

## Sermon – Noah's Sons

### **Genesis 9:1; 8-28**

The Bible has some pretty weird stories. Many of them never get read in worship, and I'm betting there's some most of you have never heard. This year, during our trek through the Old Testament, I'm going to pull a few of these odd stories out. Partly that's just to explore the weird stories of the Bible and stay out of a rut of always the same stories.

But as we think about sin as separation – separation from God, separation from the creation that grounds us, and separation from one another – the stories can offer some different images for us.

You all know the story of Noah. You probably know about the covenant God made with Noah and his family after the flood, a covenant sealed by the rainbow.

But I'm guessing many of you have never heard the story that comes at the tail end of Noah's story – this weird one about Noah and his sons. It never gets read in worship.

Before we talk about Noah's story, I want to talk a little about these most ancient stories from the Bible – creation, Noah and the flood, and next week the tower of Babel.

These stories are origin stories. They are stories that may or may not describe actual events. In fact whether they are true in that sense doesn't really even matter – they really aren't that interested in historical fact. Instead they are meant to profoundly shape our understanding of God, the origin of our world, and how God relates to that world.

They also aren't unique to Judaism. Most ancient religions have similar stories. But the God portrayed in the stories is very different. Often, other ancient origin stories are based on a very violent god, or gods. In an ancient Babylonian creation story, creation itself comes into being out of violence.

On the other hand, our creator in Genesis brings a world into being out of words and breath...and delights in that creation.

The flood story is another that can be found in many ancient religions. The flood story as an actual event is kind of disturbing. But it tells us some things about God and evil. And it ends with a twist that shows a very different God than a God of violence.

Briefly, the story begins with the massive evil of God's human creation. In chapter 6, we read this: Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence.

So God decides to destroy them. But according to the story, God made a way for a new creation to emerge by picking the one good man and his family to survive, as well as the animals. Thus the ark.

So, there's some irony in the story – God is disturbed by the violence of humanity, then decides to violently destroy them. But we know that God takes evil seriously.

The flood story has become a part of our baptism liturgy – in baptism we recognize that sinful humanity is drowned in the waters of baptism.

As the flood waters subside, we arrive at the rainbow. God probably realizes that most likely humanity will continue to sin. But God vows to not destroy them again...God decides to put up with humanity, no matter what. This is where the story flips from the image of a violent, vengeful god. I actually think part of the point of the story is to show that God is very different from the common image of violent ancient gods.

God establishes a covenant with Noah and his sons. It's different than the covenant between God and Abraham, which we'll read in a couple of weeks. It is a very one way covenant – this isn't a transaction. God makes a promise. Period. no matter what.

And the no matter what didn't take very long. Noah gets drunk and passes out naked in his tent. Ham goes in and sees him naked. So for us, this would probably at most be an embarrassing incident, best forgotten. There are apparently some things going on here that make it a much bigger deal than we might make of it.

We'd maybe more likely do an intervention with Noah and get him into rehab!

There are some things we can get out of this odd story, and the curse of Ham has some historical importance, both for Israel and us.

Last week when we talked about Adam and Eve, I said that sin separates us. You can see that here. Whatever it was about Ham's action that made it sinful, it disrupted the relationship between Ham and the rest of his family.

And that disruption will carry on for generations.

The name of Ham's son, Canaan, should be familiar to you. The land of Canaan is the land God eventually promises to Abraham and his descendants. Then, the Israelites reclaimed by force after the Exodus. We'll get to that down the road.

But the curse of Ham actually has some historical significance for us as well – one that relates to a much deeper evil.

Those of you in our anti-racist book group might remember reading about it in Dr. Kendi's book.

Slavery has existed for thousands of years. Prior to the 1400's, slavery took a variety of forms. Slave traders trafficked in people of all ethnic backgrounds. There was indentured servitude to pay off debts. Those captured in war became slaves.

But in the 1400's, the Portuguese bested their slave trading competitors by traveling to capture slaves from West Africa. Thus began the slave trade that expanded and ultimately spread to the Americas.

This was highly profitable for everyone concerned, except of course the Africans. Soon, the slave trade in the western world became almost exclusively made up of Africans.

In order to justify the expansion of the slave trade, people began to formulate theories about why slavery was acceptable...and even beneficial to the Africans.

I'm not going to go into all of those, but in 1578, George Best basically invented the concept of race. And he concluded that the Africans were these cursed descendants of Ham...cursed and destined to be slaves. How he decided that their blackness was part of that curse is anyone's guess, but that's how racist ideas work.

That idea waxed and waned in popularity for several centuries. While it no longer has the support it once did, it's not gone.

What is also not gone is the search for some kind of distinguishing feature that justifies unequal treatment of the different races. Things like blacks are inherently more likely to be criminals...that they're more likely to use drugs...or sell drugs. We will be well on our way to ending the evil of racism when we can cast those ideas into the same dustbin as the curse of Ham.

Well, so what do we take away from all this.

First, there are some odd stories in the Bible – this one is nowhere near the weirdest.

Second, the Bible contains some of the most misused texts in history. Like the curse of Ham used to justify African slavery and racism, you should always reject arguments based on the Bible that deny any person or group of people their God-given humanity.

That's not the same as saying anything goes where scripture is concerned. But remember that we are all created as God's beloved, no matter what. And if the bible is used to deny that for any human being, it's a misuse.

Third – sin is destructive. God created the universe with certain expectations and boundaries. When sin breaks those boundaries, chaos – represented in Noah's story by the waters of the flood – crashes in, sweeping away everything in its path.

Finally, God is nonetheless committed to creation. The ark and the covenant with Noah's family represent that commitment, giving a new start out of the destruction that sin causes.

God has chosen to stick with humanity, no matter what. The rainbow is a sign that God has decided to find other ways to deal with the sinfulness of humanity. God knows that this will be a way of heartache and sorrow for Godself. God loves us like a parent whose anguish over a self-destructive child is an open wound.

God opts to take on that wound in order to draw us back. Ultimately, God's wound will become the agony of the cross.