

The Judgment That Aims At Salvation

From the sermon series: This Is Our Father's World

Text: Genesis 6: 5-6; Genesis 8: 21; Isaiah 54: 8

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...The Lord saw that man had done much evil...his thoughts and inclinations were always evil, he was sorry he had made man...he was grieved at heart...
Genesis 6: 5-6

...I will never again kill every living creature... Genesis 8: 21

...I hid my face from you for a moment; but now have I pitied you with a love which never fails... Isaiah 54:8

The story of the Flood in the early chapters of Genesis is a story of judgment and grace. That duality is found throughout the Scriptures. Judgment and grace are not, however, two equally balanced responses of God toward humankind, each equally ultimate. Rather, God's judgment is a means toward the end of Salvation. God judges a recalcitrant and resistant creation in order finally to redeem and re-create according to His eternal purpose of love.

Judgment is God's instrument. Salvation is God's ultimate intention.

The story of Noah and the Flood tells us of a resolve in the heart of God never to abandon His Creation but to stay with it with limitless patience and forbearance on the basis of a radical grace that will not finally be defeated.

Thus the story of Noah and the Flood is not simply a curious, ancient tale from a stage of primitive religious development. Rather, it was finally cast in the written form in which we have it during the dark days of Judah's Exile as a proclamation of the faithfulness of the God of Israel, Who would yet remember and redeem His people. In a word, this story is a proclamation of the Gospel of Grace.

Chapters six through nine of Genesis present an exceedingly dismal picture of the inclinations of the human heart and thus the fractured reality of the Creation -

the betrayal of God's purpose of a faithful, harmonious created order in covenant with Himself. But these chapters present a most hopeful picture of the resolve of the heart of God to stay with, renew and redeem Creation, which has run afoul of His purposes. These chapters then are gospel, Good News. We can be assured that this is our Father's world and we can rest in the deep assurance that nothing will ever separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord.

The story is familiar and need not be rehearsed here. Let us rather begin by recognizing once again *that Genesis 1-11 throughout is a preface to the history of God's redemptive action in our history*. These eleven chapters are constituted by a series of episodes which reveal deep and ultimate convictions about God, the world and humankind, convictions which are the premise of the whole biblical story of God's saving action in the midst of the world's resistance and revolt.

We have reflected on God's creative intention for humankind made in His image. We have examined the failed test in the case of Adam and Eve, the fatal choice to give way to jealous anger in the story of Cain and Abel. The fourth chapter points to the development of culture in the descendants of Cain and now we come to the story of Noah and the Flood.

Yet these chapters are not really about a flood that covered the earth and an ark that some religious groups are still trying to locate. Much rather, these chapters relate the truth about the human condition and the response of God to that situation. *The real drama of this story occurs in the heart of the Creator; this is a story about the grief and faithful love of God.*

The story is introduced by God's taking notice of the wickedness that corrupted His good creation and betrayed His purposes in Creation. Notice the anguish of God's heart and His decision to destroy what He had made:

... *The Lord saw ...* (vs. 5)

...*he was sorry he had made man ...* (vs. 6)

I will wipe them off the face of the earth ... (vs. 7)

I intend to destroy them. (vs. 13)

This sets the stage for the story. God's heart is grieved at the state of affairs He observes on earth. His first reaction is to destroy what He has made for He sees that evil has permeated to the core of the human heart and the corruption of Creation is complete. There is no hope that things might turn around of their own accord. It is a hopeless situation going from bad to worse. Destruction is God's determination.

Creation has refused to be God's creation and God's decision is death to the whole world. The "very good" of Genesis 1:31 has become the "I will blot out" of this narrative. This story reminds us of the most severe preaching of the later prophets.

But, contrary to the human response to such a situation which would be anger, we find in the heart of God anguish; He is grieved in His heart.

The evil heart of humankind troubles *the heart of God*. This is indeed "heart to heart" between humankind and God. How it is between humankind and God touches both parties. (Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 77)

Thus we are dealing with a God Whose purposes have been betrayed, a God Who brings a serious charge against His creature and Who resolves to destroy, in light of the recalcitrance of the world; but we are not dealing with an angry tyrant Who might use His almighty power to crush in a fit of rage. This is not a hostile God Whose dignity has been offended. Rather, this is a God of gracious intent, willing life and harmony and completeness for His Creation, finding to His deep anguish that such purposes of loving intention are being resisted and betrayed.

The world stands condemned; the sentence is destruction, but the sentence is rendered from an anguished heart, not from a jealous rage. Could God abandon His world? Could He bring it to an end?

The answer of this story – a reflection of Israel's faith and understanding – is obviously, Yes, He could. He could change His mind about His Creation and bring to nothing that which He created out of nothing. Brueggemann writes:

Can he abandon the world which he has so joyously created? That is a central question for Israel. Many people hold a view of God as unchanging and indifferent to anything going on in the world, as though God were a plastic, fixed entity. But Israel's God is fully a person who hurts and celebrates, responds and acts in remarkable freedom. God is not captive of old resolves. God is as fresh and new in relation to creation as he calls us to be with him. He can change his mind, so that he can abandon what he has made; and he can rescue that which he has condemned. (*Ibid.*, p. 78)

Thus Brueggemann points out we come to the heart of this narrative which has to do "not with a flood, but with a heavy, painful crisis in the dealings of God with creation." The real crisis is the crisis in the heart of God - "because of the resistant character of the world which evokes hurt and grief in the heart of God."

What is going on here is a parallel of that familiar and moving passage from Hosea where the same conflict rages in the heart of God. Israel's unfaithfulness is documented; certain judgment will be the result. Yet that judgment cannot be the last word.

How can I give you up, Ephraim, how surrender you, Israel? ... My heart is changed within me, my remorse kindles already. I will not let loose my fury, I will not turn round and destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst. Hosea 11:8-9

And then we meet Noah and Noah won favor in the sight of the Lord. You know the story from that point - the ark, the rescue of some of all kinds of living creatures, the terrible flood and eventually the return of the dove with a sprig of olive branch, the dry land and an altar built to offer thanksgiving to God Who had surely judged but, rather than destroy, had saved Creation. Now Creation can begin again; this is a point of re-creation and a fresh start.

Thus we find the resolution of the conflict in the heart of God. The sentence of death is overcome by a gift of new life. Grace prevails. God begins again with a resolve greater than that which prevailed at the beginning. Note the end of chapter 8. Noah and his family are restored to dry land and he builds an altar. In response God says,

Never again will I curse the ground because of man, however evil his inclination may be from his youth upwards. I will never again kill every living creature, as I have just done.

While the earth lasts, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall never cease. (8:21-22)

Here is God's pledge of unwavering faithfulness to Creation; He will never destroy it. The conflict in His heart has been resolved and resolved in favor of mercy. A great change has occurred but the change is not in Creation nor in the heart of the creature; rather the change is in God Who determines to be gracious, come what may.

It is critical to note that this resolve is not made in the light of the judgment that has just occurred in the belief that a fresh start will make everything all right. Notice the words "Never again ... however evil his inclinations may be from his youth upwards." To put it bluntly, God took the persistent evil of the human heart as a given and said I will redeem anyway. In this passage we have a statement of radical grace - a grace that saves because of God's decision quite apart from human merit.

Perhaps the wonder of this passage can best be seen by putting in juxtaposition two statements:

The human situation is hopeless.
God will redeem the human situation anyway.

or

In the creature himself there is no hope;
the hope of the creature is God's grace alone.

or

Humankind is hopeless. Our hope is in God.

Just as Hosea discovered, so the Genesis writer believed: God will never abandon the world or the people He has created.

*How can I give you up?
By rights I should give you up!
I cannot give you up!
I will not give you up!*

He takes as his vocation not judgment but the resilient work of affirmation on behalf of the death-creature. The flood has effected an irreversible change in God, who now will approach his Creation with an unlimited patience and forbearance. To be sure, God has been committed to his Creation from the beginning. But this narrative traced a new decision on the part of God. Now the commitment is intensified. For the first time, it is marked by grief, the hurt of betrayal. It is now clear that such a commitment on God's part is costly. The God-world relation is not simply that of strong God and needy world. Now it is a tortured relation between a grieved God and a resistant world. And of the two, the real changes are in God. This is a key insight of the gospel against every notion that God stands outside of the hurt as a judge. (*Ibid.*, p. 81)

This story found written expression at the time of the Exile. A people under judgment through their own folly and disobedience heard this as a story of their God Who would never abandon them but finally bring them to salvation. Second Isaiah reminds the Exiles of the story of Noah and the Covenant pledge of the faithful God.

For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you ...

For this is like the days of Noah to me; as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more 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 ...
(Isaiah 54:7-10)

Within the course of history judgment continues to occur. There is no sense of indifference to human wrong, no blasé attitude about creation's perversion and human sin. However, judgment is always embraced within the resolution to redeem and save. Judgment aims at salvation. This is the message of radical grace and our hope must rest in the God and grace and in nothing else.

The Summit meeting brings the heads of State together. We pray for mutual understanding and progress with the reduction of world tension. But our hope is not in the negotiating skill of our leaders; our hope is in God, the Sovereign of the nations.

In our personal lives, too, we encounter difficult experiences; we go through deep water. We do our best to handle the situation and we find what help and support we can. But finally our hope is in the God Who through His prophet said,

When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isaiah 43:2-3a)

God has resolved in His own heart never to leave us nor forsake us. He will never abandon Creation. His steadfast love endures forever. Amen.

Reference:

Walter Brueggemann. *Genesis: Interpretation: a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. John Knox Press, 1982.