

# FLOOD AND PROMISE

## Genesis 6:5-22; 8:17

**PENTECOST 16**

**September 9, 2018**

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Today, we begin our second year of Biblical readings from the Narrative Lectionary.

This new cycle of readings begins in the Old Testament, opening with the story of Noah and the flood, and continuing after Christmas with a block of selections in the New Testament from the Gospel according to Matthew, and the Letter of Paul to the Romans.

I personally look forward to this new cycle of readings and the opportunity to preach and teach on texts I have infrequently, or never, preached and taught in my many years of ministry. Our readings from the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Scriptures, will fall under the title heading “Partners in the Work of Creation.”

If I asked you to name the first book of the Bible, most people would answer Genesis.

As Christians, we would be correct.

However, for the Jewish communities of faith, Genesis is NOT the first book.

That distinction goes to the Torah, also known as the **Pentateuch**, or ‘five scrolls.’

This name reminds us that Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are really one composition, or writing.

The main story is situated in Exodus through Deuteronomy.

These books are not only a literary unit, but they also tell an uninterrupted story.

This story opens with the birth of Moses, in the beginning of Exodus, and ends with an account of his death, in Deuteronomy.

This story, as well as the Old Testament itself, speaks to a faithful God, who fulfills the covenantal promises with His called and delivered people.

Genesis, then, serves as the prequel to the story of the **Penteteuch**, providing the background as to how the Israelites came to be, and how they came to reside in Egypt.

Next Sunday, we will read and hear about the last patriarch's sojourn to Egypt to escape a famine, and how his lost son, Joseph, welcomes and provides for them.

The book of Genesis is, as its name implies, a book of beginnings: the beginning of creation, of humanity, of sin and death, and of the Jewish people.

The ending of Genesis makes it clear that the story of God's faithfulness and love for Israel does not end with its close.

This morning, we read about another beginning, a new beginning, as God commands a man named Noah to build a gigantic ark. Afterwards, God makes another covenantal promise never again to destroy the world by water.

In fact, for us Christians, water will take on a similar function in baptism, as it wipes away sin and death, and promises new birth and life through the promises of Jesus Christ.

This morning, we witnessed such an act with the baptism of Jacob Richard Ruffenach.

The case of Noah is one of the strangest in the Bible.

We are introduced to him in terms of unrivaled praise.

His introduction is full of expectation:

***“Noah was a righteous man, blameless (faultless) in his generation.***

***Noah walked with God” (6:9).***

No one else in the Jewish Torah receives such accolades, not Abraham, Isaac or Jacob, not even Joseph, Moses or Joshua.

Yet, the last glimpse we have of Noah is both unforgettable and tragic.

We are told that Noah, ***“a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard.”***

He then ***“drank some of the wine and became drunk,”*** so that his son, Ham, ***“the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers,”*** who came and covered up the nakedness of their father.

This action prompted Noah to curse the descendants of Canaan,  
who will become slaves to Ham's brothers' progeny.

Noah, the preserver of life, has become Noah, the embarrassment  
to his children.

Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge.

Noah drank from the fruit of the vine, the Tree of Oblivion, of  
not-knowing.

Adam and Eve were naked and ashamed.

Noah was naked but unashamed.

It is his sons who are ashamed to look at him.

The stories of those who are singled out as heroes in the Old Testament  
are told 'warts and all,' because no one is perfect

All have sinned.

We will take note of this reality this fall as we read about the partners  
God chooses in the ongoing work of creation — ordinary people  
called to perform extraordinary tasks.

The moral ambiguity of Noah was already written into the story at  
the announcement of his birth in Chapter Five, Verse 29:

Lamech, his father, calls him Noah, saying:

***"This one will bring us relief from our work and from the hard  
labor that has come upon us because of the Lord's curse."***

There is something not quite right here.

Noah will live during a time when God, again, will curse the ground,  
this time with a catastrophic flood, because the Lord has regretted  
how corrupt in the flesh humanity has become.

Noah does bring relief for humanity's toil.

However, he would busy himself in what seems to be a fool's errand —  
the construction of a gigantic ark in the absence of a body of water  
in which to sail it.

The story of Noah unfolds rapidly.

God orders Noah to build an ark, specifying its immense, and yet  
precise measurements.

Details follow as to what Noah must take with him — his family,  
two of all species of life, and provisions.

The rains come cascading down, flooding the earth, with Noah and

those aboard the ark the only survivors.  
Then, the rain ceases and the waters abate.  
This process takes over one year.  
Scripture tells that the rains fell on the earth for forty days and nights,  
in the 600<sup>th</sup> year, the second month, and seventeenth day of Noah's  
life.  
In the 601<sup>st</sup> year, the first month, the first day, the waters begin to dry  
from the earth.  
And on the second month, the twenty-seventh day, the earth was dry.

Much of the Genesis story focuses on the time period after the flood,  
after the waters have receded.  
Here the narrative almost comes to a halt.  
Noah opens a window and sends forth a raven.  
Then he sends out a dove, and it returns.  
Seven days later, he sends out a dove.  
Again it returns, this time with an olive leaf.  
Another seven days pass, and Noah sends out the dove for a third time.  
It never returns.  
But Noah does not step out on dry land.  
On the day previously mentioned, God orders Noah to bring his family  
and every living thing with him out of the ark.  
Only then does Noah do so.

During this whole sequence of events, Noah does not say a single word.  
He says nothing when God issues the decree that the world is about to  
perish.  
He says nothing when God gives him instructions to build a great ark to  
save himself and his family.  
He says nothing about those who will perish in the flood.  
He says nothing when the waters raise the ark and submerge every  
living creature below.  
Instead, we read of his obedience — Noah's steadfast and silent obedience.  
We read that Noah ***“did everything just as God had commanded him”*** (6:22).  
Noah is the model of obedience.  
He does as he is told.

To find another interpretation for the story of Noah, I turned to the commentary of a rabbi I have come to respect — Jonathan Sacks.

For him, the story tells us that obedience alone is not enough.

It is reasonable for us to assume that, in the life of faith, obedience is the highest virtue.

For Rabbi Sacks and Judaism, it is not.

One of the strangest features of the Biblical Hebrew language is that, despite the fact that the Torah contains 613 commands, there is no Hebrew word for ‘obey.’

Instead, the verb used in the Torah is **shema**, which translates “to listen, attend to, understand, internalize, and respond.”

So distinctive is this word that the KJV Bible had to invent an English equivalent — the word, ‘**hearken**,’ which has become archaic.

In Judaism, and in Christianity as well, God does not command blind obedience.

God wants followers to become mature and deliberative, to do God’s will, because we understand, or because we trust God, even when we don’t understand.

God seeks from us something other and greater than obedience, namely responsibility.

Remember I said that the Bible’s heroes are not without their flaws.

For Noah, it is his inability to speak.

As his father, Lamech, predicts at his son’s naming, Noah does bring relief from humanity’s work, but it is a release found in death.

Noah’s greatness was also his weakness.

Noah stood still and silent before others, knowing that their doom was eminent.

Throughout the whole narrative — the warning of the deluge, the building of the ark, the gathering of the animals, the beginning of the rain — Noah says nothing.

Noah’s failure is that, righteous in himself, he has no impact on his contemporaries.

He does not engage with them, rebuke them, or urge them to mend their ways.

Nor does he pray for them, or bargain for the lives of others who might be as righteous as he.

Abraham did this for the inhabitants of the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Noah, the sages said, walked with God, whereas Abraham walked ahead of God.

Beloved people of God,  
there's a lesson here for us.

Noah is the first intimation in the Bible that individual righteousness is not always enough.

We may not be silent while others suffer.

To be moral is to live with and for others, sharing their responsibility, participating in their suffering, protesting their wrongs, arguing their causes.

Jewish folklore wisdom speaks of Noah as 'a righteous man in a fur coat.'

There are two ways of keeping warm on a cold night — buying a fur coat, or lighting a fire.

Buy a coat, and you keep yourself warm.

Light a fire, and you keep others warm also.

Noah, the righteous man, fails to exercise responsibility for those other than his own.

Next week, we will discover this insight from our reading.

Noah, who saves himself and his family by building an ark, is the opposite of Joseph, who saves an entire region by building storehouses against a lack of rain.

**AMEN**