

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

The Rev. Jonathan Gibson

“Not Facts First, Truth First”

Holy Communion
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The Text: Genesis 6: 9 -13

9 These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God. 10 And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

11 Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. 12 And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. 13 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.'

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G. K. Chesterton, an English author of the 19th century applied the following principle to his writing: “Not facts first, truth first.”

These five words are so important when approaching a passage like the one we will be considering this week and in the ensuing three weeks. This is especially so given the materialistic world in which we live. Facts and truth are not synonymous words and we often use them interchangeably. We can find it difficult to distinguish between fact and truth. The difference between fact and truth is essential if we are to understand rightly the story we have here in Genesis 6.

A fairy tale can be more true than a realistic novel by one of any number of contemporary authors. In this deconstructionist age where we are losing, or have already lost the category of truth; a realistic novel could be something that is purely in the author's head,

stemming from his or her angst, the result of his or her own hang-ups. It can be a complete fabrication of his or her own distorted, self centred, subjectivist view of the universe. This would be called realistic because it speaks about all sorts of perversions that might affect other people. Harlequin Romance novels would be a clear expression of this kind of writing . The realism of this kind of novel centres around our identification with the experiences of the author. Or should I say our desire to escape into their experiences. None the less, the thing is the product of that one solitary ego.

Now a fairy tale might tell of something that is perennially true, touching all ages and all cultures and people. They can talk about betrayal, love, honour, deception, and sacrifice. There may be a happy ending.

Not facts first but truth is something that we see sanctified by Christ himself in his parables. Think of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Possibly the son is not factual at all. There is no specific son or waiting father or resentful brother. It was a story, not people existing as fact. So although the story is not literally true it is archetypically true. We can all relate to the Prodigal Son, the father and the resentful brother. This is because we have in our lives at one time or another been perhaps each of these three characters. Therefore this is a story that speaks to every generation. It is true but not necessarily factual.

Now when it comes to the stories that we have in Genesis 6 and 7 pertaining to the flood it is helpful to keep Chesterton's phrase "Not facts first, truth first" in mind." It is not the facts of this story that are of primary importance. Here is a story that is perennially true. There is some event behind it that is factual but that is not where we need to focus our attention. For today, what we want to do is consider the two perennial truths that we discover in the story that I want to take time to consider now.

We see in this passage a clear expression of the character of the faithful person as well as gaining insight into the character of those who choose to walk apart from God and are therefore faithless. Like a fairy tale, it speaks to us of a truth that is timeless. And it is this that I think is most important when considering this most famous of Bible stories.

1. The Character of the Faithful

In an economy of words we learn something integral about Noah's character in verse 9. He was a righteous and blameless man who walked with God.

"These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God."

Scripture shows us something that is very interesting. While it is true that world events are of great importance, and the Old and New Testaments never dismiss this, the Bible also repeatedly narrows the focus down onto individuals. We see that here in chapter 6. Last week we saw the big picture, as we considered the civilization in which Noah lived. As we will see now over the next couple of chapters, the attention is given to this one man, his family of eight and a boat load of the clan's pets.

Do not lose sight of how significant this is. The names and actions of individual people truly matter to God. 2nd Chronicles 16:9 says:

"For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him."

This is a truth that we see clearly illustrated in the example of Noah. So what are the truths that we learn from considering Noah as we see him as one who received strong support from God? There are three. Noah was a righteous man. Noah was a blameless man. Noah was a man who walked with God.

i) Noah was a Righteous Man:

We are told that he was a righteous man. Now often times when people read this they think this means that he was a good man and God showed him favour because of his goodness. And yet if we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture we read over in Romans 3 these words, quoting from the psalms:

"None is righteous, no, not one;
11 no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one."

Is there a seeming contradiction here? I don't think so. Jesus said "Only God is good (Luke 18.19). Therefore the only good deeds in God's sight are the ones God does. If this is so, Noah's righteousness cannot refer to his goodness. Turning over to Hebrews 11:7, we see that righteousness means something else.

7 By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

Do you see what precedes the righteousness we have been considering? It is Noah's faith in God. In verse six of Hebrews 11 we read:

"without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

It is as we believe in God what we are able to please God. It was this that set Noah apart in his generation. His faith in God resulted in Noah becoming an heir of righteousness. The reward for those who seek God is righteousness. This is not a righteousness of our own but the righteousness that God imparts to us. It is God's own righteousness. This is why Paul says that no one is righteous. We have no righteousness in ourselves but only the righteousness that we receive from God. This is put most succinctly in the New Testament when Paul says:

"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5.21).

The righteousness of all believers is not of their own creation but the reward of faith.

ii) Noah was a Blameless Man

Not only are we told that Noah was righteous we also read he was blameless in his generation. The closest word we have for this in English is the word "whole." Noah was a whole person in a broken world. This does not mean he was perfect but it does mean that he was living a life that was integrated. Wholeness is the fruit of righteousness. This is such an important thing for us to consider. At

times we live the Christian life believing more in ourselves than in God. And yet when we do this we are repeatedly disappointed by ourselves and by others. However when we are centred in Christ, we are able to live with a new freedom. When we do wrong we are readily able to admit our mistakes and sins because we know that we have no righteousness in ourselves. When others hurt us we choose not to harbour grudges. Again the reason for this is clear, they have no righteousness in themselves. As we choose to bring our sin and the sin of others to the cross and leave it there, the focus is directed away from our wrong doing or the wrong doing of others. Instead our focus is on Jesus and we are able to claim his forgiveness and declare that in his sight we are predestined to be holy and blameless.

What freedom there is for us when we can live in this place because we do not need to justify ourselves but trust only in the justification that Jesus Christ can give to us. When this is the place from which we live, we are able to know what it means to be blameless, to be whole.

iii) Noah was a man who walked with God:

What was the result of Noah's righteous faith and blamelessness? He walked with God. What a clear expression of this kind of intimacy. Do you know that such intimacy can be experienced by us today? As we live, not with a self assurance, but with a Christ imparted assurance, we can know a confidence and trust that is able to withstand the pressures that we face all around.

St. Paul in Philippians 4 talks about the grace imparted to us when we walk with God. He writes:

11 I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 12 I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

As Paul walked with Jesus and as we do the same we can know the inner strength that he alone can give us. It is the fruit of a life where we freely admit we have no righteousness of our own and grow in living as those who are being made whole and blameless by Christ. Such a life is one that with Paul can celebrate: I can do all things through him who strengthens me!

As we have considered many times before in our study of Scripture, the life of faith is lived not in some sort of isolation from the world but in very real contact with it. And what does that passage have to say to us about the character of the world that is walks apart from God because it chooses to lives faithlessly?

2. The Character of the Faithless:

11 Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. 12 And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. 13 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.

Notice how there is the repeated use of the words violence and corruption. What can be more contrary to the blameless wholeness of Noah than the corruption spoken of here. Why does such violence and corruption happen?

Here is the pattern humans follow. People are by nature and creation fully dependent beings. We must depend upon God for our life, our breath, our activity, our intelligence, our power of choice and everything we do. We are the most dependent of creatures, even more so than the animals. We lack even the instincts which animals have. Yet, fallen man denies this most important point of his life and is forever trying to assert his ability to do everything himself. "I'd rather do it myself!" That is the slogan of humanity and always has been. But when we attempt it, we soon have everything in such a terrible state that it can no longer be controlled. We lack the rationale, the intelligence, the knowledge to control. We delude ourselves into thinking that we have the ability to control our lives and, as a result, it soon gets into a state beyond control. Nature (including human nature) goes out of control. The delicate balance of life is tilted beyond the critical point, and then a collapse occurs. This has proved again and again to be true in the history of civilization and, occasionally, as we have in this account, of nature itself. It may well be that the Flood was brought about by man's intemperate misuse of elemental forces, that he misused his power over nature and tripped the balance in a delicate scale, which resulted in the collapse of certain elemental forces that brought about the Flood.

How pertinent this is to our own day as we think increasingly about our relation to the created world. There is much talk about climate

change and as we think about this topic from a theological perspective, do we perhaps need to keep in mind what we read here in Genesis 6. We know that the whole of creation is affected by the result of human disobedience and self centred sufficiency. As we consider how we are to live in the world we have placed before us this morning a text that is not primarily concerned with facts but truth.

The truth is that in every generation God is looking for men and women who will consider how they will live. As we will see next week when we consider the rest of chapter 6 and then move into chapter 7, it is a few people who truly take to heart an awareness of how dependent we are upon God and interdependent upon the created order. It is this theme of dependence and interdependence of which psalm 104 speaks with such poetic clarity. As we choose to live this way we need to understand that the judgment of which verse 13 speaks is God's judgment alone and not ours. This will become more clear when we look at the ark next week. We are in no way to be a judgmental people but rather those who are walking in such intimacy with God that he will choose to work out his purposes through us because he sees that our faith is creating a people who are whole and blameless as we walk nearer to him in an age that has chosen a different path.

May your faith be strengthened through this study of God's word as you know his righteous wholeness so that you can walk intimately with him.

Amen

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