

Providence Presbyterian Church
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June 25, 2023
Genesis 9: 1-17

Bereshit bara Elohim. In the beginning, God created. The earth was formless and void, darkness covered the face of the deep, and the Spirit hovered over that watery abyss. Genesis 1:1-2. Beginnings. Like a lush valley spread out below you. Like a wedding with its pristine garments and unapologetic hopes. Like a child and a life of exciting mystery lying before you. Like a new career and lungs full of wind and energy. Beginnings.

Genesis 1 tells of the formation of the world before there were any reporters around to take pictures or notes. This literary account tells us of a world conceived in order and goodness. God saw what God had created and said at every stage, it is good. God creates the world, ordering and giving space, and filling those spaces with various species. And God creates humankind in God's image, and gives them community with himself and with each other and with all the creatures of the earth. A beautiful story about beginnings.

Genesis 9 is another story about beginnings. It's a different kind of beginning, however. It's an attempt to start anew after you've realized what darkness you are capable of; after you've seen the white hopes of possibility descend into muddy, painful entanglements. It is a new beginning that comes after you start to realize the brokenness. When you realize the cruelty capable of those in power, the cruelty capable of one human towards another looking them full in the face. When the things you nurtured with the greatest intention go sideways, and things do not go as desired. When the ordered and balanced world is off-kilter, and the errors of the past run wild in the street. And how do you get back, or begin again, when you see how far we have come from "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them?"

Genesis 6 says that "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." The pure hopes of Genesis 1 unraveled, starting with Cain killing his own brother. The innocence of creation marred with shame and then jealousy, growing into violence and murder. The whole possibility of humans walking with God in the cool of the day seemed to be an embarrassing daydream.

Now these early chapters of Genesis fall in what we call “pre-history.” These stories tell us about the world in its nature, God’s intent, about our place within God’s world. These are literary accounts that do not read like nor pretend to be eye-witness accounts of literal events on the ground. I say this only because I am not interested in getting bogged down with whether the world was formed in a literal seven days, nor do I wish to defend the eradication of human life in an intentional flood. What is interesting and relevant about this flood story, however, is the dilemma of God’s relationship to humans after things go awry. How you begin anew with humanity when possibility and ideals and God’s good intentions have gone askew. Tracy Smith phrases it this way: “The worst in us having taken over / and broken the rest utterly down.

As the image in the bulletin depicts, Noah stands on the ark’s deck, not in the way Adam began to walk the garden. Noah has seen the violence and the wickedness of humanity. He has seen the world ravaged, and now returned to pre-creation chaos. He sends out a dove to see if there is anywhere to land in this wrecked world. Is there life out there, is there a new possibility, is there land to stand on?

When the ark finally lands and they stand on earth again, on the firmament formed out of the chaotic ocean, similar to Gen 1, God commissions them again as he did the first time: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.” It is like seeing a landscape marked by drought and the smoke of forest fires be restored to green, rivers flowing, lakes full. I thought of this imagery or renewed creation as I drove through Idaho this week and the fields were so green and bright, they looked almost neon. Reservoirs that were shockingly low, now full. You could see the Tetons on the horizon from nearly everywhere, unobscured by the smoke or recent years. For Noah, the created world is revived. But so is humanity’s place within it. “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.” Take care of this place, help bring it into its fullness.

It is a command tarnished and darkened by the past, a commission to begin again in a way that you do not relive the mistakes of the past? If God is going to go to such great lengths for a restart to God’s vision for humanity and the world, then what is the key to beginning anew? How do humans find their place again? What do they need to focus on? The theme that I hear emphasized repeatedly through this passage is the significance of human life.

God created human life in God’s image in Genesis 1 and watched it devolve into murder and jealousy, wickedness, devaluing, and violence. And when God commissions Noah and his family to fill the earth and be fruitful again, of all the

things that God seems most intent to not have repeated is the violence against human life. “For your own lifeblood, I will surely require a reckoning.”

Verses five to six continue: “I will require a reckoning for human life. Whoever sheds the blood of a human, / by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; / for in his own image / God made humankind.” God establishes a rigid system that seems intended to preserve and ensconce the value of life and the dictate that one does not take life nor do violence to one another. Now Jesus will come along and change this. No longer eye for eye or life for life, which leads to more death and violence, but turn the cheek and pray for your persecutors. He renews the call for preserving life and seeking reconciliation rather than violence and vengeance.

And God’s sign of the rainbow, while we often interpret it concerning judgment and that God will not judge and destroy the world again in such a way, I wonder if the thrust of the rainbow is the value of life, a reminder even to God. Never again will God wipe out humanity with chaotic force. God will make humanity anew, set the humans on the earth to fill and multiply, and sets before them the value of life, lest they repeat the dark past, and will not resort to such tactics again. As James Weldon Johnson writes in *Lift Every Song and Sing*, “Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us, / Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us. / Facing the rising sun of our new day begun, / Let us march on till victory is won. The rainbow stands as a pact for beginning again, turning the tide against the old patterns and seeking redemption.

Genesis 9 is a new beginning with a fresh memory of the dark past. But beginning anew is hard. Before Genesis 9 is over, Noah’s family has already gone wonky and begun the descent into the old pre-flood patterns. By Genesis 11, the pride and hubris of humanity is trying to build a tower to heaven. And by chapter 12, God is sending Abraham west from Mesopotamia to Canaan, hoping for a different type of restart, to forge a special people in covenant with the Lord, to start anew with yet another family.

How does one remake humanity, and restart patterns when the old ones just keep cropping up, when one believes in the sacredness of humanity, and that one does not just wipe out a broken humanity? This is what Jesus does. He doesn’t clear the stage of the dysfunction to begin anew as happens in flood, washing away the wicked actors. He enters the broken world and takes it on, and seeks to forge a rebirth from within, writing anew on hearts, renewing bonds through touching the broken and eating meals with the ostracized, and calling as disciples those previously passed over. He leads and models a way of beginning again that we can learn from and follow.

There is another aspect intertwined here, also. For when Jesus proclaims God's kingdom, there is an acknowledgment of broken bonds and a religious system that marginalized and dehumanized many. Jesus' building of the kingdom begins there. With the poor, blind, and lame, with tax collectors, and women, and Samaritans. Jesus didn't double down on nor defend the social structure he knew. He subverted it and confronted it. Embodied by Jesus is this emphasis on life and justice and love and care for one another; the value of life, the nature of community and neighborliness.

There is in our Christian tradition the principle of confession. To truly receive Christ, there is a confession of our brokenness and need. Because unless we acknowledge the past and our propensities, we risk repeating them, we risk isolating and justifying ourselves. In our Reformed tradition, the practice of confession is traditionally a part of our weekly worship patterns. Because it is the regular habit of acknowledging the truth of our broken humanity that allows the possibility of repentance and new direction. Confession is tied to re-creation in us, even as the flood was tied to re-creation of the world. There is hope in acknowledging brokenness, in coming to the place where old patterns will not work nor be accepted any longer. To acknowledge our complicities in the world's sinful patterns, so that we might seek God's good with the same fervency that God showed with Noah, and Abraham, and Jesus.

In Smith's poetic vision of a new beginning, there is a sitting in the utter brokenness. In the aftermath, where remnants of the old created order start to emerge.

A long age
Passed. When at last we knew how little
Would survive us—how little we had mended

Or built that was not now lost—something
Large and old awoke. And then our singing
Brought on a different manner of weather.

Then animals long believed gone crept down
From trees. We took new stock of one another.
We wept to be reminded of such color.

You see, what Smith seems to suggest, what the Noah narrative seems to suggest, is that to access something old, before all went wrong is to be reminded of what

should have or could have been. Such a realization causes one to weep to be reminded of such color. And to pledge anew to never decimate the earth like that again.

Re-creation after the fall, re-creation in light of the cross has a different feel from Genesis one. It is full of possibility, but a sober hope, realizing our sinful patterns and capability. And so, we confess and we grieve, even as we begin again with fervency, seeking to tether ourselves to God's vision and rhythms, seeking to embody God's values in every action, seeking God's justice in the world, being a voice for the suffering and the down-trodden, seeking to restore a created world where life is valued and nurtured, and where each is cared for and treated as a brother, a sister, a neighbor.

And we remember that in our Christian tradition, to confess the full-faced reality of our brokenness and sinfulness serves to remind us also how much God loves us. Our brokenness does not lead us to despair and isolation, but closer to the bosom of our savior who loves and redeems us, and to the hope he can lead us to.

In Genesis 9, God gives the sign of the rainbow that God will not again ravage the earth, and not destroy human life. But what is your sign? What are our signs that we have learned from the dark past and are ready to begin anew on God's earth again? Perhaps the cross, and the invitation to take it up and follow, the path of dying to our sinful past to begin anew in resurrection power. Perhaps the table of broken bread and poured out wine, or the waters of renewal and baptism? Lift up your signs. For God has given us a new day, this day, and it is good.

And all God's people said... Amen.