

Devastating Change Genesis 7

Could a flood like this really have happened? Well, think about the flood we experienced this past spring. Snow that fell over the winter in the Missouri River basin was melting, and there was a period of especially heavy rain in part of the area drained by the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Southern Missouri and Indiana and Illinois, along with most of Kentucky and Arkansas, got between 10 and 15 inches in the month of April alone. And all of that water came right down here.

April had 31 days, but we know it didn't rain without stopping in all those places for the whole month. But what if it had? What if it had rained all day and night all month long just in the same area that was soaked back in April? How high would the water have gotten here? Now, what if we added another ten days? And what if it had rained that hard not just over a few states, but over the entire Mississippi River basin? How high would the water have gotten here? What if it rained that hard over the whole country at the same time? What if it had rained like that all over the world? How high would the water have gotten then? The size of the flood becomes a bit more believable, doesn't it?

But in verse 11 we learn that something else was also happening – while the windows of heaven were opened, the fountains of the great deep were also broken up. What does that mean?

We know the earth's crust is formed from giant plates of solid rock, floating on top of the mantle, which is hotter, molten rock. When the edges of those outer plates rub together, we experience earthquakes. And when molten rock from the mantle pours out around the edges of the plates, we call that a volcano.

Well, you remember seeing the pictures of the tsunami that hit Japan after a magnitude 9 earthquake occurred just offshore. That happened because one of the earth's plates suddenly shifted underneath another one – after it was all over, the shifting of these plates made the whole Japanese island of Honshu move 2.4 meters.

It was a tremendous release of the earth's energy that caused terrible flooding, but only in one small part of Japan. So, what if something like that earthquake and tsunami happened around all the edges of all the earth's plates at one time? In fact, what if all of the movement in the earth's plates that most geologists say happened over hundreds of millions of years actually happened all at once – all at the time of the flood? Could such a tearing of the earth's surface have caused such tremendous rainfall and flooding?

Sure it could. And it could explain a lot of other things in the geological record as well, from the fossils of sea creatures on mountaintops to the existence of the Grand Canyon – if we are willing to reject the assumption that all geological change has to be gradual and uniform. If we are willing to admit instead what the Bible says, that there was a fundamental discontinuity in global history in the days of Noah, a worldwide flood becomes very believable.

Of course, it goes without saying that the Great Flood was a discontinuity for Noah. He had never seen anything like it, and no one else had either. For Noah and his family, it had to be

a terrifying experience, being cooped up in that big wooden box, tossed around by what had to be violent currents and, at least for the first month or so, equally violent storms. Sure, those who were in the ark must have known they were safe, but that wouldn't make the ride any less rough. That wouldn't make it any less scary.

We know a little bit about sudden, violent change these days, don't we? On Monday we had the 6th biggest daily decrease in the Dow Jones Industrial Average in history. On Tuesday, we had the 10th biggest increase. On Wednesday, we had the 10th biggest decrease. On Thursday, we had the 11th biggest increase. Think about that – four of the top twenty market movements in all of history took place in one week. That's enough to make anyone feel a little jittery.

Some of the sudden, drastic changes happening all around us are the result of wickedness in our culture. At this time last week, was anyone expecting London, England to explode in youth violence? Some of the changes we experience are completely beyond our control. When that beautiful wedding was held at Oak Square this spring did anyone expect to be attending a funeral there this summer?

Change always yields uncertainty, as we struggle to make sense out of the transformed world around us. We wonder what those three new supervisors will mean for our county next year. As we look at the financial crises in Europe we wonder what our own debt crisis will mean for government employees and retirees. And in our uncertainty it is all too easy to give ourselves over to fear.

Of course that ride in the ark wasn't just scary for Noah. It also had to be quite unpleasant. After all, he and his family were cooped up in a big wooden box with who knows how many animals. And by the time they were able to leave the ark, more than a year had passed. I don't care how big that boat was, to its confined inhabitants it must have seemed like a canoe after being inside it for that long.

Radical change is never easy for anyone, and we know that all too well, don't we? According to the most recent census, while Mississippi gained a little over 4% in population since the year 2000, Claiborne County has lost 18.8%. It's no wonder that so many of our local institutions are struggling. And of course our denomination is facing radical changes in our ordination standards, and thus even greater changes in the way that congregations and presbyteries will relate to each other in the years to come. Abandoning the Biblical understanding of marriage can't be a good thing.

But even positive change is difficult to manage. We've got lots of new folks moving in to help with new construction at the nuclear plant, along with new faculty families at CHA – how can those of us who've been here awhile make all of them feel at home? And all those newcomers are going through even greater changes. They are entering a whole new world and leaving good friends behind. Whether it's good or bad, change never comes easy.

So, how do we deal with the fear and the difficulty that goes along with sudden, radical change? How can the changes in our lives become opportunities for our faith to grow, instead of terrors that sap our strength?

Well, let's think about Noah, who was inside that ark in the midst of the terrible storm. He could have moped around about how miserable he was. He could have given in to the fear it would have been so easy to feel. But instead of doing those things, he could have drawn a great deal of comfort from recalling that he had built that ark. He had done exactly what God had told him to do, every step of the way. Sure, it was a scary, uncomfortable ride. But whatever happened, he could be sure that he had done his very best in spite of a bad situation.

What about us? It's easy for us to complain about the changes we see within us and around us. But are we trying to make things better? Are we getting involved in our local institutions? Are we supporting our neighbors' businesses and encouraging them in their projects? Are we trying to improve our own budgets and our own physical fitness? Are we trying to improve other people's lives, or just trying to get by on our own? And on a broader scale, are we working to deepen our knowledge of the Scriptures so that we can know how to respond to our denominational and cultural decline? Changes are happening all around us, and many of them aren't very good – are we working to make the best of those changes?

Noah was, and we've already seen that he could take comfort in his own considerable faithfulness. But more importantly, as the storm surged around him, he could take even greater comfort in God's faithfulness. For the terrible storm Noah was enduring proved that God does in fact do what He says He will do – God had said there would be a great flood, and sure enough the flood came. And so even though going through the flood had to have been a terrible experience, the fact of the flood itself showed Noah that God never goes back on a promise.

We can draw the same strength from God's faithfulness as we endure the hardships of our lives. As we suffer from the infidelity that is so rampant in our denomination, we can take comfort that God told us false prophets and deceivers would arise in our midst. As we read the distressing headlines in our newspapers, we can remember that Jesus told us that wars and droughts and famines and plagues would come. None of the difficulties in our lives take God by surprise.

But in the midst of all our struggles, as we confront all this overwhelming instability, we can also take comfort that our faithful God, our God Who has never broken a promise, that this God has made promises to us as well. Jesus promised He would never turn away any who would come to Him. Jesus promised rest to His followers, to those who would take His yoke upon them. Jesus has promised that He would always be with us, that He would never leave us and never forsake us. And so even in the midst of our greatest trials, we can take comfort that our God is a faithful God.

But our God is not only faithful. He is powerful. Noah could feel that power as each swelling wave battered the side of the Ark. But Noah had also experienced God's sovereign power in an even more personal way – verse 16 says that God didn't just tell Noah to make an ark and save himself. No, it was God Himself Who shut Noah and his family in the Ark. In other words, if God was causing the situation that made the ark necessary, God was also the One Who had made sure that ark would save Noah in the midst of the storm. From first to last, Noah had to know that God was ultimately in control.

And isn't that a great comfort to us when we face disruptions in our own lives? When waves of grief crash over us, when doubts and fears assail us, when everything we had thought was steady has suddenly become unstable, there's one thing on which we can always depend: God is in control. He is in control of the stock market and the battlefield. He is in control during riots in the streets and arguments in the home. He is in control in the classroom and in the operating room and in the funeral home. We may not understand why changes happen in our lives, or in the lives of our loved ones. We may find those changes unpleasant and frightening. But in the midst of all of them, we can take comfort if we trust in God's power, if we will let God be God. We can take comfort that somehow, some way, God is using even these difficulties in our lives for the good of those who love Him.

And we can also take comfort because we know the final outcome of all these difficulties and discomforts and dangers, just as Noah did. No, he didn't know how long that storm would last. He didn't know how long the flood would prevail on the earth. He didn't know how long he would be in that Ark.

But he knew that God's ultimate plan wasn't to leave him in that ark. He knew that God had brought him and his family and all those animals into that ark for a reason – to save them from the flood and to allow them to begin the process of restoring the earth one day. And so even in the midst of his difficulties, Noah could take comfort in God's plan of salvation.

And we can take the same comfort for the same reason. No, we may not understand exactly how our sufferings and the sufferings of our loved ones fit into God's plans. We may not know how the changes that take place all around us work together for the good of all those who are called according to God's purpose. But we do know what God's purpose is – to bring salvation to sinners by His grace alone as we trust in Christ alone.

And we know that the difficulties in our lives can in fact help with this. For when our suffering confronts us with our weakness, and when the changes in our lives overwhelm us, we do tend to rely more and more on God, trusting more and more in His faithfulness and in His power. And so even in the midst of the fearful and uncomfortable changes in our lives, we can know that as they draw us closer to God, they only fulfill God's greater purpose for us.

And just as Noah knew that one day the flood would be over and the world would begin anew, we can be sure of the same thing. For we know that Christ is coming again to complete not only our redemption, but the redemption of the whole creation. On the day that Jesus appears in all His glory, all the world will be changed one last time, made clean and fresh and new the way God always intended it to be. We can and we should look forward to that day.

But today, while we are still in the midst of the storms of life, while the change and decay all around us can seem overwhelming, let us go on trusting in Noah's God – a God of power and might, a God of faithfulness and mercy, a God Who is determined to use even the devastating changes in our lives to save all those who trust in Him.