

“Starting Over”  
Genesis 6:5-8,13-18/2 Corinthians 5:16-21

As a culture, we are starting over.

With lessening restrictions on indoor gatherings and an increasing number of vaccinated neighbors, the great lockdown of COVID-19 is beginning to ease. All around us are signs of that transformation as Disneyland has reopened and plans for in-person graduation are being finalized. Major League Baseball has resumed play with fans present in the stands and middle seats are occupied on planes again. As a community of faith, we are hopeful of resuming worship inside our sanctuary in a few weeks, too, with a final decision to come soon. It’s all encouraging and while the continuing high number of positive tests mean that for the foreseeable future we will still wear masks and need social distancing, we are starting to come back. It feels good.

It’s against the backdrop of that cultural re-opening that we begin a sermon series today recalling the great Biblical moment of starting over. It comes early in the Book of Genesis and tells of a fateful decision by God and the faithfulness of a man named Noah. Many aspects of that story are familiar to us and our children: animals going on an ark two-by-two, a dove returning with an olive leaf in its beak, and a rainbow marking a divine promise. Yet accompanying those beloved aspects to the story are the troubling depictions of God being so angry that a devastating flood occurs and how there is no opportunity for the people to repent or change their ways; instead only one family survives. Thus, over the coming weeks, we will ponder that narrative in all its complexity for what it has to say to our ongoing life as believers and to this once-in-a-lifetime occurrence as our world starts up anew.

We begin today with the Biblical description of how bad conditions had become in creation. “The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth,” the narrator says “and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.” It certainly sounds like hyperbole to say that *every inclination... was only evil continually*, but the author is setting the stage for the startling word that follows. “And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to the heart.” God declares, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air.” My study Bible refers to that announcement and the events that follow as “God’s un-creation and re-creation of the world.”

It’s hard to appreciate fully the agony God felt in that moment, but we know of times when human beings choose to un-do their creation, too. The owner of a business comes to the realization that the economic landscape has changed to such a degree that she decides it is time to close things down. A couple who had high hopes on their wedding day gradually comes to the realization years later that the union cannot be salvaged and file for divorce. In such moments and others we reluctantly choose to start over. Such was the case for God long ago.

Had the story ended there not only would the Bible have been quite brief, but we would not be gathering—even remotely—on this day. Yet thankfully, the account does not conclude with God’s vow to blot out all creation as the writer goes on to say, “But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD.” Soon thereafter, a theophany occurs as God speaks to that man. “I have determined to make an end of all flesh,” the Lord says to him, “for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.” God then gives the man the job of creating an ark, offering details about building materials and dimensions. The Creator tells of the intent to send a great flood declaring, “everything that is on the earth shall die.” Only then, does God reveal that the man will survive. “But I will establish my covenant

with you. And you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you." How does Noah respond? There are no recorded words, so we don't know if he tried to change God's mind about the flood or even the divine choice of contractor. All we know is that Noah obeyed and thus God started over. In the coming weeks, we'll follow how it all unfolded.

We stop at that point in the narrative because it is where we are as a people, too. In many ways, our world is starting over and each one of us are dealing with questions of what our life will look like post-COVID. Work and school, church and neighborhood, priorities and gatherings; all of those aspects to life will be part of what we have to figure out in the weeks ahead; discerning what we will bring back from the former time and what we will set aside. Yet starting over isn't limited to times of pandemic. Instead, it is an essential part to the life of faith.

When I was in college, there was student-run organization on campus known as the Davidson Christian Fellowship, commonly referred to as "DCF." As someone who had grown-up in the church and started college without knowing anyone on campus other than my future sister-in-law, I went to a couple of DCF-sponsored events in the fall of my first year, hoping to find community, thinking it to be the best place to start. After attending a couple of their worship services and Bible studies, though, I concluded the group wasn't the place for me. More particularly, I felt a clear sense of judgment from some of their leaders because my faith convictions didn't match theirs precisely. It was an entirely new experience to be told in so many words that I wasn't a real Christian, so I stopped attending and never went back.

One day, I was speaking to a friend who had once been a leader in DCF. When I shared my early experience and the reason I had stopped participating, she told of when she made the break herself. It came one day while eating lunch with a few DCF participants. One of them pointed out a classmate at another table sitting by himself. Apparently, that young man didn't have the best reputation on campus. I don't remember the details, but his actions—whether rumored or actual—did not fit the model which that Christian group had accepted as their norms. As the conversation turned toward the classmate sitting alone, that one said, "Can you imagine anyone wanting to eat with him?" Almost without thinking, my friend said, "I can. How about Jesus?" Soon thereafter, she stopped participating in that group, too, as a few years later DCF was disbanded with the college chaplain leading a kind of funeral to mark its ending.

In every life there are times we need to start over. It isn't limited to times of closing down a Christian group that no longer models humility or grace and thankfully does not require a flood or pandemic to begin, but rather those other occasions when we stop to look again at our own life and witness. That's why we have a time of confession in every worship service because we need that chance to look honestly at our lives and start fresh. That's the reason why when parents present a child for baptism, as will happen here shortly, we invite all who look on to remember their own baptism, both for its starting point and to identify if corrections are needed in our life of faith. That's the reason we Presbyterians view every wedding and funeral as a time of worship, too. To be sure, such occasions are a time to praise God for the ones who are starting life together or who have completed their journey on this earth, but they are also times for all who are present to look at the state of their vows to God and others, and if need be, to start fresh.

One first century believer put it: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation, everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new." It is that truth and hope to which we cling, especially in those moments when it is clear we need to start over again, too.