

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

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The Balance of Grace and Justice

The Text: Genesis 7

7 Then the LORD said to Noah, 'Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. ² Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; ³ and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth. ⁴ For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.' ⁵ And Noah did all that the LORD had commanded him.

6 Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters came on the earth. ⁷ And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood. ⁸ Of clean animals, and of animals that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground, ⁹ two and two, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God had commanded Noah. ¹⁰ And after seven days the waters of the flood came on the earth.

11 In the six-hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened.

¹² The rain fell on the earth for forty days and forty nights. ¹³ On the

very same day Noah with his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons, entered the ark,¹⁴ they and every wild animal of every kind, and all domestic animals of every kind, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every bird of every kind—every bird, every winged creature.¹⁵ They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life.¹⁶ And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him; and the LORD shut him in.

17 The flood continued for forty days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth.¹⁸ The waters swelled and increased greatly on the earth; and the ark floated on the face of the waters.¹⁹ The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered;²⁰ the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep.²¹ And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings;²² everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died.²³ He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark.²⁴ And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred and fifty days.

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As we turn to the seventh chapter of Genesis I want to remind you of the quote we had from G.K. Chesterton a couple of weeks ago. "Not facts first, truth first." These words are particularly apt as we consider the Flood Narrative found here in chapter 7. There are those who discredit the story as mere myth because it is claimed that there could never have been a flood the enveloped the whole earth as we have described in these verses. Therefore the story cannot be taken seriously as historical. And while we need to concede that there is a degree of uncertainty about the extent of the flood, we can maintain that this story is rooted in an event in the past that actually did happen. When reference is made to the earth, we need not interpret this to mean the globe in its entirety. Rather it can refer to a localized flood that was dramatic in the devastation it wrought and was so

memorable that it was recorded, not only in Genesis, but in other near eastern traditions such as the Egyptian and Babylonian flood narratives.

It is worth noting that in the mid-1990s geologists and oceanographers from Columbia University in New York City began investigating a huge, catastrophic flood in the region of the Black Sea. Their findings indicate that in about 5500 B.C. there was a sudden rise in water level in the Mediterranean, which brought a thunderous waterfall through the Bosphorus Strait and into the Black Sea. Over the course of a year, they speculate, it flooded out 60,000 square miles of land and raised the water level of the Black Sea approximately five hundred feet. Prior to this time the Black Sea was a fresh water sea (as the fossils at the original beach level indicate). As the salt water poured in from the Mediterranean, "the sea's surface must have risen a foot a day for perhaps 100 days at the height of the flood. For that to occur, torrents of water must have poured through the Bosphorus into the Black Sea at a rate some 400 times that of Niagara Falls."¹

Of course we need to understand that this is a theory and not something that can be proven absolutely. However it does allow for a correlation between what we read in the Scripture with an area of scientific discovery that has formed an hypothesis, suggesting a catastrophic flood some 5,500 years ago. That they have located this in Turkey is interesting because this is where the mountains of Ararat is located. We read in Genesis 8:4:

"and on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat."

By beginning this morning's sermon with this reference to a probable flood, in what is Modern Day Turkey, I want to underscore that there is a factual event behind the flood narrative in Genesis. However, it is not the fact of the flood that we want to consider as of foremost importance. Rather it is the truth of the story as found in Genesis

¹ The findings of team leaders W.B.F. Ryan and W.C. Pittman of Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory in Palisades, New York, were reported in the New York Times on Dec 17, 1996 (Section C1) and were published in a book Noah's Flood (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1999).

seven that is to be our primary concern. It is to a consideration of this discussion that I want to turn to now.

As we look at this story in this way there are three things that I want to show you.

1. Old Testament stories, like the Flood narrative, are to be understood in light of their New Testament interpretation.
2. As we look at this particular story we see that it depicts God's love as characterized the balance between grace and justice.
3. Because God's justice is not as understood as is the quality of grace I want to take some time teaching you that his justice is as important as grace even though it is subordinate to grace.

1. The Flood Narrative as interpreted by the New Testament:

As we look to this question of the truth found within this story, we need to interpret the flood narrative by reference to what the New Testament teaches us about this story. As Christians it is helpful for us to remember that if there is a New Testament reference to an Old Testament story, it is the New Testament understanding that is to inform how we make sense of the Old Testament text.

When it comes to the story of the Flood, the New Testament teaches us that this narrative is a foreshadowing of the final judgment and the twin themes that are in mind here are of grace and judgment. This is most clearly articulated in 2 Peter 2 and 3. There we read:

"then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment"

Here Peter is clear that there is a distinction between the righteous and the ungodly. The godly are not spared from the trial that is the result of living in the world and the trial that will ensue at the time of the Second Coming. However God is able to rescue them from the trial, as Noah was spared from the flood. At the same time Peter looks to the day when those who are ungodly will face the Day of Judgment. This is where it is helpful for us to understand that the story of the flood is not just a metaphor. Rather it points to an event in the distant

past that happened in space and time. Likewise when we think of the Day of Judgment, this is not metaphorical, but rather is to be understood literally, as an event that will happen in space and time at some future date.

Peter also cautions us not to allow the delay of the Judgment to result in our finding ourselves among the scoffers. Please turn to 3.9:

⁹ The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

Just as the flood resulted in a new beginning for those who were spared, this too will be the result flowing from the final judgment as Peter clearly states in verse 13:

“But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.”

This is a wonderful thought to ponder. In the present world it is unrighteousness that is at home and it takes multiple forms. Perhaps nothing has made this clearer for us in Alberta in the past eight days than the murder of Emily Joy Stauffer last Saturday afternoon in Edson as she was walking on a wooded path east of the town. Here was a teen who loved to play the piano and violin, read books and study the Bible. Her father, a Baptist pastor, mother and three surviving siblings are experiencing at the most visceral level the effects of a world where unrighteousness is at home.

We can think of countless other examples of this, where the world is wrong in its orientation and values. Why is this so? Because as of yet righteousness is not at home.

As Christians we are sojourners in this world, aliens because our citizenship is elsewhere. We look to the day when all forms of wickedness, both within ourselves and in the larger world will be eradicated and righteousness will be at home.

Because of this unimaginable and glorious future Peter says that the bottom line is that this is to impact the way we live in the present:

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness?

This is what motivates us to live in holiness and godliness. We believe the day is coming when the righteousness of God will be all in all, where grace and justice will be in perfect balance. Such a profession of faith inspires us now to live as we will one day fully be.

The flood narrative teaches us that God's justice and grace are real. The full force and manifestation of the presence of these twin virtues will only be made known at the end of the present age. Therefore our response should not be one of fear but godliness. God does not desire to scare us by threats of judgment but to win us by acts of love, mercy and grace. Indeed his grace is most strikingly evident when set in contrast to the darkness and gloom of a sinful world racing toward its perilous doom.

We see this in an overarching way in the text for this morning when we see the contrast between how Noah and his family are treated and those who will be subject to God's judgment. The former eight and the multiple species of animals encounter God's grace. We read at verse 15:

"They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life. ¹⁶ And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him; and the LORD shut him in."

The Lord is the one who secured them and thus protected them. We believe that this is also true for us who are in Christ. Because of what Jesus has done to pay for the penalty of our sin, we are no longer under judgment but grace. I find it helpful to keep this image of being shut in by God in mind as I consider what it means to live under grace. The Church is like the Ark and as we trust in the mercy of Jesus Christ there is a wonderful way that we are protected by God and kept safe.

In his first letter Peter considers this idea when he says in verse 5 of chapter 1:

5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Do you see the correlation here with Genesis 7:15? In the present we are shut in, or as it is described here "guarded through faith for a salvation that will be revealed." This is parallel to what Noah and the zoo experienced. While in the Ark they were guarded for the salvation that was then made clear to them upon leaving the Ark. For us living in light of the Cross and Resurrection we can have an assurance that teaches us that while we have to weather the flood waters of this present world, we are being guarded and shut-in by God in the present and will be delivered. Here is a clear articulation of the grace of God.

Contrast this with the judgment which we see evidenced in the devastating effect of the flood. There are many people who question how God could allow such a thing to happen if he is love. Yet we need to consider that this is a love that is pure, true, holy, wise, perfect and all knowing. Just as grace is the fullest manifestation of the love of God, his judgment, while subordinate to God's grace, is also of great importance in expressing the love of God. Because people find the idea of God's justice so difficult to understand I will take the rest of the sermon to offer an explanation of what is meant by God's justice.

(The reflections I am about to share with you are from the writing of John Walton, who teaches Old Testament at Wheaton Graduate School and College.)²

There are two things I want to consider about God's justice.

1. The importance of checks and balances
2. The times when chaos unleashes chaos.

Let us now look at each of these in turn.

1. The importance of checks and balances

When we consider the idea of justice, in relation to the judicial system, for it to be just and fair, a series of checks and balances needs to be

²John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2001) Pages 334-336

exercised by both the police and the courts. When a judiciary is not run in a way where the checks and balances of the law are applied fairly, the result is corruption and the unleashing of terrible tyrannies.

This is something we also see exercised in the Stock Market. Because this is so pertinent to our present day, I want to give an illustration more developed than the judiciary example to make my point.

The economy maintains a complicated equilibrium based on thousands of factors. The stock market is a reflection of the economy because it reacts to the factors that drive the economy. There are periods of "bull market" when there is a lot of buying and the values of stocks are driven up, and there are periods of "bear market" when the market is selling off and prices are going down. Both types of markets have economic advantages, but neither is good in the extreme. Long-running bear or bull markets lead analysts to expect "market adjustments" because that is how the ebb and flow of the economy typically works. In this way, a market-driven economy has built-in checks and balances.

If we can transfer ideas such as these to theology, we get a good idea of the picture of God presented here in Genesis 7. God is the One who operates a system of checks and balances. There is a certain range of variation that is possible in the domain of human behavior. As with the stock market, this range of equilibrium is based on thousands of factors. When a situation needs a "market adjustment," God is responsible for doing that. Just as the chairman of the Federal Reserve oversees the economy in the USA and initiates certain adjustments as he deems necessary to sustain a healthy economy, so God oversees the world. There are times when more drastic action needs to be taken because of the nature of the economic or world situation.

Therefore we can understand that while the actions of the Congress and President to pass into law a seven hundred billion bill to attempt to bring a correction the economy and Stock Market was a drastic action, it was deemed necessary to re-establish an equilibrium to the markets. Whether it will work is still to be seen, as the next few days will make clearer to us all.

This is how I would like you to understand the judgment of God as depicted here in Genesis seven. The world was in such a state of chaos and confusion that God had to take drastic action to restore order and equilibrium.

Sometimes we feel that our lives, our country, or our world have gotten out of balance, and we wonder where the checks and balances are in the system. How far will God let things go before he steps in as the auditor general? The truth is, there are far too many factors that we can never be aware of for us to know when God should step in. Part of his transcendent wisdom is associated with his ability to manage all of those factors and do what needs to be done at precisely the time it needs to be done. Passages like the Flood narrative should help strengthen our faith that God is indeed functioning at the helm of this checks and balance system. We rest secure in the hands of God and trust his timing.

This is why Jesus says, in passages like Mark 13:32: "But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

We can appreciate that the reason the Second Coming has not yet occurred, is in part because the conditions are not yet as they need to be for such a drastic intervention. But we trust God with this ultimate judgment as we continue to trust in his dealing with the lesser judgments in the present that allow for the corrections needed to restore a sense of equilibrium.

May I suggest this very thing that is happening in the Anglican Communion today as we go through this very trying season in our collective life. God is at work restoring an equilibrium that is needed, because of the disproportionate number of leaders in North America who no longer hold to a classically Anglican and orthodox faith. For a long time this has been allowed to carry on unchecked and so there is an imbalance. In the last decade we see a movement rising that I believe originates with God that will bring a correction to this imbalance.

2. Chaos unleashing chaos

But not only does justice have to do with checks and balances, sometime chaos needs to be unleashed on chaos.

"I have warned you twice now about hitting your little brother. It is unacceptable behavior. Perhaps this will help you remember and control yourself."

With those preliminary remarks, a father spans his son. Now there is an argument to be made which questions such a reaction. What is

being taught when a father or mother spans a child as a way of discipline for hitting? In societal contexts, we follow the same logic in discussions of capital punishment. In its baldest form, the procedure is that we teach how bad killing is by killing those who do it.

This is the same sort of issue we encounter when we find God unleashing chaos in response to chaos. In each of these cases, the differences between the action of the one being punished and the one doing the punishment are in the areas of control and responsibility. The child who is in the habit of hitting his siblings is usually striking out in uncontrolled anger. The father who disciplines this child is responsible for the child's behavior and is seeking to discharge that responsibility in effective disciplinary actions. When he chooses to spank the child, then, it is not an act of uncontrolled anger but a controlled act of discipline. He is not trying to teach the child that physical responses are never valid. He is trying to teach self-control of violent physical aggressiveness in responding to others. If by spanking the father is acting out his violent physical aggression and is not under control, it is no longer discipline,- it is abuse.

In society, the murderer is likewise acting out his physical aggressions in reaction to any number of stimuli. Here the motivations may be more complex and require the expertise of the sociologist or the psychologist to do them justice. Society, nevertheless, has the responsibility of maintaining the peace and protecting the rights and welfare of its citizens. In some countries capital punishment is understood as a means to this end. The laws that require due process are predicated on the belief that though society's response may result in death, just like the criminal's actions did, that response is necessary for society to discharge its responsibility. If the execution of capital punishment is not a controlled, thoughtful process but simply a tool of repression and tyranny, it is no longer justifiable. It has become equal to the murder as a selfish, vindictive act of wanton violence.

When God unleashes the chaos of the deluge as punishment for the chaos of society's violence, his action is likewise distinguished by control and responsibility. God has the responsibility of caring for his creation. That cannot be discharged by simply letting sin run amok. Responsibility implies response. In contrast to the uncontrolled violence that characterized the world at the time of the flood, the chaos unleashed by God is totally under his control and is effectively accomplishing his will.

Yet this is one of the most difficult aspects of God's character for people to accept. Above and beyond the suffering they see in the world, people look at events like the Flood or the tenth plague or the decimation of the Canaanites and perch on the dichotomy that the loving God in the New Testament is a harsh, judgmental God in the Old Testament.

And yet when we see the continuation between what we have of judgment in the Old Testament with its climax in the Cross of Jesus Christ we see that grace and judgment are held together in this remarkable tension. The ultimate act of God using chaos to deal with chaos is the crucifixion of Jesus and he does this because there is a need to restore an equilibrium, which although not fully understood by us is understood by God.

But such acts of justice are ultimately to result in acts of restoration. This is a theme we will turn to next week as we move into the eighth chapter.

Conclusion:

This is not a sermon that has a clear application in terms of action and this is not its intention. Rather what I have said this morning has been an attempt, to help you better understand a passage that has been fraught with misunderstanding.

By referring to the hypothesis of the catastrophic flood some 5,500 years ago I wanted to show you that this event is one that has scientific theory that supports it as an historical event. By looking to what Peter teaches us about the truth of the flood narrative I provided a way to show that just as the Second Coming will be the fullest expression of God's grace and justice, so too the flood narrative helps us to better understand God's grace as his shutting in those who believe in him by faith. His justice is the other side of God's love, whereby through series of checks and balances and through allowing chaos to unleash chaos it provides a way for equilibrium to be restored when the world has devolved into confusion and godlessness.

With these ideas in mind I suggested we can better interpret what is happening in the Anglican Communion today as God is at working reforming His church.

