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Date: March 30, 2014
Sermon Title: Rage, Ruin, and Redemption:
God's Noah
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Genesis 6:5-22

Genesis 6:5-22

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. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So 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.' But Noah found favour in the sight of the Lord.

These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God. And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And 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. Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make 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. For 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. But 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. And 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. Of 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. Also 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.' Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.

Pop Culture. "Religion in the News." The pope and the president met together. God is everywhere, and right now, especially in the movies. "Son of God" has made \$50 million. I went to see an interesting little film, "God's Not Dead," on Thursday, and one of the previews was for "Heaven is Real," a nonfiction film based on the huge best-seller about a little boy who goes to heaven and comes back.

So, religion is everywhere, permeating the news, permeating culture, and doing well at the box office. And frankly, I love it. It gets people talking. When St. Paul was in prison, after a while everybody there was talking about Jesus. Criminals. Prisoners. Guards. Everybody. And frankly, Paul admits, some people were making fun, some were mocking or pretending or using it for some advantage. But it was all good, said St. Paul, sort of like the public relations motto, "It doesn't matter what you say about me, as long as you spell my name correctly." Whether it's religious books, religious news, or religious movies, they get people talking, thinking. And if we're smart, we can use that momentum, that interest, to engage people about faith.

When Mel Gibson made his movie "The Passion of the Christ," it was grossly violent, gruesome. Maybe it was over the top, maybe he's crazy. I don't know. But for a few weeks there, people really did talk about Christ's great love for us that he would endure so much suffering, so much horror, just for us.

We actually had a Fairfield clergy meeting where we all sat around, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish clergy, talking about what Jesus's death on the cross meant to us. Well, now we have this "Noah" Movie, a big Hollywood special-effects, megastar-filled extravaganza. What are we to make of it? What should we do with it?

All these movies aren't the same, and you and I as viewers aren't the same. Some like romantic comedies, some like sci-fi, some like 3-D or action movies. The only movie requirement we have in our church is you must go to the new Muppet movie, "Muppets Most Wanted." We have three Muppeteers in our church, so we believe in supporting our own. And yes, their new movie is a lot of fun!

Some movies work; some don't. We went to see "Son of God" a couple of weeks ago. As you can guess, it's the life story of Jesus. Mediocre at best. When we left the theater, I said to Alida, "You know, when we went to see 'Les Misérables,' I cried during the movie, I cried afterward. I cry every time the music from the movie is played on our iPod. But 'Son of God' left me cold. 'The Greatest Story Ever Told,' and they made it lame."

The marketing for these films is amazing. The producers of "Son of God" were on every talk show. For the movie "God's Not Dead," the movie actually builds to a climax where they urge the audience to stop, take a moment, and text at least 10 people that "God's Not Dead."

I got a postcard from the movie company urging me to urge you to go to see it. Probably every pastor and every church in America got that card. That's a lot of money to get me to hype their movie,

Actually, it's a very interesting movie, mostly about atheism. It has some really big upsides, some big downsides. But that's a topic for another day.

The "Noah" film really has a Hollywood rollout. Big, splashy reviews, lots of marketing, a rip-roaring trailer, some good controversy to stir the pot. I got this e-mail from their marketing campaign. Let me read some of it to you.

"Hello, friends,

This may be the most exciting time in recent cultural memory to be a movie-loving Christian. That's because all across the U.S. and around the world, people are talking about the Bible. Specifically, they're talking about NOAH ...

... I believe we are at the dawn of a new Renaissance. That moment we've all hoped and prayed for, when Hollywood would take seriously and treat reverentially the stories that form the foundation of our faith, is here.

As someone who has seen the film more than a dozen times already, I can assure you that Russell Crowe's Noah is, at his core, a brilliant and unforgettable metaphor for God. In Scripture, God sees His beautiful creation turn its collective back on Him and His anger is warranted. But by the end of the Biblical account, God has chosen grace and love in the form of a promise and a rainbow. Throughout the film, Noah also wrestles mightily to balance justice with mercy. The question on his mind ... mirrors what God had to decide just 10 generations after Eden: Is mankind, inclined as it is to evil against each other and rebellion against its Creator, worth saving?"

[He then admits that the director took a lot of artistic license but says that "religious art" has always done that – like Michelangelo.]

... I believe beauty can spring from NOAH, as well – because it is gritty and challenging, insightful and inspirational, thoughtful and thought-provoking ... a rich cinematic experience that tees up all manner of conversations about sin and redemption, judgment and forgiveness, and the nature and love of God.

So, Hollywood has done its part. They've taken one of "our" stories to make one of "their" stories Now it's our turn. If we want to see more movies like this in the years to come, if we want our culture to continue to be saturated with talk of God and His Word, we've got a grand-scale mission of our own to accomplish: going to theaters en masse this weekend and making NOAH a huge hit. Box-office success is the language Hollywood understands, and then repeats. If NOAH does well, that new Renaissance we've so long desired will be in full bloom."

*Jonathan Bock
Founder and President
Grace Hill Media*

Of course, a sermon is not a movie review. I'm just doing what we always do. If something about our religion, our faith, pops up in culture, we grab hold of it, use the spotlight while we have it. Now the spotlight is on Noah.

Noah is from the Bible. We are committed to the Bible, so let's use this morning to be clear about the Bible's Noah. Then, go to see the movie, and compare notes. The Biblical Noah is found early in the Bible, Genesis, chapters, 6, 7, and 8, and can be simply told. God created the universe. It's really nice. But fairly quickly humanity wants to do its own thing. They know better than God, so early man and early woman rebel against God. Every parent faces this. By the time your children are in middle school, they think you're ruining their lives. By the time the kids are 16, they think the rest of us are idiots, That lasts another 5, 6, 7, 8 years. Then you're O.K. again. Before you know it, they're married, they're ruining their own kids' lives, they're idiots, and they have a greater appreciation of you!

By the time of Noah, humanity is in full-blown adolescence, total rebellion. The world is a mess, and God is fed up. The story opens with God sort of talking to himself, but we get to listen in. God says, "I will not deal with man much longer. I've had enough of them ... So the Lord grieved that he had made man. God's heart was filled with pain because he saw how great man's

wickedness had become, that every inclination of the thought of his heart was only evil all the time.”

What a finely crafted sentence! What a description of divine despair! Let me repeat. “*God saw [in man] that every inclination of the thought of his heart was only evil all the time.*” Humanity’s depravity, humanity’s evil, humanity’s selfishness, humanity’s sin was all consuming. From the moment folks got up in the morning, all they did was figure out how to make everybody else’s life miserable for their own benefit. It was as though every thought, word, and deed, every person was up to no good. Literally.

So God says, “I’ve had enough. I’m sorry I ever created people. Therefore, I will wipe every living thing from the face of the earth. *I will wipe ever living thing from the face of the earth.*” Fortunately, there’s one exception.

In the Bible, there’s always one exception. The remnant. “The few, the proud, the chosen,” as they say in the military. The ones who stick to the plan, who persevere. Who go against the flow. Who take a stand. Who won’t give in. In this story, it’s old man Noah, 600 years old, still strong, “righteous,” the Bible calls him, “blameless,” someone who “walked with God.”

This gives God a plan. He tells Noah to build an ark, a gigantic boat, and fill it with male and female pairs of every living thing, whatever it takes to reproduce, pollinate, germinate, and start over. Because everything else is going to die. Whatever is not on the ark is going to die.

The Bible doesn’t tell us some interesting parts, which I guess will be in the movie. Like how do they get the animals? What do the neighbors think? What happens when it starts to rain and the floods come, and people begin to die? That’s left to our imagination. What we’re told is that it rained for 40 days, and after a while, the waters from heaven were met by the groundwater swelling up, and the earth was flooded: towns, cities, fields, mountains; water covered and destroyed everything for five months.

Again the Bible leaves out the gory details. Maybe the movie won’t. Just imagine a world full of life turned into rotting, decaying death everywhere.

Then, God repented. God ... repented. “Never again ...” God declares, “never again will I curse the ground, never again will I destroy all living things.” God repents and puts the rainbow up in the sky as a forever reminder, a forever promise that the God of destruction won’t destroy again.

There's your Noah story from the Bible. Not a pretty picture. God's prized creation, people, give up on God. In revenge, God gives up on people. In a fit of anger, he kills everyone and everything. Except enough to start over. Noah, his family, a traveling zoo, and a seedbed. And a fairly well-irrigated land mass. And the promise never to do that again.

Despite the rainbow, it is not a pretty story, and it will be interesting to see what Hollywood does with it. It has already been interesting to hear the pundits and the pundits who are against the pundits.

Bill, Maher, the popular atheist comedian, calls God a "mass murderer." Glenn Beck critiqued the movie as "anti-human and pro-animal." Interesting. Others have accused the movie of having a pro-conservationist, environmentalist, global-warming agenda. Note to Glenn Beck. It's not leftist, atheist Hollywood who made the movie "anti-human." That would be God. It's in the Bible, "The Lord grieved that he had made man ... so the Lord said, 'I will wipe every living thing from the face of the earth.'" It's hard to soften that. And we Christians are left to deal with it. Not as pundits or film critics, but as believers.

As with any story, good story or bad story, we're left to ignore it, turn the page, close the book, or draw some lessons from it, even if parts of it puzzle us or offend us. The Civil War was awful, devastated parts of the nation; photos and reports seem epic, a Noah's flood-like horror. World War I was awful, defies imagination or explanation. The images of destruction are of Biblical flood-like proportion. September 11 was awful, a great evil perpetrated by evildoers against the innocent. Our memories of that day are as searing as the earth at the height of Noah's destructive flood. And there are lessons to be learned, questions to be asked.

The most lingering question is "does God do such awful things?" Just this very week, on Christian TV, I heard a TV preacher declare once again that 9/11 was America's fault, that God punished us for turning our backs on God. That's not Genesis, Chapter 6. That's American TV religion, March 2014. President Obama's old pastor, Jeremiah Wright, said much the same. Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell said much the same. Every disaster from Noah's flood to 9/11 to Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy to Haitian earthquakes gets explained as God's punishment for our evil.

At some point, Christians have to choose whether or not Jesus is our way to God. Did he mean it when he said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. It is God the Father living in me doing this work. Believe me, I am in the Father, and the Father is in me." (John 14:10) "I and the Father are one"? (John 10:30) If we don't believe that, we don't need Christianity. We

can go back to any other old religion with a big, bad, angry God who kills and slaughters and “wipes away every living thing.”

Four to five thousand years ago, people looked at a massive life-destroying, world-shattering flood, and they looked at man’s inhumanity to man, and they said, “God did it.” That made sense. It’s not even unique to Judaism or the Old Testament.

All over the world, in all sorts of religious myths and stories and scriptures, there are huge disasters made by angry gods to punish bad people. It made sense. But within these four walls on a Sunday morning, we’re stuck with Jesus – his life, his teachings, his worldview. The Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount. The Jesus of the Lord’s Prayer. The Jesus with children bouncing on his knee. The Jesus who always sided with people against institutions and traditions. The Jesus of the Cross, who forgave even his murderers. And we have to decide whether that Jesus whose “Father was in him and who was in the Father,” we have to decide whether Jesus ordered that “every living thing be wiped off the face of the earth.” Whether Jesus orchestrated 9/11, whether Jesus handcrafts earthquakes and hurricanes to get even with folks he doesn’t like.

The story of Noah has enough lessons to make our heads spin for months of sermons. What is rebellion against God? What does it take for one person like Noah to stand out from the crowd? What does it mean to be “righteous” and to “walk with God,” as Noah did? What is the message about stewardship and conservation and caring for the earth – not just in the film, but in the story? What does it take for a family like Noah’s to persevere in the face of great tragedy, great horror? As in any holocaust?

If God can be humble enough to repent, to change, to promise never to do something hurtful again, why is it so hard for us to be humble? And what about that rainbow? What about God’s promise of hope, of grace, of forgiveness, of life eternal? Why does so much religion rush to emphasize God’s flood and totally ignore God’s rainbow?

We all make religious choices. Being in this church this morning is a religious choice. Looking at the world through Jesus’s eyes is a religious choice. Emphasizing God’s rainbow is a religious choice.

Here’s what I believe. Something awful happened back in Noah’s time. People were awful to one another. The earth was turned upside down, inside out, torn apart. There was death everywhere. God made it happen or let it happen. It just happened. And when it was over, God grieved hard, and never again did he want us thinking he was that sort of God.

Instead, we live for those beautiful moments when the storm has raged, and even within the storm the sun begins to shine, and we look up, and God has painted his own greeting card up in the skies just for us, in rainbow colors. It says, "Get well quick. You'll be home soon. I love you."