

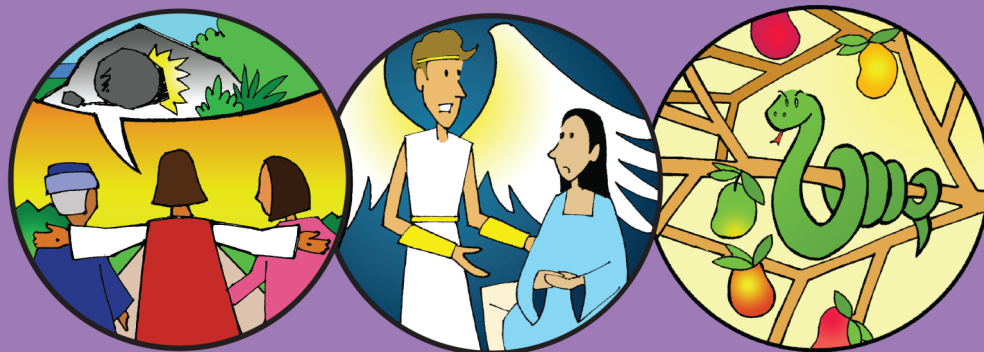
**CONTEXT &
CONNECTIONS**

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LIVING THE WORD

Narrative Lectionary



Context & Connections

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Noah and the Ark

God's Promises Bring Hope

The Point

We can trust that God cares for creation and will never again destroy the earth.

Key Verse

[God said] “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

- Genesis 9:11

Summary

Humanity’s wickedness deeply grieves the Lord, who decides to destroy the earth by allowing chaos to reign temporarily. When the flood recedes, God establishes a covenant with humanity and nature, promising that a flood will never destroy the earth again.

Accompanying Text

A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” And he said to them, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?”

- Matthew 8:24-27

Contexts

Linguistics

- In Genesis 6:6 the Lord is “grieved” (*’asav* in Hebrew) over the evil inclination of human hearts. This is the same word used in Genesis 3:16 to describe the woman’s experience of pain in giving birth.¹
- God tells Noah “I have determined to make an end to all flesh” because of the “violence” that fills the earth (Genesis 6:13). In Hebrew this violence is *hāmās* and includes injustice, the flaunting of moral order, and the violation of others, even to the point of murder.²
- In Genesis 6:5 the deity is referred to as *yhwh*, the four letter “short-hand” for the personal name Yahweh. This is translated in the NRSV as LORD. Genesis 6:9 refers to the deity as *’ēlōhīm*, the Hebrew word for “god” which is translated in the NRSV as “God.” These different ways of referring to God have been cited as an example of the two different sources that comprise today’s story (see **History**).³

Geography/Setting

- Today’s story is found in a section of Genesis often called the “Primeval History,” (Genesis 1–11) which is universal in scope and rarely dwells on specific geographical locations. The geography of the flood is cosmic and not particular. The only place-name is Ararat (not included in today’s lesson), which is probably in northeastern Turkey.⁴ The exact location of Ararat is not the point; the main point of this story concerns God, not exact locations (see **Authorial Intent/Occasion**). The question “where?” is much less important for the author(s) of the text than the “why?” and “how?”

History

- This story was probably put into its present form during the exilic period (587 BCE to 521 BCE). During this time, the exiles from Judah came into close contact with Babylonian culture and religion. It is highly probable that the story found in Genesis 6–9 was shaped and influenced by similar “flood narratives” such as the “Atrahasis Epic” and the “Epic of Gilgamesh” from Mesopotamia.⁵
- There is general scholarly consensus that today’s story is a composite made up of two different sources that have been intertwined.⁶ The first is commonly called the “J” or “Yahwist” source. It is thought to reflect a viewpoint from earlier in Israel’s history. The second is the “P” or “Priestly” source which came later, probably during the exile in Babylon. This is easy to see in Genesis 6:5-22 where the same story is told twice (Genesis 6:5-8 and 6:9-22) with slightly different details.⁷

Culture/Religion

- The ancient Hebrews, along with the majority of ancient Near Eastern cultures, did not believe that God had created the world *ex nihilo* (“out of nothing”). Instead, they saw creation as order being brought out of chaos. This chaos is represented by the waters seen in Genesis 1:1-3. The continuing existence of creation did not mean that chaos was obliterated, however, only contained.⁸ The cosmic order created by God is threatened by human violence, (see Genesis 6:5, 13) which causes God to allow the waters of chaos to return.⁹
- Other ancient creation myths like the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* tell stories that also emphasize creation as chaos being kept at bay. The hero of this story is Marduk, the patron god of Babylon, who slays the monster Tiamat and imprisons her eleven monsters.¹⁰ Like the chaotic waters of Genesis, these monsters have the potential of “getting loose,” bringing chaos back into the world.
- There were two other “Flood” stories from the ancient Near East which bear remarkable similarities with Genesis 6–9. The story of Atrahasis from approximately 1700 BCE tells of how the gods grew tired of the noise of humanity and attempted to reduce the number of people through plague and then a great flood. One of the chief gods, Enki, instructs the human hero of the story (Atrahasis) to build a boat in order to survive the flood.¹¹ The *Epic of Gilgamesh* also includes a cosmic flood. That story’s present form dates to at least the seventh century BCE, but its sources come from a much earlier time.¹² In this story the hero is named Utnapishtim, but the plot is very similar to the story of Atrahasis.

Literature/Genre

- As noted above (see **History**), the story of Noah and the flood is a part of the “Primeval History” in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. A ‘primeval history’ is a common literary convention throughout world history that attempts to explain the origin of a society through creative storytelling.¹³ It is not “history” in the present-day understanding, but rather involves speculations and imagination.
- Rather than seeing God’s actions in Genesis 6–9 as “destruction,” it is more accurate to view the flood as “un-creation.” God has been continuously holding back the waters of chaos since Genesis 1. The continued disobedience and violence of humanity threatens creation as the man and woman eat the fruit and hide from God (Genesis 3:1-13), Cain kills Abel (Genesis 4:8-16), and the “wickedness of humankind” (Genesis 6:5). Chaos almost overwhelms the created order due to human wickedness.¹⁴
- Directly before the final section of today’s story (Genesis 9:7) God gives Noah and his family the command “be fruitful and multiply,” which is a repeat of Genesis 1:28. While there is no new Eden in the post-flood world, God’s covenant promises that un-creation will not return. God will not abandon what God has created and will continue to act in the post-flood world.¹⁵

Authorial Intention/Occasion

- It is quite possible that Genesis 6–9 reached its present form during the exilic period of Israel’s history (see **History**). This was a context filled with many creation myths that explain why there is an orderly world with chaos kept at bay. The biblical authors and editors of Genesis 6–9 are stating that it is the God of Israel, not Marduk, Enki, or another foreign deity who is responsible for both the creation of order and its continued existence.¹⁶
- Beyond Israel’s exile the ancient world was regularly threatened with overwhelming chaos by flood, famine, war, disease, or any number of other natural disasters. The authors of this story show that God is ultimately in control of chaos and that the promises of God are not void.¹⁷

Audience

- Because Genesis 6–9 is a composite of multiple sources that have been woven together, the intended audience of this material varied over time. In its present form, however, it was heard by the people of Judah in exile in Babylon who were familiar with other versions of the “Flood Story.” (See **Authorial Intention/Occasion**) At the same time, earlier versions of this story quite possibly were used to explain a chaotic world to generations of Israelites.¹⁸

Common Misunderstandings

- The “Flood Story” is often seen as an example of God’s anger and judgment. Walter Brueggemann points out that the main emotion attributed to God is to be grieved to the heart (see **Linguistics/Genre**). Rather than a wrathful God, we see a God who is filled with sadness.¹⁹
- Genesis 6–9 also gives us a picture of a God who is able to change: both in the decision to blot out what has been created (Genesis 6:7) and in the promise to never destroy the earth through a flood (Genesis 9:11). While many view God as immutable, today’s story portrays God in a much different light.²⁰

More Information

- Today’s story is a part of the Pentateuch, or first five books of the Old Testament. Learn more about the Pentateuch’s formation here: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/tools/video-gallery/f/formation-of-the-penteteuch-ska>.
- The Bible Project has created a video that explains the biblical theme of “Covenants,” including the covenant in today’s story. You can find this video at www.jointhebibleproject.com under “Biblical Themes.”
- Learn about another non-biblical flood story, found on a Babylonian tablet, here: <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/hebrew-bible/the-animals-went-in-two-by-two-according-to-babylonian-ark-tablet/>.

Connections

Narrative Lectionary Connections

- **Last Week** – Today’s story begins the Narrative Lectionary! It is fitting that it includes the first covenant relationship between God and humanity (Genesis 9:8-17).
- **Next Week (Genesis 12:1-9)** – In the coming week, another individual will be given a divine command and promise. Like Noah, Abram will follow the Lord’s command and become a part of God’s saving activity on earth. While Noah’s story is cosmic in scope, Abram’s is placed in a particular place with specific geographical names.
- **Other Year 1 Connections** – God continues to be in control of the earth’s waters in Exodus 14 (10/2/2022), driving the sea back for the Israelites, while covering the Egyptians. Just as Noah “walked with God” in Genesis 6, the LORD will give the same command in Micah 6 (11/13/2022). God also brings death and new life through the waters of baptism in Romans 6 (5/21/2023).

Other Bible Connections

- Genesis 1 vividly describes God creating order out of a watery chaos. This is especially clear in Genesis 1:6-7 where God creates a dome (“sky”) to hold back the waters in the sky and Genesis 1:9 where God gathers all of the waters under the dome in one place. In the Flood Story, God allows this watery chaos (kept at bay until now) to return.
- Genesis 9:13 (with the “bow in the clouds”) is not the only time that God will be associated with the war bow: both Psalm 7:12-13 and Habakkuk 3:9 refer to the LORD’s cosmic archery.
- Hebrews 11:7 lauds Noah as an example of faith because he respected the warning of God and built an ark, becoming an heir to the righteousness that comes through faith.

Thematic Connections

- **Guided by God’s Promises** – Noah is a perfect example of an individual who is guided by God’s promises. Before receiving a divine warning Noah “walked with God” (Genesis 6:9). He also “did all that God commanded him” after receiving instructions to build and fill the ark (Genesis 6:22).
- **God’s Promises Bring Hope**– Our story today provides two examples of the hope that comes from God’s promises. Noah and his family lived in hope during their time on the ark as they were surrounded by watery chaos. In turn, all audiences of this story can live in hope, hearing God’s promise that there will never again be a flood that destroys the earth (Genesis 9:11).

Liturgical/Seasonal Connections

- Today’s story begins the Narrative Lectionary for the year. It is a story of “firsts” and new beginnings. Noah is among the first individuals in the Bible to exhibit faith, by walking with God. He and his family are also the start of a new creation. God’s covenant of Genesis 9:8-11 is the first covenant found in the Bible. Emphasizing these “firsts” could be useful at the beginning of a new lectionary year.

Hymns/Music

- There are many hymns that deal with God’s guidance and presence in the midst of chaos: “Eternal Father, Strong to Save,” “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” and “Jesus Calls Us; o’er the Tumult.”
- There are many children’s songs that are inspired by today’s story, including: “Who Built the Ark?”, and “Rise and Shine (Arky Arky).”
- Some praise songs that resonate with the themes of today’s story include “Oceans” by Hillsong, “Every Promise of Your Word” by Keith and Kristyn Getty, and “Your Grace is Enough” by Matt Maher.

Media Connections

- This blog from the Library of Congress website explores the many different songs inspired by “Noah and the Ark” in recent history: <https://blogs.loc.gov/folklife/2014/04/a-boatload-of-songs-about-noahs-ark/>.
- The well-known song “Flood” by Christian band Jars of Clay became a hit after being released in 1995. The song alludes to today’s story through its lyrics and can be experienced at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfAhpX_wIBk.
- The Disney movie *Fantasia 2000* (1999) includes a humorous and light-hearted segment in which Donald Duck serves as Noah’s assistant on the ark. Set to Elgar’s “Pomp and Circumstance,” the movie includes many of the famous images from this story.
- Author and illustrator Peter Spier won the 1978 Caldecott Medal for his book *Noah’s Ark* which tells today’s story through pictures.²¹

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 77.

² Terence Fretheim, “Genesis” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Vol I* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 390

³ John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 50-51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 392.

⁵ J.H. Walton, “Flood,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 315.

⁶ Collins, 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁸ Gregory Mobley, *The Return of the Chaos Monsters and Other Backstories of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 20.

⁹ Walton, 322.

¹⁰ Mobley, 18.

¹¹ Collins, 30-31.

²¹ Walton, 315.

¹³ Isaac Kikawada, “Primeval History,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol 5* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 461.

¹⁴ Bruce C. Birch. *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 92-94.

¹⁵ Fretheim, 398.

¹⁶ Walton, 323-324.

¹⁷ Mobley, 33.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30-32.

¹⁹ Brueggemann, 77.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

²¹ <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/caldecottmedal/caldecottwinners/caldecottmedal>.