

# Towson Presbyterian Church

October 13, 2019

“We Make the Road By Walking” Ch. 5

*“The Flood”*

Rev. Joel Strom

Genesis 6:5-8; 7:1-5; 8:1; 9:7-17

In case you haven't heard, throughout this year we are studying Brian McLaren's book “We Make the Road By Walking.” You're invited and encouraged to read a chapter a week, and this past week was Ch. 5, which is where Brian explores the flood story from Genesis. At the end of each chapter in his book Brian asks this question: *What one thought or idea from today's lesson especially intrigued, provoked, disturbed, challenged, encouraged, warmed, warned, helped or surprised you?* Let's apply that question to the scriptures we just read. Before we continue, try and answer Brian's question about our scripture readings from Genesis.

What I love about Brian's book is that he is tracing the story of the Bible, and so he starts in the book of Genesis. Genesis describes the beginning of the cosmos and our world, but it's also the beginning of a story that will begin with Adam and Eve and their family, and take us to Noah, and then to Abraham and his family, and to Moses, and the nation of Israel and eventually to Jesus. The story begins in Genesis, and if we want to faithfully explore and try and understand this story as best we can, these individual stories, such as the flood story today, must be read as part of a larger story. We lose something when we pluck them out and read them on their own.

We're in chapter 6 of Genesis and the story has already told us about Adam and Eve and how they were created in the image of God, and humanity was to reflect the creativity, goodness and character of the Creator. They were given two trees to eat from – the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They chose the latter and from there, Genesis describes this downward spiral of humanity. Cain is jealous of his brother Abel and gives in and murders him. Lamech, a descendent of Cain, not only commits more violence, but is proud of his violence, which then leads right into the story of the flood and God deciding to wipe out the world to preserve the goodness God had originally hoped for when the world was created.

I would have loved to have heard your comments on our scripture readings, because I imagine that you very well might hear this story in a different way now than you did when you were a child. This is actually a pretty serious and intense story and it needs to be interpreted in a different way than we interpret biblical stories when we were children. Children *should* focus on the ark and all the animals, and that they're coming in 2 by 2, and sing the “Arky Arky” song, but as you get older and read it as a teen and as an adult, you can start to think about it in different ways.

Years ago, on a Sunday night at Youth Group, we were using a video series that slowly took us through the story of the Bible from beginning to end, and that night's lesson was on the flood story. After watching the video, we were invited to draw or write down what stood out to us in the story and what made us wonder, and as we went around and shared with the rest of the group, one of our teens said, "*What about everyone else who wasn't a part of Noah's family? They all died in this story and God caused it? That doesn't make sense.*" It doesn't. She was now looking at this story from a different angle from when she was a child.

What I appreciate about Brian's book is that he is very willing to shine a light on some of the more difficult sections of scripture. He doesn't shy away in chapter five from noting how disturbing this part of Genesis can be read. All of humanity is wiped out in this story and only one single family is saved? What?! What does this story say about God? Well, if we're honest and we look at this story from one particular angle, it makes some very troubling assumptions about God."

And that's the challenge and the limitation of looking at scripture from only one angle. And when we do that, the first angle that we look at is usually from a literal perspective, right? And we can say to ourselves, *if I'm supposed to believe everything in the Bible happened just as it was written, how am I to make sense of this story?* And what often happens is people read a story like Noah and the Flood and it now confuses them instead of maybe delighting them as it might have when they were a child, and it can often lead to people throwing their hands up in the air and saying *I don't know what to do with this book* and walking away. And that has happened countless times in our culture. People have walked away from their faith or their genuine *exploration of faith* because they can't reconcile a God who would wipe out all of humanity. I can't blame them for feeling confronted with that choice.

Every Sunday Rob or I welcome you to TPC and share the kind of church we are striving to be – inclusive, curious, compassionate, courageous. I love all those words, but when they were proposed I was particularly drawn to curious. Curious acknowledges that we don't have the life of faith fully figured out and we will always be learning and growing, all of us, at every stage of life. And to be curious means you must ask questions. They go hand in hand. And if we don't ask good questions about the Bible, it will be hard for us to understand a lot of it because it can contradict itself. It just does. And to ask good questions about the Bible is to look at these stories from different angles and different perspectives, because each angle will tell us something different about it and open even more questions for us to ask. To ask good questions is to take the Bible very seriously, which is what we strive to do here.

Different angles and different perspectives tell us so much. When we come to the Bible and these ancient stories, it's not helpful to just ask the question, *did this happen or not*, and stop. That's the just the first question; that's just the ground floor for us. From there we begin to wonder: What was the world like when this story was written? Why did people write down this particular story? Why was it important to them? How did they try and make sense of the world

around them? What does this story tell us what it means to be human? We know it tells us something about God, what about what it means to be human?

The flood story from Genesis begs questions and for us to look at it from different vantage points. In the ancient world flood stories were numerous. The people of Israel were not the only ones who had flood stories. The Sumerians had their own flood story; the Babylonians had their own flood story. And for the most part, these flood stories were similar in that they all made the point that divine judgment had caused the waters to rise and for humanity to be wiped out. God, or the gods in these stories, were angry and vengeful. In “We Make the Road By Walking” Brian describes one of these ancient flood stories. A gang of gods let loose a catastrophic flood that destroyed the world as a personal vendetta against some noisy people who had kept the gods awake at night.

When we lay these other ancient flood stories alongside the Noah story, *there are* similarities. God sees the violence that has taken over the world – the killing, the destruction, the inability to care for and respect one another – God sees this downward spiral of humanity and decides to start all over. There are similarities. But there’s something very different about this Noah story than the others. God is merciful in this story when you compare it to the other flood stories. Often in the other stories God or the gods wipe out everyone and everything! But in this story, God does some saving...God saves Noah, and his family, and the animals, and then does something quite astonishing. God makes a covenant, or a promise, with humanity and with the world, with all of creation, to never do this again.

And God makes this promise not because humanity has changed. Keep reading Genesis; it doesn’t take too long to notice that humanity is back to where it was before. In the Noah story God changes. God’s mind is changed, and God decides to never do this again. And then God commits to living with people in a very new way. The other flood stories ended in a very different way. The gods were angry, and everybody was wiped out and the gods were satisfied with their destruction. The Noah story is different. It ends with hope and a promise, and God wanting to live with humanity, and all living creatures, in a new and life-giving way.

When you look at this story from one angle it might describe a God of wrath who seems to lack any kind of mercy. But when we look at it from another angle, where we lay it aside other ancient flood stories, it has hope to it and describes a God who wants to be in relationship with humanity. We can read the flood story as a giant leap forward of how people were coming to understand God in ancient times.

What I love about Brian’s book is he’s not just sticking with the New Testament, but he’s taking us through the whole thing, and he’s inviting is to explore the story the Bible is telling. And to take it seriously means we need to wrestle with it – all of it – both Old and New Testaments. We need to ask good questions, and we need to look at it from different angles and perspectives. And in “We Make the Road By Walking,” sometimes we’ll agree with Brian’s interpretation, and sometimes we might not. Good. That’s how it works. That’s how we grow

and learn. That's how we keep allowing the Bible and the story it is telling to shape us – individually and as a community - into a community who God is calling us to be. A community that is here to bring hope and peace and justice and love and life to the world.