"NOAH"

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"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." (Gen. 6: 5-6)

REUTERS

April 19, 2005 -- An American paleontologist says he and a team of Egyptians have found what could be the most complete fossilized skeleton of the 40 million year old whale *Basilosaurus isis* in Egypt's Western Desert.

Professor Philip Gingerich of the University of Michigan excavated the well-preserved skeleton in a desert valley known as Wadi Hitan, or the Valley of the Whales, southwest of Cairo.

The first *Basilosaurus* was discovered in 1905 but no full skeleton has been found until now, the university says.

The skeleton, which is 18 meters long, could throw light on why there are so many fossilized remains of whales and other ancient sea animals in Wadi Hitan [which means "Valley of Whales" and contains the fossilized remains of over a thousand of sea creatures including] …five species of whale, three species of sea cow, two crocodiles, several turtles, a sea snake, and large numbers of fossilized sharks and bony fish.

It is a protected area to be developed as a national park under an Italian-Egyptian cooperative program and it has been nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage site because of its natural beauty and scientific importance.

CNN WORLD NEWS

July 1, 2010 -- Researchers scanning the Peruvian desert for whale fossils have stumbled upon the remains of a "sea monster" three times the size of a modern day killer whale.

The teeth of "Leviathan Melvillei" were so large it was initially assumed they were elephant tusks.

"There were no elephants in South America before 3 million years ago, and the specimens found have an age of 12 to 15 million years, so that was impossible," said Professor Jelle Reumer, one of the team of scientists who found the fossil in the Pisco-Ica desert in coastal Peru.

WHALES IN THE DESERT

What with whale, turtle, crocodile, shark and fish skeleton's turning up in the desert and fossils of every imaginable swimming creature showing up along the highways of Ohio, it is not surprising that our various cultural mythologies should contain stories about floods.

Just a quick search of web sites dedicated to this topic shows no less than 32 separate countries which have flood stories in their cultural mythology. They include Babylon, Borneo, Burma, Canada, China, Cuba, Fiji, Guyana, Iceland, Iran, Peru, Wales, Viet Nam and four different flood stories that circulate in the various sub-cultures found in the United States. So pervasive are flood stories in various cultures that, for centuries, historians divided ancient history into antediluvian (before the flood) and postdiluvian (after the flood) epochs. Modern scientific research has shown, however, that there is no evidence in the geological record of a flood which covered the entire earth. Most flood stories, it is believed, can be traced back to large but local floods.

At the time of the Babylonian Captivity in 586 - 500 BCE when the biblical flood story, as we have it, was finally written down, we know that four flood epics were circulating through the Ancient Near East: The Epic of Gilgamesh, the Epic of Atrahasis, the History of Babylon by Bersus and Sumarian Flood Epic – all of which probably arose out of a common memory of the great Mesopotamian flood of 3000 BCE.

Biblical scholars are in nearly unanimous agreement that the Noahvetian flood story was adapted from these various yet similar stories that circulated in the area at that time. The ancient Hebrew redactors borrowed the flood stories of their time and reworked them "to express the peculiar theological affirmations of Israel's faith."[1]

One other observation before we move to the story itself, and that is one that usually goes unrealized by Christians because most of us have never actually read the story. We've heard it told to us by preachers or we have heard it read to us from children's Bible story books, but few of us have ever actually read it as it appears in the book of Genesis.

If we did we would realize that it's not an easy story to read. It is full of repetitions, reversals, backtracks, dead ends and shifts in perspective that make it hard to follow and understand, especially in the beginning.

This is because the flood story, as it appears in Genesis, is actually two versions of the story that have been forced together in an attempt to create a kind of unity that does not really exist.

One version is very early and comes from the Priestly writer or "P" and was used in worship settings. It contains repetitions that make it easy to remember and some scholars have likened it to a children's story – simple, repetitious, and fun.

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[1] Brueggemann, Walter. *Genesis: Interpretation Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. N.Y.: John Knox, 1982.

The other version is a later version that was created by the Yahwist or "J" writer and it is more complex, longer, more detailed and, frankly, a little scary. It is an adult version of the story and contains some fairly mature, complex and sophisticated theological observations and reflections.

Usually, when the story is told, the places where the two authors disagree or contradict each other are just left out and that's what we're going to do this morning. We're not going to dwell on insignificant details but rather on the overall story and its meaning for the people of God.

The other thing we're not going to dwell on is whether this story is a historically accurate depiction of events that happened exactly as they are described. We're not going to examine satellite images of Mt. Ararrat to see if we can see images of the ark. And we're not going to ask questions about fish and birds and how a flood would affect them and the relative guilt or innocence of everyone and everything that died in the flood.

As we shall see, this story is not intended to be a historical account of a big flood. It is way more than that. In fact, it's not really about a flood at all. It's a story about God, about how God relates to his creation and the creation relates to God. And it is how the God who we like to think of as always the same, never changing, and solid as granite can and, in fact, does change his mind out of love for his creation.

THE IMAGINATIONS OF THE THOUGHTS OF THEIR HEARTS

The story teller begins by telling us about the creation, the world and what had become of it.

In just ten short generations since Adam the entire creation had gone completely off the grid. It was a runaway train. Created to be in partnership with God it has now gone its own way. It does not honor God or respect God or even acknowledge God as God.

And the result of this rebellion, this misdirection, he tells us, is pervasive "wickedness, evil, and corruption." Then, as if to answer the question, "What do you mean by that?" or "What does that look like?" he sums it all up in a single word: *violence.*

Violence.

Go back as far as you like and the scriptures are always in agreement on this one thing if nothing else. The irrefutable sign that we are operating outside God's will for us is violence against one another. Violence is contrary to God's will. Violence is a sign that we have gone off the track, that we have missed the target God has set for us, that we are not meeting God's expectations.

Violence is sin in its purest form. Violence estranges and separates us from each other and, when we are separated from God's creation we are separated from God. To the degree that sin is separation and estrangement, to that degree violence is sin itself.

And it is also the symptom of other forms of sin – of the corruption or decay of our moral character, of the wickedness that seeks separation and estrangement over union and reconciliation, of the evil that values self over other and loves the creation more than the creator.

Violence, says the story teller had become the norm.

It was the norm of human behavior, the go-to mode, the first recourse.

And it was the norm of human thought. Here are the storyteller's words: "Every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was evil continually." The King James version says , "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was evil continually."

This evil which permeated the population was not limited to behavior but to thought as well. Their acts were violent, their thoughts were violent, their intentions were violent. Even their fantasies were violent.

Violence had become endemic in human culture.

GOD GRIEVES

Normally we think that God's reaction to all this violence, evil, and corruption is one of anger. It makes God angry. And why wouldn't it. This is not what God had in mind when he created the universe and the human beings who populate it. This was not what he wanted or expected.

Put in the same situation we would be mad and we expect God to be. We know how this story ends, right? We know what God is about to do so he must be really, really mad.

But that's not what the text says.

Look again: (6:6) *And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.*

God's response to human evil and violence is not anger but grief! God is grieved. He is sorry. His heart is broken. This beautiful thing he created, this thing he declared "good" at every step along the way, this thing of beauty and harmony and grace and poetry and unspeakable grandeur has become ugly and rotten and worthless.

Imagine that you are a sculpture who creates a beautiful masterpiece from polished marble. You spend days, weeks, months working on its creation and very day it becomes more complete and more beautiful and more valuable. And then, on the last day, the last moment with the very last act of creation you discover a flaw in the marble. You investigate a little closer and see that the flaw runs through the entire piece.

One tap, one tilt, one stiff breeze and the entire work will disintegrate into a thousand pieces. It is, in a word, worthless. All your work has been for naught. What will you do with the piece?

(6:7) *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.*

Do you see? This is not an act of anger.

This is the last scene in "Old Yeller." He must destroy the thing he has created and which he loves. He comes to this act with tears in his eyes, his head bowed in grief, his step reduced to a slow, painful shuffle. It is a loss almost unbearable.

ENTER NOAH

Enter Noah. All is not lost, after all.

It is not all corrupt and evil. Violence does not dwell in the heart of *every* human being. There is one man who is "righteous and blameless." A man who understands that God is God and everything else is God's creation, who understands his rightful place in the creation, who does what God asks him to do.

And his name is Noah.

Noah, we are told, "did as God commanded." In fact, we are told this four times and it seems to be the thing which makes Noah so loveable to God. He does as God commands. He is obedient.

And because of this one obedient, faithful man, this good man, God changes his mind.

Are you shocked? How does that fit into your personal theology, the way you normally think and speak about God? The storyteller is challenging us, do you see? He is asking us to reconsider our understanding of God and to try thinking of God not as a mighty and powerful creator only, but as a *loving parent* as well. We parents change our minds all the time, don't we? "Oh, alright. Go ahead. But be careful!"

A serious student of the scriptures will now see, in this story, a thread that runs through the scriptures. This is the first time, but it will happen over and over again that God will consider changing his mind and even change it. Here are just a few of the cases we will be examining:

Abraham: Confronted with God's decision to destroy Sodom and Gamorrah, Abraham asks God to spare the cities if fifty righteous men can be found in them. When God relents Abraham goes back to the table. How about forty? And then, how about thirty? Twenty? Ten? Each time, God relents and changes his mind.

Moses: God's intent is to send Moses alone to face down Pharaoh but when Moses argues that he is not a good public speaker God relents and sends Aaron to go with him.

Jonah: God sends Jonah to announce to the citizens of Nineveh that they are about to be destroyed because of their wickedness, but when they hear his message they all repent and change their ways and God decides not to destroy them after all. Jonah isn't even surprised. His response is: I knew you'd do that!

In fact, changing God's mind, is a constant theme among the prophets. Time after time they warn the people that God's anger has been kindled against them and God is intent on punishment but might change his mind if the people will only repent and change their evil ways.

So, the average reader or listener isn't all that surprised when we hear the storyteller tell us that God stumbles across Noah and, out of love and compassion, decides to change his mind. He will not destroy the entire creation, he will just clean it up. He will give the entire creation on earth a second chance after a thorough house cleaning.

And that house cleaning comes in the form of a great flood.

Water was the one thing that was constantly on the minds of the early People of God. In the Middle East water was their constant concern – too much or too little, either one was a disaster. It is the one thing that human life simply cannot live without and it is also one of the most dangerous and destructive things with which we have to contend.

On the one end of the spectrum is drought – not enough water and we die of starvation or dehydration. On the other end is too much water – tsunami or flood, and we drown. So we are not surprised when the cleaning comes via water.

I leave the details of the story to your own reading. It is a tale that sets the imagination racing with possibilities. The sounds, the smells, the work, the cabin fever. What would such a thing be like? The weeks of rain and the months of floating around -- waiting, waiting, waiting. And, then, finally, the end. The rain stops; the water begins to abate.

The numbers in the story are largely symbolic, not meant to be taken literally. It was the ancient near eastern way of saying "a long time" or "a lot of rain" or "a really long time." Kind of like people today use the word "ginormous." Five years ago no one had ever heard that word, today my spell checker didn't even highlight it. It's part of our common language and it just means, "really, really big."

DRY AT LAST

So, after a really long time and whole lot of rain… things finally dry out.

There are several false starts when things ought to be dried out but aren't yet. And then, finally, Noah sends out a dove and the dove doesn't come back, which means it has found a place to build its home and the land is finally dry.

Noah airs out the ark for seven days and then, once again, does as God commands, and brings everyone and everything out of the ark onto dry land.

(Mt. Ararat is not mentioned. In fact, nothing is said about where any of this happens. It just happens.)

Noah takes some perfect animals – apparently offspring of those which he took aboard – and makes a sacrifice to God as a thank offering for bringing him and his family through the deluge.

God smells the offering and it smells good to him and he is pleased and knows he has done the right thing and God ends the story by, of all things, singing a little song:

Here is the gift to you I give
The evening and the dawn
For as long as the earth shall live
The seasons shall go on.

The final event in the story, before God kind of lets them go on about their business, comes in chapter 9 when he creates a covenant between himself and the human race with Noah serving as our proxy. God promises that never again will the earth be destroyed by a flood. And to remind himself of his promise, he places his bow in the sky. That way, whenever it rains, God will see his bow and remember to turn off the faucet.

And then God kind of backs away and lets the family get on with the business of repopulating the earth.

The story which began with evil, wickedness, corruption, violence and the grief they have caused, the story that began with a resolution to destroy has, in fact, ended not with destruction but with re-creation, with new beginnings and a second chance for human kind.

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

The story of Noah does not contain a single theme or lesson that we can take away. It explores several and it challenges us at several different levels.

It challenges us to understand sin, wickedness and evil as God understands them, in terms of violence and the kind of corrupting destroying influence that violence wrecks upon our culture and our relationships with God and each other.

It challenges our understanding of ourselves and God in terms of law and grace. If God can, out of grace and love for us, change his mind, then can we not do as much?

It challenges us to think about house cleaning. It calls us to examine our lives, the things we have created, and ask when it is time to wash them out of our lives and make a radical change.

And, finally, it asks us to consider the value of second chances, new beginnings and re-creation as forces for good, opportunities for reconciliation, and powers that can be put to use in our lives.

May God grant to us more Noah's and the new beginnings which such people as he provide.

AMEN

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. When was the first time you heard the story of Noah and the Flood? What was the first movie you ever saw it depicted in. (John Houston playing Noah in "The Bible" comes to mind.)
2. If you first heard it as a child, what questions did it raise for you? Did you wonder and worry about the children who might have died in the flood? Did questions of fairness arise?
3. At first this story seems to be about judgment and punishment without grace. Where does grace fit into the story?
4. Walter Brueggemann points out that in these early stories God is "a person" with real emotions and human like reactions to the things people do. How is this type of understanding God helpful or unhelpful? How has it changed?
5. The storyteller seems clear that violence is a sign of human sin and corruption. What does such a stance have to say to our culture? Do you agree with the storyteller? How does human violence get in the way of God's will for us?
6. The storyteller tells us four times that Noah "did as God commanded him." In fact, that seems to be the key to our understanding of Noah as a righteous and blameless man. What does that mean for us? What does God command us to do? Can you find some commandments from God in the Bible besides the "Big Ten?"
7. God changed his mind. What's up with that? If God changes his mind, what does that mean for us?
8. The story ends with the human race being given a second chance, a new start. Have you ever been given a second chance or a new start? Would you be willing to share that experience with the group?