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Genesis 6:9-14, 17-22

Children’s Bible Stories All Grown Up: Noah’s Ark

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Genesis 6:9-14, 17-22 New Revised Standard Version

These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God.  And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence.  And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth.  And God said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.

For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die.  But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you.  And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female.  Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive.  Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them.”  Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.

Today is Father’s Day, a day when we celebrate the men in our lives who have loved us and taught us. Just like Mother’s Day, this day is hard for many. But today, I think of my grandfather who loved me and showed me how to live a life of adventure and generosity. I think of my dad who didn’t miss a single soccer game or choir performance that I was in. Now he is the grandpa who never misses a basketball game or band concert.

I think of my own husband, Lee, who loves our children well, with Nerf gun battles and tickle-fights and making sure the doors are locked every night before we go to bed. My children would not be at church if it were not for my husband. It is hard to be a preacher’s husband; no one quite knows what to do with you. I will never forget when we lived in England and I was the pastor at three Methodist churches there. One of our first Sundays there one of the older ladies of the church came up to Lee and asked him if he felt pressured to play the piano. He doesn’t know how to play the piano, so he said umm, no.

Today we also begin a new sermon series as we look at children’s Bible stories all grown up. As I thought about Bible stories that I remember learning in Sunday School, the first one that came to mind was Noah’s Ark. It seems like a fitting story for Father’s Day because the Bible says Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. The Bible says Noah walked with God. Now after the Noah’s Ark story, Noah plants the first vineyard in the world and becomes drunk and Noah’s doesn’t act so righteous or blameless, but maybe that is a good message for Father’s Day as well.

When I was growing up, I remember learning in church that God created the world and as time went by, the beauty God had created on earth was being spoiled by wicked people and God decides to start again. Noah and his family were the only people God believed in and wanted to save. God tells Noah to build an ark and it holds Noah and his family along with two of every kind of creature on earth. Once the ark is built and everyone is safely inside, it begins to rain. It rains for forty days and forty nights and the whole earth is covered with water. When the rain stops, Noah sends a dove to look for dry land and the dove brings back a branch from an olive tree so the ark lands on dry land and Noah and his family begin their new lives with the animals they saved from the flood.

But this is children’s Bible stories all grown up. Flood stories were found in every ancient civilization, the Babylonians, the Sumerians, and the ancient Mesopotamians. The most famous of the flood stories is in the Gilgamesh Epic, which predates the Biblical flood story by a lot. All of these flood stories follow the same pattern. The world is created, humanity spreads across the earth, but humanity is bad, so a flood is sent to stop the bad humans, and a hero is always saved. These stories are set in the Tigris-Euphrates River valley and geologists can tell that there were periodic floods in ancient times, but there is no geological evidence of a worldwide flood.

So, did Noah’s Ark really happen? Did it actually happen is a different question than is it true? If something is true it tells us a truth about life. The Bible isn’t videotaped history, and it is okay and good to ask questions. I mean, where did Cain’s wife come from? Adam and Eve had only boy children, so where did their wives come from? Did it really happen? Did the snake really talk to Adam and Eve in the garden? Snakes can’t talk, so what does that tell us? Is there a truth that we learn in the story of Adam and Eve and the snake in the garden that tells us a truth about life? Why is this story being told? What is the value? It is important to note that if you question the Bible, it doesn’t mean that God doesn’t exist because God’s existence isn’t tied to the Bible. We connect with God in worship. It is here in worship that we learn from one another as we wrestle with the truths about life that we learn in Biblical stories.

In the Noah’s Ark story, it seems like that there were two traditions that have been meshed together. One writer refers to God as Elohim, has 2 pairs of every animal and it rains for 150 days. Another writer refers to God as Yahweh, has 7 pairs of every animal and it rains for 40 days. It isn’t a bad thing that these writers disagree. It makes our experience with the Bible richer. Our sacred text as Christians is complicated. And it is our job to engage the Bible in a responsible way.

The story of Noah’s Ark is a universal story, and it makes you feel good to think about all of those animals walking two by two onto the boat. Two giraffes, two tigers, two snails inching forward, two rabbits, two parakeets, even two skunks.[[1]](#footnote-2) But so many people die. Everyone else on the face of the earth except for Noah and his family. We gloss over the death of the ungodly people outside of the boat, because it is too horrible to comprehend. The waters recede and the boat lands and the animals leave the boat and there is a rainbow in the sky as God promises never again to send a great flood that will cover the entire earth.

I wish that there was more detail in the Bible because I have lots of questions about how this all happened. Did the flood really cover the entire earth? How large was the ark? How did the animals get on the boat? And how did Noah and his family keep the ark clean with all of those animals inside?

The Bible doesn’t answer any of my questions. In fact, Noah in the Bible is pretty silent. Noah builds the ark. Noah does what he is told. We don’t learn about Noah’s motivations or his questioning, we don’t hear any description of Noah’s family members, we don’t hear how they reacted, we don’t get much detail about the flood itself, and there is very little attention paid to the victims who are killed in the flood. In the Bible we only hear about Noah, the one who will be saved. It seems like Noah is the only one who is told what is coming.

What truth about life do we learn from the story of Noah’s Ark? A few years ago a man named Robert Fulghum wrote an essay called “All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten.” It was so popular that it spawned a number of spin-offs. This week I ran across one called “All I need to know I learned from Noah’s Ark.”

1. Don’t miss the boat.

2. Remember that we are all in the same boat.

3. Plan ahead. It wasn’t raining when Noah built the Ark.

4. Stay fit. When you’re 600 years old someone may ask you to do something really big.

5. Don’t listen to critics, just get on with the job that needs to be done.

6. Build your future on high ground.

7. For safety’s sake travel in pairs.

8. Speed isn’t everything. The snails were on board with the cheetahs.

9. When you’re stressed, float awhile.

10. Remember the Ark was built by amateurs, the Titanic by professionals.

11. No matter the storm, when you are with God there’s always a rainbow waiting.[[2]](#footnote-3)

We learn about God in the story of Noah’s Ark. The language used for God isn’t angry or judgmental, but sad, disappointed, regretful, and merciful. Grief is always what the Godward side of judgement looks like. The relationship with God and the world is not simply that of a strong God and a needy world, but a tortured relationship between a grieved God and a resistant world. Four times in the story we hear the lists of people and animals and birds that are saved. The writer wants us to focus on who was saved rather than who was not. The writer wants us to focus on what God does to preserve creation.[[3]](#footnote-4) The flood didn’t change humanity, but it effected an irreversible change in God. The real changes in this story are in God. What God does re-characterizes the divine relationship to the world. God decides to put up with the evil that is in the world.

In this story there have been ten generations of people since the creation and the wickedness of creation has become so deep and broad that God feels like something must be done. Water is used to wipe the slate of the world clean and start again. And the promises that God gives at the end of the flood are that something like this will never happen again. The flood is a unique event; it is not seen as an illustration of divine judgement but as an illustration of the certainty of God’s promises. In Isaiah 54:9-10 God affirms that for us, “This is like the days of Noah to me: 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 and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.”

The flood deeply affected the relationship between God and humanity. In this story we see that God is open to and affected by the world. We see a God who expresses sorrow and regret, a God who judges, but doesn’t want to, a God who goes beyond justice and determines to save some creatures, including every animal and bird, a God who commits to the future of a less than perfect world, a God open to change and doing things in new ways, a God who promises never to do this again.[[4]](#footnote-5) This is a story that reveals this tension within God, and in the end we have a God who wills to save, not who decides to destroy. A God committed to change based on experience with the world, and a God who promises to stand by the creation.[[5]](#footnote-6)

In this story Noah teaches me about being faithful. Noah felt God calling him to build the ark and Noah did it. When Noah was finished, the animals came to him. He followed the urging of God and God provided what was needed. Twice in the story we are told that Noah did all that the Lord had commanded him. It is hard to listen to God’s voice calling us to do something that might be difficult or might not make sense. I was visiting with someone recently and they shared with me that beginning in January they decided to be regular with their giving. They kept stressing that it wasn’t a lot of money, but they felt called by God to begin making their generosity a regular priority in their life. Yesterday I was visiting with a friend and she shared with me about the calling from God that she felt in her life to adopt. Noah listens to God and then Noah did what the Lord commanded. These people today are taking actiosn based on what they feel God is commanding them to do. Are you listening? As a congregation, are we listening?

What truth about life can you learn from the story of Noah’s Ark today? Maybe it is to stand with those who are victims and are voiceless in our world, like countless people who lost their lives in the flood. Maybe it is to hear the stories of those whose stories we don’t know. When I think about the violence in our world today, I give thanks for the conversations that are happening. Folks are talking about race and privilege. People are talking about police brutality and talking about the lives of Philando Castile and Jordan Edwards and Santos Rodriguez, a 12-year-old child killed by Dallas police in 1973. We are beginning the conversations about mental illness and how we respond to it. Conversations are beginning about how we best support our police as they take on such a stressful job. May we help give justice to all of these voiceless peoples.

In the Noah’s Ark story, God sees the evil in the world and continues to open up God’s heart to that world, which means that God will continue to grieve because we will continue to mess up. God decides to stick with us because of our brokenness. Our future depends on God’s promise of love, forgiveness, and grace. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/noahs-ark-a-picture-of-salvation/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/noahs-ark-a-picture-of-salvation/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary: Volume 1. Page. 389. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary: Volume 1. Page. 389. P. 395. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary: Volume 1. Page. 389. P. 395. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)