

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 9:8-17  
SECOND LESSON: 1 Peter 3:18-22  
FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT  
February 21, 2021

***“The First Covenant”***  
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

The god Enlil decided that he had had enough of the rebellious and noisy humans and decided to flood the earth and get rid of them. But the great and merciful god Enki warned one righteous man of the impending disaster, and instructed him to build an ark to save himself, and to load two of every kind of animal on to the ark. Noah? No, the Babylonian hero Atrahasis.

The gods were angry about the evil and rebellious behavior of humanity and decided to destroy everything in a great flood. But the god Ea warned one righteous man, instructing him to build a large boat and to bring his family and some skilled workers aboard along with every species of animal and seeds. Noah? No, the Sumerian hero Utnapishtim.

It’s the same general region of Mesopotamia, what today is part of Turkey and Iraq. The mountain on which the ark ends up differ. Some of the other details differ. **But the things that are the same is startling.** Either this is the same story re-written, or it is the same event remembered and interpreted by different groups of people. We have to remember that this is a story from ancient pre-history. It was in oral form for centuries before it was ever written down, and it dates from a time when the human population on earth was very low.

Was the “whole world” flooded? No. The whole known world was flooded. These people had no idea how large the planet was. And there is geological evidence of such a flood in the region, although to this day scholars debate the date and size of the flood. Suffice it to say, SOMETHING HAPPENED. There was a catastrophic flood. There was an ark with a lot of animals on board. And they survived. I’m just glad that we only have to remember the name Noah, not Atrahasis or Utnapishtim. Can you imagine calling little Utnapishtim in for dinner? *Utnapishtim, you get in here this minute!*

Where the story picks up today is after the flood waters have receded and the land is dry again. It is at this point that God makes a covenant with Noah, and it is a covenant that includes all of the human race, all of the animal kingdom, and all plant life. Never again will God try to destroy everything and everyone in order to start over. Those that survived are imperfect, and their children’s children will be imperfect. But from this point on God will not give up on God’s creation. And the symbol of this hope, of this incredible promise, is the rainbow.

A covenant is a contract. It normally requires two parties to agree to do something. I will do THIS if you will do THAT. You get my house; I get your

money. That type of thing. But this is a unilateral contract. We don't have to do anything. We get the house and give nothing in exchange. And it's a universal contract. The whole human race is included, people of every race, religion and nation. The animal kingdom is included. Plants and trees are included. Every living thing is included.

The story of Noah and the ark is very familiar to us. It is so familiar, in fact, that we ignore much of its harsh reality. People died in this story. That's certainly not what we emphasize when we tell our children about it. And in the Old Testament every natural disaster or military loss is viewed as the judgment of God for sin. At a very basic human level we can understand this. As little children when we were naughty we were punished. Bad behavior was followed by some kind of loss or pain. When my children were very little I had to resort to time outs and spankings. But one of the things I learned to do over time as a parent was to teach using natural consequences. Natural consequences are much more effective in the long run. I'll never forget my friend Teresa from northeast Philly telling me about the one and only time she got drunk as a teenager. She was 14 or 15 at the time she arrived home totally plastered. Her mother didn't say a thing as she stumbled in to bed. But the next morning mom came in with a full cooked breakfast of bacon, eggs, sausage, toast and juice as a "lovely surprise," and stayed to watch Teresa attempt to eat it, until finally Teresa had to run from the bed to go hurl. After spending hours of "quality time" throwing up in the bathroom, she never did that again.

God may or may not deliberately send disaster upon us, but God can let us feel the consequences of our acts. Texans have suffered from the extreme cold that hit their state because of the pride of some of their leaders and the foolish lack of investment on the part of others. Despite what some media outlets would have us believe the real problem is not that the windmills froze. They are only a tiny portion of total output. The real problem is two-fold. First, because Texas didn't want federal interference in the form of regulations, they opted to go it alone and have their own power grid. There is no back-up available from neighboring states. They have cut themselves off from help, even help that is geographically close. Second, the three largest Texan producers of electricity, natural gas, coal and nuclear reactors, ground to a halt because of ice. Pipes froze. They rely on water. They can't do anything with ice. Could they have insulated their equipment against this possibility like they do in the north? Yes, and they have been told to do it in the past, but that costs money, and so they were, as we would say in Scotland, pennywise but pound foolish. It is now going to cost a lot more to fix than it would have to be prepared in the first place.

God did not cause the power to fail in Texas. Texans did that with the help of extremely cold weather. But the extreme weather is itself a product of global warming caused by us. And in case we think we're immune and superior to the poor people of Texas, we're not. Things like that can happen here too. When our leaders make bad decisions, we all suffer, and God does not protect us from the consequences of foolishness. This is not because God hates us. It is because God loves us and wants us to open our eyes and make changes. Teresa's mother didn't hate her when she inflicted such an awful experience on

her daughter. She loved her. She wanted to protect her from going down the wrong path in life.

It is certainly possible for us to interpret Noah's flood as they understood it at the time, a straightforward punishment from God or the gods. But it is also just possible that God knew that a natural disaster was on its way and decided to use it as a divine litmus test—to warn people it was coming and to give clear-cut instructions on how to survive, and only Noah or Atrahasis, or Utnapishtim was listening. After all, who builds an ark on dry land? The hero of the story was mocked. And of course, there is a dangerous parallel for us today. In the face of impending climate disaster many in positions of power around the world mock the very idea of global warming because to them everything looks fine. Human beings have an incredible talent for rationalization. God keeps sending people to warn us and urge us to take action. But it's so much easier and more profitable to just keep doing what we are doing. Which is what Noah's contemporaries did. They kept doing what they were doing, and ignored the warnings until it was too late.

Whether God sent the flood as judgment or God allowed the people to reap what they sowed by ignoring God and continuing to do evil, God promised in the Covenant with Noah to work within the world from that point on to redeem it. And God fulfilled this promise by sending Jesus. Jesus became one of us. **He took on flesh and became part of the created order.** The rainbow in the sky is a sign of God's promise that God will do everything possible to seek and save us, regardless of how depraved or lost we become. And God's first covenant of unconditional love extends to ALL. There is no one on this planet who is outside of God's love and mercy. We can choose to turn away from God, but God will never turn away from us. Amen

Genesis 9:8-17

<sup>8</sup> Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: <sup>9</sup> "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you <sup>10</sup> and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. <sup>11</sup> I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

<sup>12</sup> And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: <sup>13</sup> I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. <sup>14</sup> Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, <sup>15</sup> I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. <sup>16</sup> Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth."

<sup>17</sup> So God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth."

1 Peter 3:18-22

**18** For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. **19** After being made alive,<sup>[a]</sup> he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— **20** to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water,**21** and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, **22** who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.