

Genesis 8

In the last two articles we examined God's reasons for the flood (humanity had become evil and all the thoughts of their hearts were wicked) and the flood itself destroyed all life other than Noah, his family and the animals on the ark. The theology behind these stories was that God desired to start over; to create, in today's jargon, humanity 2.0. In the process God had almost returned creation to its beginnings when the waters covered the earth and the earth was without shape and form. It is at this point that we rejoin the story.

The writer begins by stating that "*God remembered Noah and all the wild and domestic animals that were with him on the ark.*" The term *remember* here does not mean that God had forgotten them, like we forget about something we have left in the oven. To *remember* means to act in accordance with one's promises. Thus, when God remembers, God keeps God's promises, firstly by seeing Noah and his family safely through the waters and returning them to dry land and secondly, by acting upon the chaos of the flood in the same way God acted upon it in the original act of creation; by letting loose God's wind/spirit over the face of the deep, pushing the waters back to their appropriate places and bringing order once again to creation.

The story then, once again, meshes the two Noah traditions. One tradition offers a timeline for the drying of the earth that takes one hundred and fifty days and as the waters receded the ark came to rest on Mt. Ararat. Sometime later the rest of the mountain tops could be seen. To see if the earth has dried out Noah sends forth a raven who flies here and there until the ground is dried up. As a note, the landing of the boat on a mountain and the sending of the raven are integral parts of the Babylonian flood epic, the *Epic of Atrahasis* (1647-1626 BCE). A second tradition focuses on the forty days theme. After forty days Noah sends forth a dove, which, on its first flight returns empty beaked, then on its second flight brings back an olive branch and then on its third flight does not return at all. Only then does Noah remove the covering (the only time this is mentioned) from the ark and peer out. Finally, God tells Noah that he, his family and the animals can leave the ark. Their exit, "*by families*" insures us that order has been restored to God's creation.

Noah's response to his salvation is appropriate. He offers sacrifices, using some of the extra clean animals that he brought with him. God "*smells*" the odor of the sacrifices and even though God understands that human "*hearts are evil from their youth*", declares that God will never again destroy creation and that there will always be the seasons (again returning order to a chaotic world).

Reflection: As noted above, the Noah story has its origins in the Babylonian flood epics (the other flood story is contained in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*). It is likely that the Hebrews encountered these epics while they were in exile in Babylon. Rather than simply retell those earlier tales however, the Jewish community altered them to make theological declarations about God. These declarations include 1) God is faithful and does not forget humanity 2) God desires an orderly creation, meaning peaceful and harmonious 3) humanity tends to be unfaithful to God's plan for creation 4) however, humanity can, like Noah, be faithful if they so choose. These four declarations will form the central narrative of the rest of the scriptures.

Questions:

1. Have you ever had a time when you sensed that God "remembered" you? What was that like?
2. Does it make a difference to you that the Noah story may be based on earlier material? Why or why not?
3. How do you offer "sacrifices" to God in response to God's kindness toward you?