

When the PA vehicle registration for my car arrived in the mail this notice was attached to it: PENNSYLVANIA’S LITTERING LAWS. As a reminder, Pennsylvania has laws against littering on our roadways and on public and private property. Here comes the legalese... Section 3709 of the Pennsylvania Vehicle Code provides for a fine of up to \$300 for dropping, throwing or depositing, upon any highway, or upon any other public or private property without the consent of the owner thereof or into or on the waters of this commonwealth from a vehicle, any waste paper, sweepings, ashes, household waste, glass, metal, refuse or rubbish or any dangerous or detrimental substance. PLEASE DRIVE SAFELY AND REMEMBER TO BUCKLE UP.

Then I began to wonder how often this \$300 fine for littering is actually issued to drivers. I suppose one could say that law enforcement has bigger fish to fry, but littering is still a violation of the law. I also wondered, speaking of fish, if the same fine applies to throwing a McDonald’s filet of fish wrapper out the window as well as stopping on a back road to dump fifty gallons of used motor oil into a farmer’s field. Does proportionality matter in these cases?

And speaking of proportionality, listen to this: *“The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The LORD regretted (i.e. was sorry) that he had made human beings on the earth and his heart was deeply troubled”* (6:5-6). It would be difficult to imagine a more complete and sweeping condemnation of the ways of humans on the earth than is contained in these words. Once again, in verse 7 we read that God says, *“I regret that I have made them.”* The Lord was sorry he had ever made human beings—*“his heart was deeply troubled.”* He could not find a single redeeming feature in what human creatures had made of creation. Under the circumstances, there appeared to be nothing to do but to destroy humanity.

In his book, *The Gospel According to Genesis\**, Charles Cochran suggests, “It is well for us to observe that this situation has not changed materially to the present day. We still greet God’s grace with our unfaithfulness, and his faithfulness with our disobedience. We continue to be the foolish virgins, the rich young rulers, and the unprofitable servants portrayed in the New Testament.” Psalm 14:2-3 paints the picture this way: *“The LORD looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one”* And Jesus’ observation in Mark 10:18 is also very much to the point: *“No one is good—except God alone.”*

The Noah story of popular culture isn’t really the Noah story. The real story has rotting corpses. The real story has an angry God. The real story has a drunken Noah. **The real story is not a fitting bedtime story for children, unless you want to give them nightmares.**

Remember that the people in the story have gotten to the point where *“every inclination of the thoughts of [their] hearts was only evil all the time.”* There is nothing to redeem these wretched human beings. Compare this to Romans 1:28-29, where Paul says, *“Just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind...They have become filled with every kind of wickedness...”* And Romans 3:10-12, where Paul quotes the psalm I just cited: *“There is no one who*

*does good, not even one.*” This is what happens when God lets humanity do whatever humanity feels like doing. The world goes to hell.

How does God respond to all of this? Is he grieved? Is he angry? Why doesn't God destroy everything and everyone? Does God, or God's response, change as this story progresses? Why does God respond so differently to the depravity of humanity in Genesis 6 than he does in Romans 1? What does this story tell us about God?

Last week, when we considered Cain, we were reminded that God loved Cain, and that *love really messes with justice*. So even though Cain deserved death, God preserved his life. Walter Brueggemann suggests that this conflict between *judgment* and *pathos* in the heart of God is the key for our understanding of the flood story.

Genesis 7:11 & 12 say, “*In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, on the seventeenth day of the second month—on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.*” Water came up from below, and it came down from above, in torrents. The family of eight—Noah and his wife, their three sons, and the three daughters-in-law—entered the ark, accompanied by an entourage of animals. “*Then the LORD shut him in,*” states verse 16.

Everything went according to plan (God's plan, at least) for the duration of the flood, whether the forty days and forty nights or the one hundred and fifty days is preferred. Charles Cochrane notes that, “It should be said at this point, however, that Scripture makes considerable use of the forty days and forty nights formula: Nineveh was given forty days to repent (Jonah 3:4); Jesus fasted for forty days in the wilderness prior to the temptations (Matt. 4:2); and his resurrection appearances took place over a span of forty days prior to his ascension (Acts 1:3). In each situation there is an element of danger until deliverance is assured.” The forty days is a typical biblical formula rather than a literal period of time.

“A striking feature of these stories, and indeed of the Bible in general, is the emphasis placed on God's genuine affection for his creatures other than humankind. We would not be mistaken in observing that there are some similarities in the way God deals with human beings and the animal kingdom: both were created of the ground (2:7,19); both perish (Ps. 49:20); and both will share in the peace of the coming messianic age (Isaiah 11:6-9; 65:25).

Furthermore, we learn much concerning animals from the account of the flood: they suffer as a result of human sin (6:7; 7:21-23); the preparation for the flood includes provision for their safety (6:19; 7:2-3, 8-9, 14-16); they are “*remembered*” by God (8:1); and the covenant with Noah and his descendants is also a covenant with “*every living creature that is with you*” when we read on to chapter 9. In the New Testament, we are assured that although two sparrows are sold for as little as a penny, yet “*not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will*” (Matt. 10:29). Truly, “*His eye is on the sparrow.*”

In view of God's well-documented concern for his creatures other than we human creatures, perhaps we should support the local branch of the S.P.C.A. (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) not for humanitarian reasons alone, but on biblical grounds as well.

So how will this “not a bedtime story” end? Genesis 8:20 says, “*Then Noah built an altar to the LORD...*” Noah, knowing that he and his family no more deserved to be rescued from annihilation by the flood than the others of his evil generation, prepared offerings to the Lord. “*Taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on [the altar].*”

Why did he do this, and why at this particular time? From our point of view it might seem more natural to have made the offering before the flood, perhaps in an attempt to placate God’s anger and win his favor. But we may learn from Noah’s example that our God is not about to be “bought off.” Noah had already “*found favor in the eyes of the LORD*” (6:8), and accordingly had not been required to forfeit his life as the penalty for his sin. Preparing animals for sacrifice is an open confession of his guilt. When he destroys the animals and sheds their blood, he is renouncing them for his own use and gratefully acknowledging God’s forgiveness. It is for this reason that the Lord found the smell of burning flesh to be a “*pleasing aroma.*” This time of year when I’m walking through our neighborhood I too catch a *pleasing aroma* in the air because one of my neighbors has their dinner on the grill.

It is in the light of Noah’s sacrificial action that God reveals his intention to enter into a covenant with Noah. Verses 21-22 say: “*Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.*”

Tremper Longman\*\* says, “This reaffirmation of the relationship between God and humanity is given the name ‘covenant,’ first mentioned in Genesis 6:18 and then spelled out in Genesis 9. A biblical covenant is similar to a treaty. God is a great king who enters into a treaty with his servant people, and Noah serves as the main human representative. This is a covenant of creation in which God affirms his intention to preserve the conditions that allow humans to live on earth. He promises to never again bring a flood to destroy human beings (9:11), and he agrees to continue the life cycles of the seasons (8:22).

Appropriately, the rainbow is declared the sign of the covenant. The sign is a symbol that represents the covenant, and when it appears, it reminds the respective parties of the need to [keep] its provisions. The rainbow is apt because it is something that appears after the storm. Furthermore, [Longman says that] the rainbow may contain an implicit curse that God takes on himself. The Hebrew word for rainbow used here is the same as the word for bow, a weapon. Taken in this sense, God hangs his bow up and its upward direction, pointing at God, may signify that God is saying that he will keep the covenant on pain of death. Of course, God can’t die, and that is precisely the point. He can’t break the covenant either. In any case the sad truth is that it’s a good thing God promised not to destroy humankind even if they sinned, for it’s not long before we hear of additional shortcomings. The next world crisis we encounter is the tower of Babel.”

To summarize, throwing litter out the window of our car can hardly be compared to the wickedness that led to the flood in Noah’s day. But I suspect that it still breaks God’s heart. That’s what sin always does. The story of Noah may not be a fitting story to tell the kiddies before you turn off the bedroom light tonight. But, like Noah, we too may find favor in the eyes of the Lord! Praise the name of the Lord. Amen.

\**The Gospel According to Genesis*, © 1984, Eerdmans Publishing Co., p. 60 f.

