

Lesson 7

Genesis Chapter 9 & 10

In some ways, for people closely studying the early chapters of Genesis, the story of the Flood comes as a kind of catharsis. Rebellion in and out of Eden, the spread of wickedness throughout the earth, and the profound sadness that comes from knowing how all this grieved God does make us want to cry out for an end to it all and for a fresh start. In the account of Noah, who was a human being who still loved God more than he loved himself, we had reason to breathe a sigh of relief and hope. Perhaps with the earth washed clean of violence and with the continuation of human life through a righteous man and his family, we can expect better things. Surely the scene from Genesis 8 in which God was once again pleased by what He sees on earth (an echo of the "very good" of the first creation), evident in his delight in the aroma of Noah's sacrifice, gives us some basis for this hope.

Chapters 6-8 of Genesis, with their frequent use of language evocative of the first creation, prepared us for what we find in this lesson. We are hoping to see a renewal of the covenant that God graciously made with all creation. We expect that He will make it clear how He wants life on the renewed planet to be lived. And because God is Goodness Itself, we are counting on some demonstration of His deep, abiding, persistent love for man-the kind of love we have already seen in our study, which reaches down to man in his dependent, helpless condition and gives so much more than he deserves. We will not be disappointed.

That is, we won't be disappointed in God. But what about the humans? It's hard for us to forget that the problem in Eden was man's doing. Have men's hearts been washed clean by the Flood?

Chapter 9 & 10

- **Read Gen. 1:28-31 and Gen. 9:1-7. How are these two scenes similar and how are they different? What do you think explains the difference?**

In both scenes we see God pronouncing a blessing on human beings. Intimately associated with that blessing is a command to be fruitful. We must not miss this fact. When men are pleasing in God's sight (which is what it means to be "blessed" by God), His desire for them is to reproduce themselves. Why? It is because the earth was empty? No, it is because man is created in the image and likeness of God. Since He is the author of human life-the One Who thought of it and created it-then man's clearest reflection of Him will be to continue to love and create other human beings, which is a divine power he has from God.

Both scenes also include a reference to dominion. In the first, God grants man dominion over every living thing. In the second, this dominion has a new dimension-fear. The harmony of the first creation has been broken; now the living creatures will fear man as he exercises dominion over them. The fear of creatures for man will be a reminder to him that he is not who he thinks he is and not at all who he was meant to be. As painful as it is to experience this dread in animals, it is a great mercy to us. In our spiritual blindness, we can look very good in our own eyes. With the loss of grace in Eden, we simply cannot see the truth about ourselves. We have an amazing capacity to minimize our sin, forgetting our true destiny. A little bird hopping away from us in fear gives us a moment to see ourselves reflected in its eyes-we are not the holy creatures we were meant to be. In fact, we are scary. We need help.

In both scenes, there is a reference to food. In the first, man and beast will eat what grows out of the earth. In the second, man will eat the creatures (another reason for dread!). This is an intensifying of the break in the harmony of creation because of sin. Once the earth could easily have grown all the food that was necessary to sustain life; now, perhaps as a result of

the judgment of the Flood, which may have wiped out much of what grew in the ground, man will eat the animals as well to stay alive.

The significance of the differences between the two scenes reminds us that although God has taken the initiative to cleanse the earth of evil and make a fresh start, human existence is still under the just punishment of God. Sin and its devastating effects have not been completely rooted out of creation. Man should never get too comfortable in a world which is fallen.

- **Why do you suppose that when Cain feared that someone would kill him because he murdered Abel, God preserved his life, but in the renewed world, those who kill others will lose their lives?**

The prohibition against taking life, which is to be penalized by death, indicates the direction of human civilization. It reflects the reality of wickedness and the power of evil over the human heart. It is a response to the fact that violence and corruption spread so thoroughly in the human community at the dawn of history that God had to send the Flood to purge it. God cannot trust men to curb their appetite for violence. Now, in the renewed earth, He will use laws with drastic penalties to reign it in. We are to interpret this as a sober sign that whereas God left Cain to his own conscience, without requiring his life for his act of murder, now He must act with laws to preserve safety on earth.

- **In vs. 4, God prohibits the eating of the flesh of animals that has any blood in it. Why do you think that God announces this strong taboo on blood?**

This taboo on blood reflects the value of all life, both human and animal. Even though God permits man to eat animals, he is not thereby to be callous towards animal life. He is to continue to show respect for life, since it comes directly from the hand of God. Man, in his spiritual blindness, is subject to pride, in which he sees himself as the center of the universe. It is a short step from there to abusing elements in that universe to serve his own purposes. Prohibitions such as this keep that impulse in check.

- **God makes a covenant with Noah and his sons. What promise is God making to mankind in this covenant? What do you think is the significance of a promise like this (that is, what does God seem to want to communicate to mankind about Himself)?**

God promises never to blot out all life or to disturb the order on the earth by a flood again. He shows Himself to be desirous of being connected to His creation—all of it—in such a way as to create confidence in Him and peace among His creatures. He wants to be trusted as the loving Father that He is. The severe judgment on the earth in the Flood appears to have served God's purposes and will never happen again. Man does not have to live in perpetual fear of this kind of calamity. He should be able to understand from it that God is the just Judge of His creation. This should convince him to live in the light of that truth.

- **Why do you suppose God uses something in nature to be the sign of the covenant?**

God magnificently communicates Himself through what He has created. Not everything that can be known about Him is apparent in what He has made, but nature does make a very good start. "God speaks to man through the visible creation. The material cosmos is so presented to man's intelligence that he can read there traces of its Creator. Light and darkness, wind and fire, water and earth, the tree and its fruit speak of God and symbolize both His greatness and his nearness." (CCC 1147) God must choose to reveal Himself in order for man to truly know Him. By using the rainbow and by making a statement about what He promises to do, He gives man both kinds of knowledge, natural and supernatural. Man, who is body and soul, is perfectly suited to this kind of communication with God.

- **What potential temptation was there for man to have God so closely identify Himself with something beautiful in the sky? Why do you think God took that risk?**

Man, weakened by sin, has the potential to miss the messages God gives him. Was it possible that men would see the importance God attached to that beautiful rainbow and begin to worship it instead of God, Who created and used it? Certainly. We know for a fact that men regularly worshipped what God created instead of the Creator Himself. Nevertheless, God took that risk in order to communicate with man in a truly human way. As the Catechism says, "In human life, signs and symbols occupy an important place. As a being at once body and spirit, man expresses and perceives spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols. As a social being, man needs signs and symbols to communicate with others, through language, gestures, and actions. The same holds true for his relationship with God." (CCC 1146) In our human lives, we make use of natural and social symbols all the time. In fact, we can't imagine life without them. God, in the rainbow, joins Who He is and what He does to an element in nature that will have meaning to mortals. We call these actions "sacraments." Scripture is full of examples of God working this way among His people. The culmination, of course, is the Incarnation-God taking on the most profoundly human form of communication, flesh, to reveal to men Who He is. The sacramental nature of Catholic life is deeply rooted in this biblical truth about how God works among men, glimpsed first in the beautiful bow in Noah's sky.

- **The narrative makes it clear that it was from Noah and his sons that all people on earth, then and now, have descended. Interestingly, the scientific evidence from human DNA tells the same story. What are the social and spiritual implications of this fact?**

If all humans have descended from Noah and his family, we are reminded that the human community is really a family. We knew this at the time of the creation, and we are seeing it again here. The longing that men have for universal peace, the end to wars, and respect for human life and ways in every culture stems from this deep awareness that we are all related to each other and ought to live together in familial peace. In addition, of course, all men are God's children, even when their national religions have lost much of the truth about God that Noah and his family would have possessed. As the family of man spread out over the earth and through the centuries, various cultures may have preserved elements of the one truth about God even as they lost others. With additions and subtractions, with distortions and misunderstandings, those elements could have become the basis for various religions of the world. It is not difficult to imagine a process like that—a fracturing of the covenant story handed down through Noah's generation. The Church teaches that many non-Christian religions contain some of these elements of truth; it is the Christian gospel and the teaching of the Church that gives men the possibility of knowing and experiencing the fullness of the Truth (see CCC 842-845).

- **What kind of son does Ham appear to be (vs. 22)?**

It is difficult to know precisely the nature of Ham's offense against his father. Read Lev. 18:8-16 to see how the phrase "uncover nakedness" had sexual meaning for the Hebrews. This is quite possibly a reference to incest on the part of Ham. In Lev. 18:16, the nakedness of a brother's wife is called the brother's nakedness; could the nakedness of Noah be a reference to his wife's nakedness? In addition, when Noah awakes from sleep and realizes what has happened, he curses Canaan, not Ham. Would this perhaps be the son of that incestuous episode, which explains why the son and not the father is cursed?

A better question is "Why would Ham commit incest with his mother? What would he hope to gain?"

Ham, as the second son of Noah, perhaps sees opportunity to gain an advantage over his brothers in the post flood world. Shem, as the first-born would hold the pre-imminent position within the family. Perhaps Ham wants this position for himself.

There are seven deadly sins, but there are also three deadly tools: Money, Sex, and Power. Ham's Pride would lead him to manifest in an outward sign that HE would be the patriarch. How better to show Shem and Japheth that he was in charge by taking for himself the wife of the current patriarch? He used sex to try and take power.

Then why is Canaan called Noah's youngest son? Because Noah's wife is still his wife. What this suggests is that the commitment between man and woman where "the two shall become one" extends to their children, indeed we see later that if a man died childless, his brother or nearest relative was to take his wife and raise up children for him. This child would be counted as his brother's child (see Ruth).

- **What strength of character did Shem and Japheth show?**

A better translation of vs. 26 is "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem." This is the first time in the Bible that God is identified with the name of a man. Shem is set in a position of superiority over his brothers. Although little information is given about him, what can we assume was to be the rightful place of Shem and his sons among the descendants of Noah?

The picture in chapter 10 is one of slow but steady re-population of the earth. Of particular interest to us is the descendants of Shem and Ham.

Among Ham's descendants, we see the precursors of the five groups of people that became the enemies of Israel.

Cush's descendants became the Assyrians and Babylonians.

Mizraim's descendants became the Philistines.

Put's descendants became the Egyptians.

Canaan's descendants, the Canaanites, took over the promised land from Shem and his descendants.

Nimrod's name stands out as one who gained a certain ascendancy. The phrase "before the Lord" is not meant to suggest a relationship with God. It is used as a way of expressing the degree of his notoriety. Indeed Nimrod is identified as the first potentate on Earth, and the subject of our final lesson next week.

Of note of the descendants of Shem, is Eber. It was during his lifetime that the Tower of Babel is built and when the peoples were scattered, that is how the descendants were identified.