

March 8, 2023 – Genesis 7:11-23, 1 Peter 3:17-22, John 3:1-8

When people imagine the Flood, I think, for the most part, they get it wrong. Don't worry... we do that with lots of Bible stories. The elders and I were just discussing last night the number of Bible stories we hear as children that really need to be reexamined as adults. Because in the process of simplifying them for children, we lose a lot of detail and a lot of meaning.

The Flood is no different. The happy image of a comically small ark with cheerful animals sticking their heads out of the various windows as they float on a calm blue ocean becomes somewhat engrained in us. And the truth of the Biblical account gets lost in our childhood imaginations.

So what do we get wrong about the Flood? Well, for one thing, I think we fail to recognize the significance of the rain. Forty days and forty nights of rain. Yes, that's a lot of rain. But for the people of Noah's day, it would have been startling for a different reason: They had never seen rain before.

Not even a sprinkle. Genesis 2 tells us that prior to the Flood, God held back rain from the earth. From the sounds of it, there was moisture in the atmosphere. Lots of it, in fact. Enough that there was a perpetual mist upon the ground that watered all the plants of creation. But there was no rain that fell from the sky.

And then God told Noah, "It's going to rain for forty days and forty nights." And Noah said, "OK God. If you say so." And secretly he thought to himself, "What is... rain?" And when the rains finally did come, I can't even imagine how the people reacted. Maybe they were confused. Maybe they were terrified. Maybe they actually thought it was fun... for a minute.

But, of course, it wasn't just rain that flooded the earth. Which is something else that people miss. Even forty days of torrential rainstorms everywhere, all at once, wouldn't be enough to flood the entire planet. You need more water than that.

And so we have this verse from our reading, "*all the fountains of the great deep burst forth.*" That phrase - "burst forth" - is not a peaceful image. It's a violent event. This is describing a geological catastrophe like the world had never seen before and has never seen since.

Because that much groundwater doesn't suddenly explode onto the surface without some massive earthquakes, tectonic shifts, and even volcanic eruptions. The entire surface of the earth was probably fractured with upheaval in the matter of a few days. This was not just rain.

Which leads us to the third element that we overlook. And I say overlook because it's staring us in the face, but we really, really don't want to look at it. Even though Genesis 7 goes to great length to emphasize it.

*"And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, livestock, beasts, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all mankind. Everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. [The Lord] blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens. They were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those who were with him in the ark."*

All flesh died. Everything. Every man, woman, and child. Every cat. Every dog. Every cow. Every chicken. Every wild animal. Everything, except for what was in the ark. All of it. Dead.

You know that happy image I mentioned? Of a comically small ark with cheerful animals sticking their heads out of the various windows as they float on a calm blue ocean? You know what it's missing? Corpses. Animal corpses. Human corpses. Lot and lots of dead creatures floating all around the ark.

It had to be a scene out of a horror movie. Every creature on earth drowning to death. Every living thing on the face of the ground, blotted out. The land itself, covered in the flood. Until the whole earth was just a big blue orb of water. With a single precious ark floating on top of all this destruction. Floating on top of one massive watery grave.

The Flood is not a children's story. I mean, it is, in that it needs to be taught to children, just as much as every other part of God's Word. But it is not inherently the type of story we read to children before they go to bed at night. Not unless we want them to have nightmares.

It's a very serious story about a very serious event that teaches some very serious theology. Because, according to St Peter in our Epistle lesson tonight, the Flood was not just a tragic event in Earth's history. It was definitely that, but it was also so much more.

The Flood was a type. I've explained this in Bible class and sermons before, but it bears repeating. A Biblical type is a real object or event that really occurred in history. But which God placed there specifically to teach us about something even more important in the future. So it's a symbol, but it's not hypothetical. It's a parable, but it's not fictional. It's very real, but it represents something else that also very real.

So what is the Flood a type of? Or, to use the theological term, what is the Flood's 'antitype'? The thing it was foreshadowing. Well, to answer that we need to know why God sent the Flood.

And that, at least, is a part of this story that people usually remember correctly: God was punishing humanity. After the Fall, we become stunningly sinful. I mean, we go from the innocent perfection of paradise to the premeditated murder of family members in one generation. And it only gets worse from there.

Humanity descends into utter violence and anarchy, with absolutely no respect for God's Law or even the value of a human life. To such a degree that Genesis says God actually begins to regret making human beings at all. And so, he wipes the sinfulness of humanity off the face of the earth. Blots it out completely.

Except... it's not completely, is it? It could have been completely. Probably should have been completely. As our hymn just stated so well, we are sinners ruined by the fall. There's no reason to keep us around. And this is God we're talking about. It doesn't take any effort for him to create. Just wipe us out and start over.

But he doesn't. He saves Noah. He saves Noah's family. He starts over again, but with the old creatures. The old, sinful creatures. The old, ruined creatures. Noah may be a righteous man, but he's still a sinner. The first thing Noah does after the Flood is plant a vineyard and then become a drunkard. This is not a perfect man we're looking at.

But God doesn't care. God loves Noah. God loves Noah's family. God loves humanity, even if he does destroy most of it in the Flood. He wants to see the earth full of his human creatures again. He wants this earth to continue to be our home. Full of all the plants and animals that he put on it in the beginning. And so he gives Noah a means of salvation: an ark. An ark to save them through water.

That ark would have been useless if he had destroyed the world by anything but water. If he had destroyed the earth with fire, a wooden ark would have just been a big bonfire. The ark is only a means of salvation if he destroys the world with water. The same thing that kills sinful humanity also saves Noah and his family.

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you. And it's not just about washing dirt away. Yes, water washes. But more importantly, to Noah and to Peter, water kills. It floods. It drowns. And it leaves nothing behind but floating corpses. So yes, God washed the earth clean of its sin, but he did so by killing every sinful thing on it.

Which is what Baptism does to us. Baptism doesn't just wash away our sin. It floods our soul. It kills the old Adam inside us. It drowns every bit of us that resists God's Law and is condemned to the prison of hell.

And it is an appeal to God for a good conscience. For a conscience that knows good and resists evil. It is an appeal to God for a new man inside us who daily desires to drown the old Adam when he floats to the surface again. It is an appeal to God that we remain safe inside this ark of Baptism. Inside this church, where the family of God has gathered and waits patiently for the day when all things are made new.

Baptism now saves you through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. For just as the world was resurrected to new life after the Flood, we too are resurrected to new life in Holy Baptism. And we too await the fullness of the resurrection on the last day.

Christ has died. Christ has risen. We have died to sin. We have risen to newness of life. We will die some day. We will rise at Christ's return.

Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God. He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit so that when our flesh dies we know that it will live again by the Spirit. For we have been reborn of water and the Spirit. We have entered into the ark of Baptism, passed through the waters of the Flood, and now step out onto dry ground. Praising God that he has kept his promises to us.

Noah and his family experienced a rebirth in the ark. All of creation, in fact, experienced a rebirth in the ark. For though they learned the extent of God's wrath for their sin, they also learned the extent of God's love for humanity. A love that would one day be seen again. When, instead of putting humanity to death, the Son of God let himself be put to death that we might live again. Amen.