

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Genesis of Our Faith: Grace
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July 11, 2021

Genesis 6:1-8; Romans 8:31-39

The passage from Genesis is hard to hear. God regrets making humanity. It hurts to hear our loving God come to this conclusion because we can relate to the mistakes these humans have made. If these people must face the consequences of their actions, we fear what consequences we will have to face too.

Our fear thrives off of the idea that God's judgment is punitive. That every wrong step we make here has an equivalent punishment in the afterlife. We assume this is how it will work because it is how human judgment works. Crimes deserve punishments. The story of the flood and Noah is an example of how God's judgment works. But it is only one of many stories that show us what to expect. Scripture tells us about Adam and Eve's banishment from the garden, Cain's punishment for killing his brother, Noah, and the flood and hundreds of other moments where we see how divine judgment works.

There are a lot of similarities in these stories, which is good news because we know they aren't meant to be historical retellings of actual events. Their characters and actions are exaggerated to make the important parts stand out. When we see similarities surface within a writer's works we can begin to piece together the deeper truths they want us to see.

The first similarity is their sin: the sin of abandoning the identity God gives us and making a new one for ourself. Adam and Eve, Cain, and Noah's community make the same mistake. They try to make a new identity for themselves. Adam and Eve try to become God. Cain thinks his identity as the oldest and farmer makes him more important than his brother, forgetting that they are both God's own and beloved. .

In the flood narrative we see this happen too. The author makes parallels between the heart of God and the heart of humanity. God's heart looks at the state of the world and grieves. Human hearts look at the state of the world and plot and deceive. The hearts of God and human are supposed to be the same. The heart was understood to be the center of a person containing everything that made them who they are which included the image of God. If human hearts were not after the same things as God's heart they had shifted their identity away from their center, away from the image of God, into something else. They no longer identified as God's image bearers. They identified more with warrior, seducer, whomever they claimed they were. It was no longer their God-given identity.

The sin that God keeps trying to correct is the sin of not expressing one's God-given identity and instead choosing an earthly title or status marker to be the center of who we are. Losing touch with our purpose and being pulled away from the goodness God created us to be.

If we believe God's judgment is punitive we will come to the conclusion that the consequence of these sins was the flood. The flood was a punishment of equal share with the sins of humanity. If the flood was meant to tell us about God's judgment it should be the center of the author's narrative, however, very little time is spent talking about the flood itself. God's main interaction is with Noah and the work they do together.

Noah and his family represent the truth of God's judgment. It is not punitive, it is restorative. All of God's action is centered on Noah; this is where we find God's judgment enacted. God's plan is to restore the original intent

of creation. God looks at the world and sees the sins, but God also knows that somewhere in each person is the original created goodness. This is the second similarity we find in stories about God's judgment -- restoration. Adam and Eve deserved death but God found a way to restore what could be restored here on earth and give them another chance. Cain murdered his brother. The equal punishment would have been death, but God finds a way to restore what could be restored here on earth and give him another chance. Through Noah, God proves again it is possible to shift one's identity back to the heart, the image that God made and placed inside them.

Noah is presented as blameless among the people. Scripture does not comment on if he is blameless among God. But if his future actions tell us anything, Noah was a sinner too. He just had a good reputation among his neighbors. So when God steps in and asks him to build an ark, Noah has a lot to lose. He will look like a fool to the neighbors who respect him. All the years of favors and dinner party schmoozing to build up that reputation will be gone. Noah has a choice. Double down on the identity he has created, or let God restore him to his created purpose. Noah chooses to do the harder of the two; he listens to God.

The hard labor of building the ark slowly moves Noah away from his earthly identities. He depends more on God to provide and he reconnects with his identity in God as a beloved creation.

After the flood God admits that is not how God wants things to work in the future. No more stepping in and hitting the reset button. Humans are going to have to do what Noah did and work through their sins. They will need to learn how to confess, to ask forgiveness, and examine where their identity is invested during their life and work to center themselves on their God-given identity.

The world operates with this new covenant. A couple of amendments happen here and there, until we get to Jesus. Jesus' death and resurrection is the ultimate proof that God's judgment is restorative. That every piece of God's image gifted to us at our creation will return to God. Paul reassures the church of Rome NOTHING can separate US, our core identity rooted in God, the true US. Nothing can separate US from God.

Judgment is not something to fear, but something to look forward to because it means on the day we are judged, the things that make us truly US will survive. The gunk of sin we build around us will fall away, leaving us, that perfect creation God intended.

Let me show you this process of judgment another way.

When we are born we are created with a perfect heart. One God declares to be very good just like God declared it in the garden. It holds our gifts and passions, our capacity to love and the very image of God, all our goodness.

As we grow up we learn things about how God created us, we better understand what makes us unique. As we learn how our unique characteristics work we also find out they can be misused. We hurt others. We hurt ourselves. We support oppressive systems. We assume our race is the best one. We create cultural constructs that tell people they cannot be proud of who they are.

All this stuff becomes a part of us and threatens to pull us out of our center. We start to identify more with this outer mess more than the inner goodness. We say things like: "I am stupid," "I am unlovable," "I am never going to get better." Our identity shifts away from God's image and into the stuff. The sinful stuff that happens to us or by us.

God knows this is happening. God can see how our mistakes build up and cause us to forget who we are. That is why God looked into the world and grieved. He regretted creating humanity because he felt those pieces of God's self inside all this and knew those good hearts didn't deserve it.

God wants us to do the work of unburdening ourselves from these earthly things that try to convince us our identity is anything other than beloved masterpiece, God's own image bearer.

But this is hard work! It would have been easier for Noah to keep his reputation, throw another party, and die with the rest of humanity. Separating ourselves from the remnants of sin is hard because it forces us to see how far we have let our identity shift. How comfortable we have become not expressing God's image to the world.

When Amy Julia Becker, the author of "White Picket Fences," joined us, she told us about how she slowly came to realize the problems her family reinforced by having a black nanny. She told us how deeply her family loved this woman and how she began to see how their love was not perfectly expressed. It was a painful realization. It redefined her entire childhood and family relationships. It was painful, but she committed to wrestling with her privilege. She still wrestles with the issues of privilege but she is less and less fooled to invest parts of her identity in things that are not God. She has privilege; it is a sin of humanity we do not choose to have stuck to us, but if we can endure the pain of divesting our identity from it now we save ourselves from the pain of it later.

Because it will be ripped away from us. God's restorative justice is going to take all of this away.

Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 3: 14-15: If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.

We are all heading for the restoring fire of God's judgment. In that fire all this gunk made by sin is going to burn away and what remains will be how we all started. Nothing can separate this US from God.

But Pastor Bethany, if God is just going to burn it all away later, why should we work on the gunk build-up now? Why not wait and let God do the work? Because we often fall in love with this stuff: the power, the privilege, the reputation, the titles, We fall in love with our earthly identities and believe they are who we are. When we love these earthly identities too much it hurts to go through that fire to have them burnt away from us. If we can begin that work now, the process of God's restorative judgment is easier. It also teaches us to trust the restoring process.

When I was younger, if I sat back on my knees they would lock up. It wasn't painful for them to be locked but if I tried to straighten my legs the pain was excruciating. The first few times it happened it was a whole ordeal of adults trying to help, and me crying. It took forever to convince me to relax and let them pull my leg straight. The minute my leg was straight though, there was no pain at all. Like it never happened. Over time I learned this and I would feel my leg lock and I would calmly push past the pain knowing if I just got it over with I would feel so much better.

When God's restorative judgment is passed, some things will be excruciating to have pulled away from us because we have invested too much of who we are into maintaining that identity. But the minute we are restored we will feel better than we have ever felt.

God's judgment is not something to fear, it is something to look forward to. It is something we can welcome into our lives today and work to unburden ourselves now. Some of that work is going to hurt. When we realize we have misused our gifts and allowed the stuff to pull us away from our inner goodness, it hurts. It is better to begin that work now and stay aware of what our identity is centered on so that we can be God's image bearers today. And we can be a little better at it tomorrow, and look forward to the day this work is over and we can be fully us, restored, and forever with God.