

Sermon: Beginning Again

Series: Genesis

Scripture Reading: Genesis 8:20-22

Date: June 21, 2026

Preacher: Susan Shaw-Meadow



Confession: I am more comfortable with creation. I am more comfortable with the Biblical account of creation in the opening chapters of Genesis where the land is formed, lights are placed into the sky, and plant and animal life emerges to the refrain: “God said it was good, and then “very good.”

I prefer the Biblical stories of creation than the stories that immediately follow:

- A fateful rupture in the relationship between God and humankind - Adam and Eve and a serpent in the garden.
- Jealousy between brothers that festers into resentment and murder - Abel and Cain.

And what comes next? A cascade of evil acts leading God to conclude that creation itself was a mistake. That the creation of human beings in particular was a mistake. The ones made in the divine image - the crown of creation - are so flawed that God will blot them out, and all of creation with them. God is ready to be done with a failed experiment.

We know this is not the whole story. The common title, Noah’s Ark, tips us off. At the center of this lengthy narrative in which flood waters cover the earth, God notices a righteous man named Noah. Through Noah and his family, God rescues a remnant and creation is restored.

Even so, this story of a catastrophic flood is troubling. My daughter Beth, when introduced to this story through a delightful picture book, innocently put it this way: ‘What happened to all the other animals?’

Let’s put young Beth’s question alongside our own grown-up questions:

- Do the transgressions of some justify the suffering of so many innocent ones, including all the other animals?
- What kind of God destroys his own creation?

For help with these tough questions, Biblical scholar Patricia Tull invites us to consider the historical and cultural context. The story of the Great Flood in Genesis is not unique in the literature of the Ancient Near East. Similar stories predate the Biblical narrative, most notably the Mesopotamian myth of Gilgamesh where *the gods* (plural) send a flood to destroy the earth. One renegade god chooses a man to build a boat so

that a few would survive. Sounds familiar, right? But in this story, the gods are vain and capricious. They use human beings as pawns in their own battles of intrigue and conquest. They go hungry when creation is destroyed because they depended upon human slaves to feed them, and upon the earth's vegetation for food.

In Genesis, the story of a primordial flood is fundamentally reframed to reflect the Israelites' emerging relationship with one god, the Lord, maker of heaven and earth. In place of a pantheon of mercurial gods, the one God, YAHWEH, is committed to a creation declared good. YAHWEH is concerned that humanity exercise its stewardship of creation for good.

In Genesis, God does not impulsively destroy the creation. God acts out of righteous anger. God is grieved in his heart - broken hearted is a fair translation - at the waywardness of human creatures and their impact on all of creation. Jewish Midrash - a tradition of Biblical interpretation - goes so far as to suggest that in the tradition of mourning the dead, God grieves a full week before enacting the flood. Such imaginative interpretation reflects a God who is intimately involved with creation, a God who has a stake in its survival and flourishing.

And so, Patricia Tull poses a "what if?":

"What if God, grieved at human violence, tried one solution that turned out not to work...and then tried something else, deciding never again to give up on humans, but instead to take a long, patient, forbearing path with us?" (Tull, Working Preacher, 2017)

"What if God decided never again to give up on humans, but instead to take a long, patient, forebearing path with us."

Isn't this the way the Biblical story ends? Isn't it the way our story of faith in the One God ends and begins, again and again?

The creation is destroyed, yes. Through Noah, his family, and an ark full of creatures, creation is also restored. Plants and animals again cover the earth. Human beings multiply - human beings whom we soon learn, are no better and no worse than the ones who perished. Recognizing that this post-flood humanity exhibits the same capacities for good and for evil, God commits to hanging with them. God commits to staying in relationship with them. With us.

The story of the Great Flood is lectionary for this season after Pentecost. The other place it shows up is at Eastertime as one of the texts read at the Great Vigil of Easter - texts chosen to express the full arc of salvation history from Genesis through Revelation. If you grew up Episcopalian or Catholic you may be familiar with this extended service celebrated on Easter Eve.

The story of Noah and the ark full of animals is a symbol of God's gracious intention for all of creation. The ark prefigures Christian baptism through cleansing, saving waters. A child's mobile of Noah's ark was a baptismal gift for our youngest daughter. It hung in Erin's room for many years but I don't think we quite grasped its significance. God's grace covering and upholding our child in all of life.

Have you noticed the sculpture of Noah on this campus? He's right there in the hallway between Ryan Hall and the Education Building. This is Noah as he receives the dove when it returns with an olive branch in its beak. After months, nearly a year on the ark with nothing but water in every direction, this sign of life - this miracle of new growth - takes Noah's breath away. The artist beautifully captures his astonishment and awe.

Noah, the one who walked with God, trusted God's plan for him and his family. Building an enormous boat in full view of neighbors who surely thought he was crazy, Noah provisioned the boat, gathered the animals, and waited upon God who shut them in as the rain began to fall. As the rain fell, Noah and his family attended to the daily necessities of a floating zoo. They waited, and they waited, and they waited. What faithfulness. What a test!

As we know, Noah passes the test. Noah and his family and all the creatures pass the test of their confinement, parading gratefully out of the ark to a refreshed landscape where they may begin anew. Where they are commanded to begin anew. Noah's first act is to make a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God, who, finding the odor pleasing, responds with a promise:
*As long as the earth exists, seedtime and harvest,
cold and hot, summer and autumn, day and night will not cease.*

God places his bow in the clouds as a sign of God's covenant with humankind and all of creation. The rainbow we glimpse after a passing shower shows us the full color spectrum that is always there but is normally hidden from sight. The rainbow is a sign of God's grace that sustains and upholds us, often hidden, always present.

"As a result of God's choice", notes Patricia Tull - "God's choice to save Noah and the creation - divine grace surrounds us. It's the air we breathe."

We have another symbol of God's all encompassing grace. (*Pointing up to cross.*) It is here in gorgeous metalwork in our sanctuary. Some of us wear it around our necks, or place it in a favored spot in our homes. For all of us, it is imprinted on our hearts. Grace made real in the life, suffering death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God!