

*From the Pastor's Desk:*  
*A Sermon for Sunday, March 9, 2025*  
*Lent #1*

Welcome to Lent! If you were able to join us Wednesday, we formally began this season then, but this is the first of six Sundays that will bring us to Easter – Easter, with all its warmth, with the feeling of positive change literally in the air, with its love and grace and blooming of new life as stem and bud throw off the shackles of their winter hibernation. But for as desirous as Easter sounds, we take our journey to it slowly, methodically, and with great intentionality in this season of fasting called “Lent.”

Since Lent is in service to Easter, and since Easter is our salvation, this year we are going to look at God’s other salvific acts throughout the Old Testament. The final and decisive act of salvation is, of course, the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, but this does not mean that God has not taken other actions intended to set the world right, or to free God’s people, or to establish God’s people in all security and providence. This year, then, we are going to work our way through these past salvific acts – what precipitated their need, how God orchestrated them, and what went wrong – because, as is logically obvious, if any of these antecedent salvations had worked, there would’ve never been the need for the death and resurrection of Jesus.

I should also make clear from the beginning that I have intentionally designed these sermons to be more than a little didactic. It’s been my general experience as a pastor that most Christians have a good working knowledge of the New Testament, but somewhere in the confluence of its immense size, its multiple cultures, and its oft-ambiguous morality, the Old Testament eludes many faithful Christians. Oh, sure, we all remember a few key stories – it helps that *The Ten Commandments* has played on broadcast television every Easter/Passover season since 1973, so we’ve got Moses’ story pretty well locked down – but beyond a few key cinematic stories being paired with whatever felt-board depictions you may or may not have received during Sunday School in your youth, the Old Testament feels like a vague, sometimes violently dark, presentation of God and God’s work in the world.

I do not say this to scold. The transition from Old Covenant to New takes time – I mean, Jesus preached on the matter for three straight years and folks go so sick and tired of trying to wrap their minds around this change that they killed Him, in part, to shut Him up – and so I want to take this time that Lent provides us to seek out the persistent, even relentless, love of God as it is repeatedly presented in one salvific acts after another.

The first thing, then, to note is that the Old Testament takes place over a very long period of time. Estimates tend to come in around 4,000 years, though it really is anyone’s guess. As such, centuries can easily go by between our God’s large, decisive interventions. When God does intervene, then, we can use these interventions to help us chart different epochs or eras within the Old Testament. I mean, just consider that America’s history is roughly one-sixteenths of Israel’s and how many different “eras” of America have there been? Four? Five? Are we presently living through the birth pangs of yet another era? Well, whatever our current cultural situation might be, the Old Testament can generally be divided into five epochs, which overlays nicely with the five weeks of Lent. (There is, to be clear, a sixth Sunday of Lent prior to Easter, but that’s Palm Sunday and we’re going to spend it singing, so no need to hear my try to carve another history report

out on that Sunday!). If you’d like to know more about these different epochs, I encourage you to go back and read my newsletter article from February on just this topic.

Today, then, we begin in what scholars call either the “mythic” or “primordial” era. In all candor, this era is the least historically reliable, hence the moniker of “mythic.” But that shouldn’t concern us all that much. There is a truth beyond truth, if you catch my truthiness. All cultures and peoples have originary stories that help bond and unite people in their current life. It’s why all of us know that there’s some story about George Washington and a cherry tree, just like we also know about Adam and Eve with a supposed apple tree. So, just because the historical veracity of these stories can’t be ascertained does not make them less important. Indeed, the acceptance of unvalidatable stories can be a highly-bonding experience as their value is found precisely in the fact that we ascent to them contrary any historical validation.

It is in this primordial era, then, that we meet Noah and read about God’s plan to use him to fix what is broken. And what, precisely, is broken? To quote: “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.” Ah, so something truly fundamental is broken. This isn’t just a cracked screen on your cell phone while your operating system is otherwise running fine. This is your iPhone getting the blue spinning ball of death that signals your phone is *never* returning to its intended purpose or function.

Well, that’s how God felt about us – humanity. God looked upon all the peoples and seemingly found nothing salvageable. Well, nothing except Noah and his sons since Noah is described as “a righteous man, blameless in his generation” because he walked with God. The author of this part of Genesis is really laboring to make sure we understand just how bad things are. Multiple times the author writes things like, “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence.” This isn’t like the day after September 11<sup>th</sup> when we were all sad, but were – at the very least – bonded together in our shared trauma and commitment to “not let the terrorists win.” But not in Noah’s time. In Noah’s time, apparently, everyone was just a terrorist to everyone else.

In fact, it is interesting that “corrupt” is such a broad category – a large umbrella under which a whole host of sins might rightfully rest – but that when a little specificity is added, it is only violence that gets named, and twice. The best contemporary-ish analog I can think of is to place Noah in the wild, wild west where a man might shoot you for looking sideways at him during a game of cards. Yes, if I were to make a movie about Noah, it would definitely be a western set in a dusty town full of violent men who cannot fathom a flood warning in their otherwise arid environs.

So, this is the conditions that leads God to want to press the “Reset” button on all humanity. When I was a kid playing my old school NES, if I had trouble with some part of the game, I would often get really mad, throw my remote, and jab the reset button. My mom would yell at me for behaving that way. Little did I know that I was also, apparently, acting quite godly! God plans to use waters from the heavens to flood all the evil out of existence – just purify it with a deep washing,

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like when you pay the extra \$4 at the automatic car wash to get all the winter's salt and grime washed off the undercarriage of your car. I have no idea what actual improvements are made to my 90-second ride through that sudsy tunnel, but we easily accept that getting something even cleaner than normal clean comes with a cost, but is worth it.

So that's what God is doing. But, of course and as will be true every single week during this series, it doesn't take. Evil finds a way of creeping back in. Maybe it's amphibious and thus hoping water would destroy it failed. Because, by the end of this story, Ham has somehow defiled his father, revealing that corruption and violence are still present even after God sprung for the deep clean, which is really my long, roundabout way of proclaiming today that the \$4 add-on is scam! A scam I tell you!

Admittedly, the text isn't abundantly clear about what happens here, but it involves Noah, his nakedness, and a lack of consent because of his inebriation. How far you want to take that – how far biblical scholars take that – is a sort of Rorschach Test on one's imagination. Suffice it to say, though, Ham – Noah's youngest son who commits some sort of violation – reintroduces evil via violence where God had intended purification on the other side of a flood.

But there's yet another layer to this violence that we must attend to. As I noted earlier, this story comes from the mythic era of Israel's history. It definitely existed as folklore – an oral tradition that was passed down through the generations as elders shared this story with younger generations around the campfire. And I have an idea when this story was its most popular around the campfire: when God was showing Israel the Promised Land.

After Israel flees the tyranny of Pharaoh, they take a forty-year stroll to the Promised Land, but when they get there, they discover that it is presently inhabited by seven different nations, most notably the Canaanites. Indeed, the land is called Canaan, so you know who the final boss is in this video game. Why was this story about Noah so important during this time? Because Ham, Noah's youngest who defiles him in some manner, is described as "the father of Canaan." Indeed, after Noah wakes and discovers his abuse, he utters a curse over Ham, saying, "Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. May God make space for Japheth, and let him live in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave."

To be clear, whether under God's direct order or not, what Israel did when they entered Canaan today goes by the names "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing." What Israel does in coming into this land is akin to what early settlers did to native peoples here in North America. It's what the Hutus did to the Tutsis in Rwanda. It's our current administration's plans for Palestine, which is – itself – a genocidal tragedy born of the genocide committed against Jews in Germany leading up to and during World War Two. Violence begets violence begets violence. And we absolutely have used both the Christian faith and our origin stories to help us justify our violence.

Well, there's a reason that we call ourselves "Christians" and not "Noahans." It's because efficacy and peace are the hallmarks of the Easter we journey

toward. We only stop by, at least in part, this display in God's Museum of Salvation to be reminded of just how effective the death and resurrection of Jesus is in flinging us from the cycles of violence that undergird even our most foundational stories. But just so we don't think all is lost from this Noah story, the flood that God used to purify the world in Noah's time gets reappropriate and resized in our baptisms. That is to say, the purification from sin and the renouncing of evil that are part of every baptism rite is foreshadowed or prefigured in this flood. And even to this day, whenever someone is baptized or whenever the baptized remember their baptism in how they live, we participate in God's salvific work in the world. Our lives become an Ark that floats in the flood rather than drowning in it.

God knows. God knows that the Flood didn't fix everything. Jesus would've neither been crucified nor raised if everything had been fixed by the flood. Yet God also shows us how one salvific act builds into this ultimate and final salvific act, and then invites us to live beyond all corruption, all violence, all prejudice, all selfish claiming of land or resources that don't properly belong to us. God offers us a new life and a new way. Don't be a Ham, embrace all of God's saving work in your life and in the world. Floods are for flushing; Christ is for flourishing. Go flourish!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.