

A New World  
Genesis 8:1-22

So, what's the deal with the birds? If Noah wanted to see what the situation was like after the flood, why didn't he just poke his head out of the ark and look around?

Remember, planet earth had been through a truly cataclysmic event. The whole world had been flooded with enough water to cover the highest mountains some twenty feet deep. A lot of that water, according to Genesis chapter 7, had come from the fountains of the great deep, coming up from the ground in some way. As we saw last week, such a flood could possibly be explained by sudden, massive shifts in the earth's tectonic plates. This sort of violent seismic activity could have been accompanied by massive volcanic eruptions, perhaps spewing poisonous gases into the atmosphere at the start of the flood. Maybe Noah sent out the birds for the same reason that miners take canaries into coal mines – to test if the air was safe to breathe.

But the waters hadn't just come up from below – they also fell from the windows of heaven, raining for 40 days and 40 nights. So, what if the reason that all that rain fell was because there was a lot more moisture in the atmosphere before the flood than there is now? What if the skies in the days before the flood had thus been mainly cloudy? What if the sight that seemed so strange to Noah, the sight that made him wonder if the air was safe to breathe, was simply a clear, blue sky? What if he had never seen that before? What if he sent out the birds because to him the world after the flood, our world, looked as strange to him as an alien planet would to us?

Well, whatever the reason, Noah sent out a raven first. Why a raven? Ravens and their cousins the crows are very smart birds. Modern crows, for example, have learned to drop nuts on roadways so that cars will run over them and crack them. Perhaps Noah thought a raven was streetwise enough to be the first one to venture out into the devastated world of the flood.

There's something else about ravens and crows: they'll eat almost anything, even garbage. Or carrion. Maybe Noah sent out the raven first because he wanted to make sure that all the dead things were gone. If the raven kept circling around and coming back to the ark, as it seems to have done, that would be a pretty good indication that the water had finally been cleaned up.

But maybe Noah had another reason to be concerned, even after the ark stopped moving. Verse 4 tells us that the ark came to rest on the top of a mountain chain, probably somewhere near Lake Van in southeastern Turkey. Verse 5 says that after awhile Noah could see the tops of other mountains off in the distance.

But here's the catch. What if the earth's plates really did shift around suddenly enough to cause a worldwide flood? That would produce enough force to create lots of high mountains as, for example, India smashed into the bottom of Asia and pushed up the Himalayas. But perhaps that also means that the world before the flood didn't have such high mountains at all. Maybe Noah had never stood on such a high place before. Maybe he'd never looked down into a valley. It could have been a very strange sight to him – day by day, the mountains appearing to grow

even higher as the waters receded and the bottoms of the valleys thus grew farther and farther away.

Perhaps that's why Noah sent out that dove after the raven. Doves are, after all, much pickier eaters than crows. I'm told that doves mainly eat seeds on the ground or fruits found in trees, depending on their particular species. Either way, a dove would need some healthy vegetation to form its habitat. If it found enough food to stay away from the ark, that would mean the ground was truly dry, and that the trees and other plants were springing back to life. When the dove brought back the olive leaf it proved to Noah that there would soon be things for other animals, and people, to eat as well.

The bottom line is that we really don't know why Noah thought he had to let those birds loose. Maybe it was just as simple as the fact that, wherever that window in the ark was, it didn't let Noah get a good look at what was going on outside. The window may have been more like what we call a hatch – a hole in the top deck instead of in the side of the ship. That would make sense, as it would have been easier to make a hatch watertight, and it wasn't as though Noah was having to do any navigation. Maybe that's why he let the birds out first, because they could fly through the hatch. But in any event, it wasn't until the cover of the ark was removed in verse 13 that Noah could really assess the situation for himself.

But once he could take a good look around him, think about his strange reaction. Remember, by the time Noah took off the cover of the ark, he and his family, and all those animals, had been inside for over a year. And yet, even though all his experiments with birds must have satisfied him that the earth was at least marginally safe for habitation, and even though for all he could tell the surface of the ground looked dry, Noah didn't leave the ark immediately. No, they all stayed cooped up for almost another two months. Noah refused to leave that ark until God told him to.

Now, that's faith. That's really putting God and God's will first in life. Even though every fiber of Noah's being must have wanted to get out of that smelly boat on the first day of the first month when he could once again see the face of the ground, he waited until the 27<sup>th</sup> day of the second month to leave. It wasn't until God finally gave him the go-ahead that Noah and his family left the ark in verses 18 and 19.

Is that what we would do? When we have important decisions to make, do we consult the Lord first? Do we search the Scriptures to discover God's purpose for our life? Or do we just look out the window and conduct a few experiments and do what makes sense to us? Where it comes to our personal lives, who's really calling the shots?

But this story doesn't just tell us a lot about the source of Noah's guidance. It also tells us about his priorities. Think about it: what would be the first thing you would do after spending a whole year in what was essentially a huge barn? Get up a basketball game with the family? Would you go exploring, maybe taking a ride on one of the horses? Or would you just go for a long walk and enjoy the novelty of some fresh air and some peace and quiet and some firm ground beneath your feet?

Remember, too, that Noah had been through a horrifying experience, and he could have raged at God for putting him through all that. He had lost all his friends and all his extended family. Everything he had acquired through 600 years of life was gone. It was like he had gone through a house fire. Worse yet, it would have been like living on the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina hit – the whole world was completely unrecognizable to him. It would have been very easy for Noah to have been bitter at God. After all, when Job went through a similar experience, his wife urged him to curse God and die.

Yes, Noah could have been angry with God. He could have been bitter. But he wasn't. Instead, the first thing he chose to do after leaving the ark was to worship God. He chose to express his thanks and praise to the One Who had saved him from what would have been certain death, even in such a difficult and unpleasant way.

And Noah expressed his worship, Noah showed God how much God meant to him, by offering up some of the few animals and birds left on the earth. Remember, God had told Noah to take only seven pairs of each of the clean animals on the ark, and Noah thus sacrificed a substantial percentage of each of these species that survived. It's hard to imagine an offering that could have been more rare or more precious. But even after Noah had lost almost everything he had, that's how much he valued God.

And believe it or not, Noah's reaction is exactly the one that we should have, no matter what we've been through. Because this passage really isn't about how faithful or devoted Noah was. No, ultimately it's about the power and mercy of the God Noah chose to worship.

For the narrative of the flood is not just a story of devastating destruction. It is, as we see from today's passage, actually a story of re-creation. For if chapter 1 of Genesis tells us how God created the heavens and the earth, chapter 8 shows us how God restored the world by His mighty power. And the fact is that He did it in much the same way, by following a very similar pattern.

In chapter 1, verse 2, we see God beginning the process of creation when the spirit of God moved over the face of the waters. In chapter 8, the process of re-creation begins in verse 1 when God caused a wind to pass over the earth. Spirit in chapter 1, wind in chapter 8. In the Hebrew language, the word for spirit and the word for wind are the same word.

On day 3 of the creation narrative, God gathered the waters into seas and the dry land appeared. Also on day 3, God caused the earth to bring forth vegetation. We see the same events in the same order in chapter 8. In verses 3-5, the waters recede and the tops of the mountains appear. And before any of the living things leave the ark for good, the dove brings an olive leaf to Noah, proving that once again the earth had sprouted vegetation.

And isn't it interesting that the first living creatures that leave the ark are birds? For in the creation narrative in chapter 1, the birds are created on the fifth day, while the land animals and man aren't created until day 6. Just so, the birds left the ark first, and the land animals and Noah and his family followed afterwards.

But perhaps the clearest comparison between chapters 1 and 8 is the purpose for which God made all the animals on the earth. In both chapters, they are directed to be fruitful and

multiply. God's intention both before and after the flood is that His beautiful world would be filled with life.

So, what does this tell us, this comparison between the initial creation of the world and its re-creation after the flood? At the very least, it reminds us of God's sovereignty, God's complete control of both events. And that should also remind us that God is equally in control of all the chaotic events in our lives, all those crises that come crashing into our reality, all those disasters that turn our lives upside down. When the first thing Noah chose to do after leaving the ark was to worship God, he was thus doing the most logical thing that he could.

But Noah didn't just worship God because of His power. He also worshipped God because of His mercy. After all, Noah could have been killed in the flood just like so many other people had been. But God chose to preserve him and his family alive. God showed him mercy.

In addition, this story makes it plain that God continues to show mercy to all of us as He maintains the stability of the world. Even though God knows that all human beings still have sin within our hearts, even though God knows that our natural inclination is to continue to push Him away and to glorify ourselves in His place, God in His mercy promises to maintain the stability of the seasons all over the globe. In maintaining the yearly cycle of cold and heat, of summer and winter, God allows us to plant our seeds in the spring and harvest them in the fall. In spite of our sin, God allows us to survive and thrive upon the earth He has created, upon the earth that He has re-created.

So, no matter in what situation we may find ourselves, let us do what Noah did. Let us bow down before the mighty God Who created and re-created this beautiful world. And let us worship Him for the many blessings He has bestowed upon us in His mercy.