

Genesis 9:8-17

God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. 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." God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

Forgiveness Revisited - February 21, 2021

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Who could have believed for a moment that the temperature in Anchorage, Alaska would be higher than Houston, Texas? Who can believe the sight of thousands of Americans lining up seeking food relief all over the country? A year ago, who could have believed that in 2021, we'd be wearing masks, working from home, sending our children to school via computer? Who would have believed that 500 thousand Americans would be dead because of a virus? Who can believe that our nation is horribly divided between those who firmly believe that the former president won reelection in a landslide and those who believe the certifications of all fifty states that Joe Biden won by more than 7-million votes.

I wonder if the people of Noah's day experienced a similar list of problems. I wonder if they were dealing with a similar list of sins. Here is the irony of our day: as in the days of Noah, many look at life as it is and ask, "How could God be there and not do anything to set things in order?" We may want to conclude that God is dead, apathetic, or just plain incapable of dealing with the world as it is.

Let us be clear. The present state of affairs cannot and will not continue. The Bible is full of stories telling how people's lives were radically changed when God decided to exercise judgment. The story of Noah is only the first example. In our own day, one only need to look at the collapse of the Iron Curtain, the fall apartheid in South Africa, and the election of the first African-American President as evidence that God will not allow injustice remain forever.

Nevertheless, while God's wrath and judgment are certain, they do not delight the heart of God. Nowhere in the story of Noah is there one scene of suffering and anguish described in detail. Even Noah's eyes were kept from beholding the torment suffered by those who died in the flood. The ark had no portholes, nor picture windows to look out on the destruction God wrought. The only opening was that at the top of the ark to allow light to shine in.

Of course, many people seem to think they can avoid God's wrath. They think that they will wait until one foot is in the grave and the other is on a banana peel to be saved. It usually doesn't happen that way. God will close the door of salvation. When we have lived our lives in sin and rebellion against God, we most often will not be given the luxury of making a deathbed decision. It sometimes happens, but seldom.

Then, too, God's judgment is often allowing things to take their own course. One of the best definitions of God's wrath is that it occurs when God decides to be absent from creation. In other

words, God may express anger best when God decides to let us suffer the consequences of our own foolish decisions. Perhaps God is allowing us to suffer because of the economic and environmental excesses we have ignored for years, even decades.

To be sure, God's way of salvation is not a glamorous one. Many would have been on board the Queen Mary if Noah had built a luxury liner, instead of the ark. There was little appeal to the eye on that ark, but it was sufficient for the task of saving people caught in a flood. Isn't it true that many people refuse to be saved if it cannot be achieved in some glorious way, one that is appealing, acceptable and most of all, easy. I would not want to spend a year cooped up with noisy, smelly animals any more than you, but that was God's way.

Nevertheless, the point of our passage today is not wrath and judgment, but forgiveness. At the end of the flood, God promises Noah that the world will never be destroyed by flood again. The problem with the flood was that its effect was only temporary. The problem was not with creation, but with sin. The problem was not with individuals, but with humanity in general. The story of Noah answers the question: why doesn't God erase the slate and start over? It's an expedient solution but ultimately totally inadequate. What? Do you want God to wipe humanity out every time we mess up? There would be few humans ever if that happened. What is needed rather, is a new people for a new creation. This is what creation is eagerly awaiting. This became God's new plan.

At conclusion of the flood, God announced a new way of dealing with sin. God's new plan for dealing with sin is through forgiveness.

What is forgiveness? Forgiveness is a force, an energy. As energy, forgiveness has power: it is power. Since the time of Noah, forgiveness is God's will. The focus of God's forgiveness is about transforming relationships, both with God and with other human beings. As such, it does not aim to try and "undo" a past that, after all, cannot be undone. Rather, it aims to provide a healing of the brokenness of the past so to enable new and renewed community in the future.

Every one of us has hurt other people. Every one of us has said things and done things that have caused great pain. Likewise, every one of us has been badly hurt by the actions of others. Some of us have even hurt each other. We have done it in our private lives; our work lives, and yes in our church lives. Some of us have been badly hurt. Some of us carry scars that are incredibly sensitive. Some of us ask if we will heal. The truth is some of us don't even want to heal. We want to carry our pain with us; we want to carry our cross with us every day for the rest of our lives. However, healing is God's way. Forgiveness is God's way.

Make no mistake, healing takes time, requires discernment, and ultimately requires a willingness to learn to speak the gospel of reconciliation. This is the work of the Spirit, whose task is to guide us, to judge us, and to enable us as a Christian community to appropriate Christ's forgiveness.

In Christian life, we learn together, by the power of the Spirit, to live into forgiveness. We engage in such learning through such communal practices as baptism, Holy Communion, and the ongoing interpretation of Scripture. However, for us to offer or even receive forgiveness, our bodies and minds must become empty, like a tomb. First, our pain, our emotions and our feelings need time to be experienced, but then they need time to subside. When you've been hurt, the worst thing to do is pretend it didn't happen or try to suppress your pain. If you deny your pain, you cannot heal from your pain. If you pretend everything is OK, you're simply lying to yourself. But when we acknowledge our hurt and our pain, over time, our bodies and our minds will turn to understanding, which is the cornerstone of compassion. Then, once our bodies and minds are grounded in compassion, we can offer and receive the force of forgiveness.

But the best news of all as Christians is that we have a way forward when we do not yet have the power or strength to forgive. We have a way forward when we experience those times when we cannot forgive. We have a way forward in those times when we, like Jesus, are immobilized on our own cross. Hear the good news: we can admit that we cannot yet forgive others by ourselves but we can ask God to forgive others for us.

Something we often forget is that when Jesus was nailed to the cross, he ordered God to forgive the people. He did not ask God to forgive them, he ordered God to forgive them. He ordered God to forgive them because he was not yet able to forgive them himself. Enmeshed in pain, humiliation, and shame, Jesus could not bring out the words, "I forgive you." We know that he had personally forgiven others before. But while he suffered on the cross, he could not say those words. His pain was just too great. However, what he could do was tell God to forgive the people. The Son's command to the Father anchors the cross to Noah's covenant in rainbow arc, this force of forgiveness flung across heaven and earth. Forgiveness is God's will, it will be done; this is the energy, the force we pray to be with us always.

Finally, then, we are in a position to see how and why confession and forgiveness are an important practices of Christian community. When it is bound up with baptism, communion, and the study of scripture, confession links our ability to tell the truth about ourselves to God's forgiveness and the promise of community. In confession, we remind ourselves both of our faith and of our sin. In forgiveness, we are free to build and rebuild friendships and join together in the community of

believers. Together, we become a community that knows true forgiven-ness, and not self-righteousness or self-punishment or self-pity or penance or vengeance. Friends, forgiven-ness is the first and defining mark of Christian life.

How can I forgive, we may cry? Yes, we have a long list of people, a list that almost floats before our eyes, of people, companies, even governments that have hurt us -- damaged us physically, mentally, financially, and spiritually. They haunt us. They enrage us. They keep hurting us, long after their terrible actions have finished.

And that is true power of forgiveness. If we don't forgive, if we allow the hurt and pain to stay with us who really benefits? Do the people or organizations that have hurt us really care if we are still angry with them and remembering their sin? No! Most people who have hurt us with their thoughtless words or actions have forgotten what they have done. They may even be dead! They've forgotten while we remember. They caused the pain while we still live with the suffering.

Now, does that make sense? It's bad enough to be hurt by a person, group, or organization. Isn't it just crazy to let that person, group, or organization keep hurting us over and over and over again in our minds?

That, friends, is why God forgave humanity after the flood. God created us, God loves us, God wanted to continue in relationship with us. Therefore, God could no longer bring up the sins of the past, instead, God forgave us and started a new relationship with Noah and humanity.

When we forgive, when we let go of the people, groups, and organizations that have hurt us, we can start over again. We are free to move forward in life, free to live without the pain, free to live without the hurt. That is true power.

Consider that Jesus ate with his disciples just hours before he knew he would die. Consider that Jesus knew that all the men at the table with him would either betray him, deny him, or run away from him. Consider that Jesus loved his friends and was as wounded by their actions as he was by the nails that were pounded into his body. Yet, Jesus chose to eat with them. He returned to them. He continued to support and encourage and love them in spite of everything. If Jesus had rejected his disciples for what they had done to him, could there be a church today? Would there be hope for us?

When Christians are able to recognize that forgiveness is a way of life rather than a simple word to remove guilt, then we will be on our way living the true potential of the gospel. We'll be working on mastering the craft of forgiveness. We will become the people whose lives are forgiven and we will

be reconciled to each other. As a result, we will be able to discern more clearly our own calling to be the saints of God, witnessing to God's forgiving and reconciling love and then be willing to extend forgiveness ourselves.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.