

Sermon for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, January 15, 2017

Solemn Evensong

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year 1: Genesis 7:1–23, John 4:27–42; Matthew 11:25–30*

The Genesis reading tonight is all of the seventh chapter of Genesis. But I want to begin by reading four verses from the sixth chapter that tell us why God did what he did. The translation is by Professor Robert Alter, who teaches at the University of California, Berkeley:

And the Lord saw that the evil of the human creature was great on the earth and that every scheme of his heart's devising was only perpetually evil. And the Lord regretted having made the human on earth and was grieved to the heart. And the Lord said, "I will wipe out the human race I created from the face of the earth, from human to cattle to crawling thing to the fowl of the heavens, for I regret that I made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.¹

In his footnote to these verses, Professor Alter writes, "In the Bible the heart is usually thought of as the seat of intelligence, only occasionally as the seat of emotion . . . But man's evil heart is pointedly meant to stand in

¹ Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1996), 28.

contrast to God's grieving heart (the same Hebrew word) in the next verse."²

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann in his commentary on Genesis, when he gets to the story of Joseph, the one who wore a robe of many colors, remarks that Joseph's story is another new beginning. This new beginning shapes the narrative of the rest of the book Genesis³ and also the narrative of the next book of the Bible, Exodus, the story of how the Hebrew people left the land of Egypt and came to a new home.⁴ At the end of that story, God will have revealed himself to the Hebrew people in a new way in a new covenant, but it was with Noah that God made the first covenant.⁵

The story of Noah is also another beginning for humankind. Tomorrow night we will hear the familiar end of the story. The narrative is really about God, not Noah. Again, Alter's translation:

² Ibid.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) 298.

⁴ Ibid., 380.

⁵ Ibid, 288–89.

And God spoke to Noah saying, “Go out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and your sons’ wives, with you . . . And Noah went out, his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives with him. Every beast, every crawling thing, and every fowl, everything that stirs on the earth . . . And Noah built an altar to the Lord and he took from every clean cattle and every clean fowl and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And the Lord smelled the fragrant odor and the Lord said in His heart, ‘I will not again damn the soil on humankind’s score. For the devising of the human heart are evil from youth. And I will not again strike down all living things as I did.’ ”⁶

In chapter nine, we hear of God’s promises for the future and of the rainbow.⁷ It’s worth remembering that in Genesis the rainbow is for God to remember his promise.

Although I’m sure I’ve read it and heard it many times, last Wednesday night at Evening Prayer I realized that the hymn “How firm a foundation” is taken from Isaiah. One example:

⁶ Genesis 8:16–21.

⁷ Genesis 9:8–17.

*Fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.*⁸

Some takeaways from all of this. First, it's possible for a person to do good in an evil time. In his generation Noah was that human who did good.

Second, in Hebrew Scriptures God's condemnation is in the days of this life. In the New Testament, judgment is in the life of the world to come.

Third, it is God who decides what humankind can know about God and about the creation of which we are a part.

Fourth, as Father Pete Powell very helpfully reminded me not so many Sundays ago, God can change God's mind—and that's why we pray.

Finally, I haven't read Professor Phyllis Trible's book, *Texts of Terror*.⁹ It's about four women in the Old Testament, Hagar, Tamar, an unnamed concubine,

⁸ Isaiah 41:10.

⁹ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (New York: Fortress Press, 1984).

and the daughter of Jephthah—and the cruel evil done to them. Tribble confronts us with many questions, among them, “Why evil?” and “Where was God?” I can’t answer either of those hard questions directly. But I do have faith in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come with those we love.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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