Etch-A-Sketch) “No, no, no . . . don’t know what that is. Don’t recognize *that* anymore.” Remember the Etch-A-Sketch . . . when you’d done the house – a picture of the house – then you did a little sunshine at the top, then you tried to do a dog down here, and you had to leave vapor trails all around? (Turning the imaginary dials) . . . Oh, bugger it!

I kind of like to imagine God shaking the Etch-A-Sketch of creation . . . . It has the same harmless feel as those plastic arks for toddlers with the animals you can walk on and off. It’s funny. Except if you imagine that *your house* is the one God’s going to erase with his cosmic Etch-A-Sketch. Your family. Your dog. Then it isn’t so funny, is it? . . . .

But there’s a problem with Eddie’s version of the story. It overlooks something I think that we often overlook, despite the Bible’s emphasis on it: that is, creation’s role in its own destruction. The things destroyed by the flood were not passive like pictures on

an Etch-A-Sketch. They weren't innocent as a child's drawing. The Bible makes it clear that they had gone terribly wrong. Apart from Noah, who was righteous and walked with God, *the world was corrupt*, the scriptures say – all of it. God saw it – as God had seen creation in the beginning – and God saw it was no longer good. Instead, it was filled with violence and destruction. We have no stories, no details about what was happening . . . . But as you hear the words, try to imagine: every thought people had was evil – evil continually. The earth was corrupt, filled with violence. All flesh had corrupted its ways. What God had made good had disintegrated somehow, until it was worse than the worst war zone . . . more violent than the most violent street gang . . . darker than the darkest alley. The whole world had become a place of fear, a place of murder and evil and wretchedness, such that God regretted having made it at all.

I am grateful to Andreas Schuele for his literal translation of chapter 6, verse 13, where God looks down on creation and says, “The end of all flesh has come before me.” (The end of all flesh is just *there* you know? Probably anyone could see it.) We often think of the flood as a punishment, because people had been so bad. But there's a way in which the demise of the world is not *so much* a punishment as it is the consequence of evil at work. That's reflected in the Hebrew used to tell the tale. The term that indicates God will “annihilate” the world comes from the same root as the one that expresses the “corruption” of the world. Andreas suggests that if you want to preserve the Hebrew play on words you could translate the gist of the matter like this: “God ruins what is already ruined.”<sup>1</sup>

Another flood story is often told alongside this one – a parable Jesus told about the wise man who builds his house on the rock. The rains fall and the floods come and the winds blow and beat on that house, but it doesn't fall, right? Because the man wisely built his house on the rock. But there's another man – a foolish man, and he builds his house on the sand. And when the same storm comes to him, his house washes away, like *that (snap!)*. Because what is weak and corrupt and ill-founded cannot stand, can it? Not forever. There is a certain *inevitability* about its fall.

God ruins what is already ruined . . . . But (again in contrast to the Etch-A-Sketch end of the world) God finds a way to preserve *something* of the original creation. As God brought life and order out of chaos “in the beginning,” God does again. God preserves a remnant of creation, protecting it from the chaos all around. It's the seed for starting again.

I'm grateful to Andreas also for transforming my image of the ark. I'd had one of those toy arks as a kid – the kind that looked like a dumpy cruise ship, complete with bow and stern and a little flag on top. But look carefully in the scriptures, and the plan for Noah's ark has nothing in common with the plan for a ship. It's not designed for sailing. It's just meant to keep its contents afloat – like an escape capsule, really. It protects them from the chaos outside.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Andreas Schuele, *The Primeval History (Gen 1-11)* Mark E. Biddle, trans., as drafted for the Zurich Bible Commentary Series, in Richmond 2008. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Schuele, 35.

The Bible doesn't dwell on the horror of the flood, like some other ancient flood myths do. Rather, the Bible's description of the flood waters rising and the ark floating upon them brings to mind the story of God's creation. As the wind (or *spirit*) of God moved above the waters "in the beginning," so the ark now moves.<sup>3</sup> Above the waters, over the chaos, is this small refuge for life – this container of creatures sustained by the breath of God. From it God's new creation will come.

God remembers Noah and the others on the ark. God cares for them, preserves them and then, when the flood is over and they emerge from the ark, God makes a covenant with them.

The rainbow is familiar to us – the sign of God's promise that God will not destroy – nor *allow* the destruction – of the wide world that way again. No more broad swipes. No tiny escape pods. But there's more to the covenant than that. This post-flood covenant marks the beginning of a greater presence of God in the world. The Bible seems to indicate that *before* the flood, God showed up here and there – an unexpected visitor, almost.<sup>4</sup> But *now*, God issues commandments that suggest *God is going to pay closer attention* – especially to the treatment of living things. There are rules to protect life now; God wants to see that we follow them.

Still, the covenant itself shows that God understands we are not inclined to follow even the rules God gives for our good. Humanity after the flood is no better than it was before; God sees and says as much! Even so, God promises to stick with us. Perhaps *because of that*, God promises to stick with us. Terence Fretheim says that after the flood it's clear: "The way into the future cannot depend on human loyalty; sinfulness so defines humanity that, if human beings are to live, they must be undergirded by the divine promise. Hence, *because* of human sinfulness, God promises to stay with the creation."<sup>5</sup> In this covenant, God still judges us, holding living beings accountable for our actions . . . . But God is already putting grace before the law here. God understands we will need help if we are to live.

For people of many times and places, the story of the Flood is less a fearsome tale of destruction than it is a powerful symbol of hope. In our world, where humans have the freedom (and too often the inclination) to hate one another and to fight and to kill each other, God's power to preserve life and to bring life out of the chaos is essential.

Baptist minister and educator Samuel Proctor says he learned the story as a child, from his father.

Sometimes we laughed at the ridiculous aspects of it, [he says, but we drew from it what we could, and we went on.] Every Wednesday, my daddy would press his trousers and go down to the Philharmonic Glee Club rehearsal. These sixty

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<sup>3</sup> Schuele, 38-40.

<sup>4</sup> Schuele, 41

<sup>5</sup> Terence Fretheim, "Genesis" in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 1, 396.

black guys – table waiters, coal trimmers, truck drivers – would give one big concert a year to the white population. When we kids went to hear it, we couldn't sit where we wanted to, even though our daddy was singing – we had to sit in the back. But in the midst of all that rejection, hate, and spite, they sang. And do you know the song they sang at the close of the concert? They sang, “Dawn is breaking, and a new day is born/The world is singing the song of the dawn/Yesterday the skies were gray/ but look, this morning they are blue.” *Noah!* “The smiling sun tells everyone come/Let's start life anew/Let's sing . . . . Let's all sing, hallelujah/for a new day is born/The world is singing the song of the dawn.” Sixty black guys in tuxedos in the 1920s, with lynching everywhere and hatred – “nigger” this and “nigger” that. But they had something we need to recover right now. I can't turn loose this story of Noah and the Flood because after all of the devastation and the bloated bodies, there's the rainbow and the cloud. And I can't take that bow and the cloud out of my universe. I'm not going to live without that kind of hope, you see? That's what that story means to me.<sup>6</sup>

*A powerful symbol of hope . . . .* This week, when I began to look at the story of Noah and the Flood, I never dreamed I would come around to seeing it as a powerful symbol of hope; I didn't! I was too stuck thinking about the coming of the flood to appreciate its end. Perhaps there are times when that's appropriate. But as I think about all the chaos of this world – all the injustice and violence and corruption we hear about on the news, or witness, even, in our own neighborhoods and homes – I find that the rainbow and *all* of its associated promises are so full of grace, and so necessary.

Can any of us live without that kind of hope?

The best news of this story is . . . we don't have to.

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<sup>6</sup> In Bill Moyers' *Genesis*, at the end of the chapter on Apocalypse.