

Genesis 6:5-9
February 14, 2010

South Plains

God's Great Catch

Some of you have heard me complaining about the thievery of the white-tailed deer and rabbits in my neighborhood. Last summer, the deer and rabbits decimated our green beans, ruined half the collards, cleaned out the first harvest of tomatoes and helped themselves liberally to other tasty vegetables that we had worked hard to grow. You could say gardening was a failure. For some reason, lima beans are not attractive to the wildlife. When the row of green beans was trimmed to nothing, the lima beans next to them were untouched. We enjoyed the limas.

Old man Noah and his family were the row of lima beans in God's creation, the one bright spot in creation. Everything else fell under the heading of "great wickedness." The evil among humankind was so profound that twice in the few verses we've heard this morning, the Lord says he is sorry he made us. He's determined to blot out from the face of the earth men, women, children, animals, creeping things and birds of the air. Everything will be destroyed ... except Noah. You could say the garden God created was a failure.

There are two ways to read this story. Some people read about Noah and the Flood and hear a moral lesson. The lesson is that when people are wicked, God

wipes them out. Therefore, we better be good. But, there's another way to read the story and with a different lesson. It's not just human beings who have a problem. God has a problem, and it's a huge dilemma for the Creator of the universe, the one who made people in his own image. The creature some believe is God's crowning achievement did not turn out very well.

If we read Genesis 6 – 9 this way, then our understanding of God may need some adjustment. God does not seem to have everything worked out in advance so that the divine spectator is just waiting for the plan to develop. God makes adjustments. By the same token, we can understand ourselves differently. In the first place, this story is not about us. We are not the main character in the book of Genesis. God is the hero, the main actor around whom all else revolves. What happens to the human race is a subplot. Our troubles are included as an illustration of how the mind and heart of the Lord God work. God is holy. Wickedness, we learn, causes God grief. The implication for us is that if we want to please God, we cannot lie and cheat and steal. We have some freedom to sin. But, the kind of corruption that makes the news every week simply will not be tolerated by our holy God. The nature of the Creator is goodness and love. We may be free to mess up, but we're not able to fix ourselves.

In the second place, we need to adjust our expectations about God. While the disobedience of Adam and Eve, the murder of Abel, and the widespread

evil across the face of the earth in Noah's time and in our own time might be seen as some failure on God's part, it does not stop God from being God. Our notions of perfection don't seem to apply. God has feelings of sorrow and grief. God even changes his mind about the wisdom of creating human beings. Genesis says, "The Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart (6:6)."

The ancient Greeks would say this is carrying the idea of God too far in the wrong direction. Perhaps the lesser gods like Zeus and Cupid could be angry or sorrowful, but the true God above all gods would be unmoved. A real God with a capital "G" would never change his mind. But if the Hebrew people are right in seeing the Creator of the universe with human-like emotions of sorrow and joy that cause a change in God, then the Greek idea of a perfect, impassive god who never changes is an idea that needs changing.

God is free to change. And, if God can change, then we also can change with God's help. That's good news. Too often, our response to failure is to say, "Well, that's just human. That's the way I am, a poor, pitiful, unholy creature." You hear that when a spouse cheats or when we don't tell the truth. It's the typical response of someone who feels like they can never climb out of the hole they have dug for themselves. But, if we are made in the image of the One who is truly free, then we may receive God's freedom ourselves.

Granted, it's a limited freedom. We are, after all, limited in strength, imperfect in our ability to think straight every time, and we don't live forever. We sin, and we disappoint our Maker. Nevertheless, by the grace of God, we are free to make better decisions and to rise above our limitations. That's the good news of the gospel. In the traditional language of faith, we can repent and get a fresh start by the grace of God.

Peter was a fisherman who did not always have a great catch. Anybody who's ever wet a line knows what it's like to fish and fish and catch nothing. Jesus corrected that. He sent Peter back out in his boat to fish a second time. Peter knew the fish weren't there, but he went anyway because he liked what Jesus had been saying. When he cast his net and it came back bursting with fish, that's when Peter became a disciple. Peter had a nice catch that day. God had a great catch in Peter.

The most important characteristic of God revealed in the story of Noah and the flood is God's persistence. The first reaction of God to the evil he saw on the earth was, in the words of Genesis, "to blot out from the earth the human beings (6:7)." We are God's problem. One solution is to get rid of the problem. Right after this verse, however, comes one of most significant conjunctions in scripture. Verse 8 says, "But ... Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord."

The logical solution may be to wipe out humanity except that God liked Noah, despite his humanity. Noah

is described as “righteous” and “blameless (6:9).” I don’t think that means Noah was perfect. Later on in chapter nine, he gets stinking drunk. But, the drinking aside, God likes Noah. That’s kind of how grace works. God doesn’t like us because we’re perfect. God just likes us.

Because God favors Noah, he comes up with a plan that will not scrap humanity completely. God will save the human race through Noah and attempt the greatest “do over” the world has ever seen. By the time last Sunday night was over, Peyton Manning and the Indianapolis Colts were wishing they could have a “do over” for some of the plays in the Super Bowl. It won’t happen. By the grace of God, however, God will re-start the project to create humanity in God’s own image. Noah is the cosmic example of the parable of the single lost sheep. For the sake of one person, the Creator of heaven and earth will start over and save humanity.

God will stick with us, even when the creek does rise. And when the waters recede and Noah’s ark has landed safely, God makes the ultimate commitment never again to send a flood to destroy the earth. That’s a promise worth remembering as these snows start melting. The flood sets the pattern for the history of God’s relationship with creation. There will be consequences for sin and evil, and the punishments will be severe. Nevertheless, God does not give up on us. God makes a way through the waters of the flood, through the waters of the Red Sea, through the River Jordan, and through Calvary.

God continues to make a way for us. The way is open for us to imitate God and repent, to change our mind and to change our ways. The future of South Plains is open. God is making a way for us. We can count on God’s persistence to repair this crazy creation and to keep opening salvation for the church. Sometimes the storms get rough and the water gets high, and we’re up to our eyeballs in trouble. The good news is that God is a saving God, a rescuing God.

Noah is God’s great catch in Genesis. Like the great catch of fish in Luke’s Gospel, the results are more than Noah and Peter could imagine. What God is doing in South Plains and what God will do for you and me is also more than we can imagine. The one thing we can know is the dogged persistence of God in saving creation and saving us.

Just when we think we’ve got God figured out. Whether we think like Pat Robertson that God is a moralistic old judge about to bring down the hammer on the wicked and wipe them out with a flood and earthquake. Or, whether we think of God as an idea, an abstraction that some find useful for teaching kindness and love. Just when we think we’ve God pegged, God changes his mind, changes his plans (and yes, changes our plans too), so that God makes a way to save.

God is not the implacable force of nature that requires us to be good or else. God is the gardener who

bends creation to benefit us, who tames the unruly nature of humanity to reflect his love and justice, the One who saves. Always, the God who saves.