

I

Years ago, I decided that I was going to do more of the cooking in our house. I am not nearly the experienced or talented chef that Amy is, but I had watched a few television shows and subscribed to a meal planning service, and I had visions of me standing in the kitchen, towel over my shoulder, sprinkling exotic spices into simmering pots and pans and shouting “Bam!” while Amy and the boys nodded and smiled with approval and praise.

The first meal plan I decided to try was an intricate Asian-fusion short rib dish that required five different kinds of spices that we didn’t already have on hand, and the garnish was supposed to be spicy wonton crisps. It was going to be so delicious, I just knew it.

But despite my best efforts, despite my vision, despite my loving attention, nothing went according to my plan. The pork came out of the oven with the smell and texture of burning tires, and the wonton crisps came out like little flecks of incredibly spicy volcanic ash.

I started out wanting to do something creative, to bring joy into the world, but nothing went according to my plan. In frustration and with maybe one or two choice words under my breath, I scraped everything into the trash and started over.

II

I suspect that this is a universal human experience. I suspect that all of us have started off on a project – something creative, something meant to bring joy into the world, something meant to be a blessing to those whom we love – but despite our best intentions, despite our best efforts, the thing just goes sideways.

The dough doesn’t rise, or the paint color is off when it dries, or the corners don’t line up just so, or any number of things happen that are out of our control. And it’s frustrating. And it causes us to maybe utter a curse or two under our breath, and then decide that the project is irredeemable, and the best course of action is just to flush it and start over. It happens to the best of us.

III

But what about God? Does God get frustrated with the things that God has created? Does God get so frustrated with us that God has the impulse to just flush the whole thing and start all over? Those kinds of questions are at the heart of our story today from the Book of Genesis.

Beginning today, and for the rest of the calendar year, we are going to be reading stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, more commonly called the Old Testament. We won’t be reading chapter by chapter or even book by book, but we’re going to be tracing the narrative arc of the biblical story as told by our Hebrew ancestors, and we’re beginning today with a reading from the

very first book of the bible, the book of Genesis.

Genesis literally means beginning, but to read these accounts as an earth science textbook or a genealogy that links us to our earliest ancestors is to miss their intended purpose. These stories are meant to be read as theology, as narratives that describe us the nature of God, the nature of humankind, and the relationship between God and all living things.

This morning we'll be reading selected verses from chapters 6, 8, and 9 of Genesis. In the chapters that precede today's passage, we hear ancient Israel's accounts of creation. We hear a story about the creation of the first man and the first woman, and how God provided for them and intended for them to live together with God and each other in community. We hear about how the man and the woman fell for lies and disobeyed the boundary that God had set for them, and the consequences that befell them. We hear about their sons, and we read a tragic tale about the very first time, in a jealous rage, one human being took the life of another. In short, we read about how God created the world and humankind and intended for there to be life, and peace, and joy, but nothing seemed to be going according to God's plan.

So listen now for a Word from God from Genesis, selected verses in chapters 6, 8, and 9.

*5The 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.*

*6And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. 7So the Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them."*

*8But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord. 9These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God. 10And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.*

*11Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. 12And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth.*

*13And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.*

*14Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch.*

*15This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. 16Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks.*

*17For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is*

*the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. 18But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. 19And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. 20Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive. 21Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them."*

*22Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.*

*At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the*

*dove; and it did not return to him any more.*

*Then 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.'*

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

5The 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.

6And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

God had started with nothing but good intentions for creation. Over and over in Genesis 1, we read the refrain, and God saw that it was good. And then we read that God stood back and looked at everything God had created, including humans in God's own image, and God declared that it was all "very good."

But somewhere along the way, it all began to go sideways. The first humans did not abide by the boundaries that God had set for them. Their offspring quarreled with each other and became violent and dared to question as to whether or not they were to be each other's keepers.

And so God became frustrated. And God's frustration turned to sorrow, and God was grieved in God's heart. And God did violence upon the face of the whole earth. The rains fell. The waters rose. And every living that lived on the surface of the earth was blotted out except for those precious few that rode out the storm of God's sorrow in a little wooden boat.

Churches all over the world are decorated with artwork depicting Noah and his family and the ark and the animals, but when you get right down to it, this what one scholar calls a text of terror – a time when God responded to

humankind's violence with violence of God's own.

The surprise in this story is not that a divine being would become so displeased with humankind that they would be blotted from the face of the earth. The surprise in this story is not that a small handful of people and animals survived by taking refuge in a boat. The surprise in this story is the way that God is fundamentally changed after the flood.

After the flood, God says, in Ryan's revised translation of the Hebrew, "Never again. Never again will I respond to humanity's violence with violence of my own. Never again will I destroy creation with a flood."

And God takes God's bow, which, for ancient people, represented the most feared and technologically advanced weapon of the day, and hangs it in the sky. It becomes a visible reminder of the promise that God made after the flood with humans and with all living things.

And it's a reminder, not just for the creation, but for God. Because, here's a spoiler alert, this is not the last time that God will become frustrated with humankind's inability to keep to the boundaries that God has set for us. This is not the last time that God will be grieved to God's heart at our capability to do violence on one another. This is not the last time that God will consider that perhaps the best course of action will be just to flush the whole thing and start over.

But the rainbow serves as a reminder to God, too. The rainbow reminds God of the covenant of peace that God made, not just with humans, but with all living things. God places the rainbow in the sky so that God will see it, and God will remember that even though humans are a stiff-necked people, prone to violence and sin, God has unilaterally disarmed, and God will never again respond to violence with violence.

The flood and its aftermath fundamentally changed the relationship between God and us. And as we're going to see as we read through the Old Testament over the next several months, God's relationship with God's people changes as the biblical story unfolds.

And that's why I believe that the bible is telling the truth about God and us. For all real relationships change over time, don't they? I met my wife Amy when I was 18 years old, but our relationship is different today than it was all those years ago. My relationship with my children is different today than it was when they were infants, and I have no doubt that it will be different when they are grown men. All real relationships change over time.

As we're going to see over the next several months, as we look at the broad sweep of Scripture, God's relationship with God's people will change as the story unfolds. But amid all the changes, there are some constants.

God has never, ever, in the entire recorded history of time, broken a promise that God has made. We humans aren't so good at the promise keeping, but God has never, ever broken a promise.

#### IV

And here's what that means for you, my friend. Because God makes and keeps promises that God makes to humankind, and because you are human, God is and forever will be in relationship with you. God knows you, my friend. God knows all your good qualities, and all your faults. God sees you when you succeed at being your brother and sister's keeper, and when you do violence to them. God knows everything you've ever done, everything you've ever said, and everything you've ever thought. God knows you better than you know yourself.

And as much as God might get frustrated with the project that is you, God will never, ever, ever quit on you. God will never, ever, decide to blot you out from existence. God will not ever, ever respond to your sins with violence. God has made that promise, and God has never, ever broken it, and God never will.

My friend, the bible tells the story of a God who is grieved to his heart by our capacity for violence and evil, and yet it's also the story of a God who will willingly give up his own son to be with us. The bible tells a story that teaches us that our sin is far more serious than we often think it is, and yet God's grace is

far bigger and deeper than we could ever imagine.

V

This same God who we read about here in Genesis, who brings the flood and also sets the rainbow in the sky, is the same God who is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. This is the same God, who when the boat is being swamped, when the disciples cry out, “Lord, don’t you care that we are perishing?” rebukes the wind and the waves and there is a dead calm. This God whom we worship and serve, this God who is bound up in relationship with us, is the same God whom even the wind and the waves must obey.

And so we need not fear the wind. We need not fear the water. For we who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. That means that in a sense, on the day we were baptized, we drowned. In our baptism, our old selves were crucified with Christ, and the body of sin was destroyed.

Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too, might walk in newness of life.

So let us remember who and whose we are. Let us remember that despite all of our failures, despite all of our sins, despite all the ways in which we fail to be our siblings’ keepers, God will never quit on us.

God is for us, friends. And if God is for us, who can be against us?

Thanks be to God. Amen.