

Noah #1

Before and After the Flood

Or, It All Depends on How You Look

Something very strange happens after the great flood in Noah's day.

Let's look closely at what happens "before" and "after" the storm. Genesis 6 reports that the earth "became corrupt before God" and "filled with lawlessness" (Gen. 6:11). God is disappointed and gives up on humanity: "The Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his heart was nothing but evil all the time" (6:5). The forty-day flood comes, bringing death and devastation in its wake.

Noah emerges from his ark and offers a sacrifice to God, and then things take a very surprising turn. Now that the deluge is over, God seemingly has a change of heart and decides "never again to destroy every living being" (Gen. 8:21). The reason given, though, is baffling: "Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of man's heart are evil from his youth" (8:21). Whereas Genesis 6 suggests that God floods the earth because of humanity's sinfulness, Genesis 8 tells us that God commits never to flood the earth again . . . because of humanity's sinfulness. The reason for God sending one flood has now mysteriously become the reason for God *not* sending another.

Some scholars try to wriggle their way out of what seems like a contradiction by translating the Hebrew *ki* as "since" in chapter 6 but as "although" in chapter 8 (yielding "Never again will I doom the earth because of man, although the devisings of man's heart are evil from his youth"). Although this is a plausible rendering of the Hebrew (*ki* can have either meaning, though it usually means "since"), the text is much richer and more interesting if we wrestle with the paradox rather than attempting to dissolve it. How can humanity's problematic nature serve as grounds both for God's harsh judgment and for God's overwhelming mercy?

The text wants us to know that human nature has not changed after the flood — not, seemingly, will it in any eon we could recognize. What has changed after the flood is not human nature but God's attitude toward it. The very same shortcomings that had called forth doom and denunciation now elicit forbearance and generosity instead. Judgment gives way to mercy, condemnation to compassion. The crucial lesson is that the same attribute that we see as cause for reproach can often serve as a basis for forgiveness as well; this seems to be what God learns after the flood, and, as we shall see, it is something we should learn as well.

The same striking dynamic is at play in God's response to the Israelites after the sin of the Golden Calf. First, God bitterly condemns the Israelites three times for being "stiff-necked" (Exod. 32:9; 33:3,5). But then Moses appeals to God's mercy, and what is the basis of his plea? "Moses hastened to bow low to the ground in homage, and said, 'If I have gained your favor, O Lord, pray, let the Lord go in our midst, since this is a stiff-necked people. Pardon our iniquity and our sin and take us for your own'" (34:8-9). God is now being asked to forgive for the very reason God condemned. Here again, some scholars scramble — the *NRS* translation, for example, reads: "Pray, let the Lord go in our midst, even though this is a stiff-necked people."

Here too, though, the simple meaning is that the basis of condemnation is now appealed to as grounds for mercy instead. Whereas until this moment God had denounced, now God forgives. What has changed is not who and what the Israelites are; they remain just as sinful as before. What has changed, rather, is how God views the same persistent human failure. What is true of God's relationship with humanity as a whole is true of God's relationship with the Israelites in particular: If judgment is the only lens through which God sees the world, it has no future (nor should it). But God chooses otherwise, and sees the world through the lens of compassion and forbearance instead.

Imagine someone you know who struggles with impulse control. Some days you are tempted to write her off as totally hopeless, and maybe even to dismiss her as utterly unworthy of your concern or affection. But then there are moments when the very same deep failing