

Each week of 2016 we are digging in to inspect an important reference point within the Bible, as a part of a year-long journey that we're calling Garden to City. The point of all this is to listen to what Scripture tells us about God, or what it tells us about ourselves, and how we should live. In these pages we learn about our Creator and we discover His great love for us- how He designed us to be- and who we are in Him. I've shared this reason for *why* we're doing this each week along with this little line:

It's within God's story that we find the meaning and the purpose in our own stories.

So I'm curious, are you discovering? Are you investigating along with us? Are you following along in one of the journals that we've prepared as a companion for the journey? Are you connected in one of our small groups (we call them Journey Groups), so that you have comrades to join you in this pursuit? (There's still time to join one of those if you haven't, go to our welcome table after service and you can find out more). We're on this journey to learn and discover the God who made us and loves us, so I hope that's been true for you.

Our journey has begun, appropriately, in the book of Genesis- the very first book of the Bible- with this series within the series called Origins.

I've come to realize that one huge benefit of teaching through this series from Garden to City (looking at the Bible from beginning to end), is that it takes us to places in the text that we might otherwise avoid. During the course of just these first few weeks we've examined some very challenging texts (challenging to our assumptions about where we come from and how the world came into being, challenging to the way we understand evil and brokenness in this world, challenging even about how we view ourselves and our Creator.

Today will be another challenge. In fact, for me, preparing this message, more than any so far, has been very difficult. To this point, we've witnessed God's great restraint in the face of man's disobedience. Adam and Eve's poor choice had tremendous consequences, and so did Cain's murder of his brother Abel, but along with each consequence we've watched God draw close to His people. We've seen Him in the role of a Father- not anxious to punish or destroy, but eager to instruct, correct and even to protect. Today it's going to be a different story. Today God does not stay His hand.

Turn in your Bibles, if you would, to Genesis chapter six. Today we examine the story of Noah and The Flood. (Genesis 6:5-8)

5 The Lord observed the extent of human wickedness on the earth, and he saw that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil. 6 So the Lord was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth. It broke his heart. 7 And the Lord said, "I will wipe this human race I have created from the face of the earth. Yes, and I will destroy every living thing—all the people, the large animals, the small animals that scurry along the ground, and even the birds of the sky. I am sorry I ever made them." 8 But Noah found favor with the Lord.

It's come to this. All of God's restraint, His forbearance, His patience, is at an end. In the span of six chapters we've watched God create the world and describe it as "very good," only to witness humanity's violence- our wickedness- bring Him to this place where He is, "*sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth.*"

I grew up going to church, as many of you know, so I can remember learning about the story of Noah going back clear back to my early childhood. And what mystifies me, is that this story- about God's decision to essentially wipe out everything and start over- was turned into a quaint little tale about a man and a boat full of animals. Did anyone else here learn about Noah as a kid? It's true, right? (show

image) This apocalyptic story was packaged as a happy little tale. What are the elements of the story that you remember?

God tells a good man named Noah to build a boat (an Ark), He sends animals two by two to join him, and then they sail along together during a great flood until the land dries up. And when it's all over, God places a rainbow in the sky as a promise that He's never going to do it again.

All those details are true to the text, by the way. It's a story that takes faith to believe. It was a whole lot more graphic- more catastrophic- than anything suggested by an image like that. If you've never read the story for yourself, I want to encourage you to read it this week. It takes place over the course of four chapters [Genesis 6-9], so it's too long for me to read here, but if you've never actually read it before- if you've only remembered it as a children's story with all the drama and horrific elements removed- then it would be good for you to go back and study it yourself.

For those of you here today who are skeptics by nature, it's texts like this one that really put your ability to believe to the test. I know that's true because when our creative team came together a couple of weeks ago to begin preparing for this week's topic, there were, even among our staff, details of this story that that we held differing views about- different understandings about how this story could have taken place.

And even if you put the particulars of what you find in the narrative aside, you are still left with a huge problem- and this is where I'm going to draw our attention. Even if you come to terms with Noah and the ark and the animals in a giant flood, you still have to wrestle with the image of God that this story presents us with.

Honestly, it would be easier to avoid this story entirely than to have to deal with all the different questions it raises about God. This dilemma reminds me of the wedding scene from Monte Python and the Quest For the Holy Grail. Sir Lancelot has just slashed his way through the entire wedding party and the Lord of the castle is trying to distract everyone from the obvious horror so the wedding can go on- "Let's not bicker and argue about who killed who. This is supposed to be a happy occasion!" Don't look over there at all the blood and violence, let's get on with the wedding. It's a lot easier to avoid the horrific picture this story paints and just get on with the nice parts.

I don't blame the children's ministry leaders who have packaged this story as a sweet little boat ride with Noah and the animals, who all discover a rainbow at the end- the alternative is frightful. The reality of this story is horrific. Humanity has descended into violence and evil with every thought and action, so God decides to clean the slate. The flood destroys everything- every human being is killed except for Noah and his family.

After reading a story like that, it's not surprising that people have developed some ominous- some fearful- perceptions of who God is. Maybe one of these would describe how you view God in light of the flood.

- Some read it and decide that God is over-reactive. They picture Him like a petulant child. ("He doesn't like how things are turning out so He takes His toys and goes home.")
- Others have read this story and decided that it shows God as emotionally under-developed, as though God needed to go through a maturation process- He had to mature in relating to difficulty. ("He flooded the whole world, but afterward realized it was something awful that He shouldn't ever do again.")
- Some people have decided to believe, as a result of this story, that God is ambivalent and uncaring. ("A God who could destroy it all in this way must be a vengeful God, full of judgment and wrath.")

The story of God's decision to flood the earth in response to humanity's wickedness has often caused people to wonder, "How can a God of love also be a God of judgment?"

That's a huge question. It's bigger than I could possibly hope to answer with just the time that we have together today. But I do want to try and provide you the beginnings of one.

How can a God of love also be a God of judgment?

Let's start with this: if you believe that there is a Divine Judge, that belief is nothing to rest easy in. It means that there is One- a being greater than us- One who is over us, for whom the rules matter. If you believe in a Divine Judge, then you believe that the laws, the rules and moral code that we humans abide by, came to us from Him and there is a consequence when they are broken. That's what justice is- getting what you deserve. Some of us believe that this is the type of God that the story of the flood presents us with- a God of justice without mercy- a cold, insensitive Being and we don't like it. We reject it.

In it's place- if we choose to believe in a God at all, and let's be honest, at this point some walk away- but if a person continues to believe in a Creator God, at this point, many replace the Divine Judge with an exclusively merciful God. In this version, God is always a God of love, no matter what. Breaking the rules only amounts to a shrug and a wink, because this version of God only ever forgives, He's only ever merciful. That's what mercy is, in fact- not getting what you deserve. This version of God holds no one accountable for their actions. All is forgiven.

Some of us would like to believe in a God like that, but if we did, we would have a huge problem on our hands.

If you don't believe that God is in charge of setting things right, then it leaves humanity in charge of doing so, and if we've learned anything over the course of human history, we've learned that we are flawed at best when it comes to meting out justice- and at our worst, we are incredibly vengeful. If you don't believe in a Divine Judge, then the result is when someone hurts you- physically or emotionally- you are in charge of setting things right.

If you don't believe in a Divine Judge, if you choose to believe in a God who is only ever merciful, then you have a big problem when it comes to human violence- because what that means is, you have a God who doesn't take the hurt that we cause one another seriously. If God doesn't get angry at injustice, at violence, at corruption and unfairness, if He holds no one accountable for behavior like that, then He isn't a God worthy of worship. No society that behaved in such a way would ever be viewed as one fit to live in. None of us would ever want to live in place where there were no rules to protect us from violence and corruption. How could we ever come think that a God who doesn't care about the rules- or the harm brought about by those who break them- how could we ever worship a God like that?

I'll tell you who could worship a God like that, someone who has never experienced pain brought about by violence. Someone who has lived a life unscathed by the pain caused by violent men or women- someone who has lived a life in relative comfort, untouched by corruption or injustice- can worship a God like that, but only until the day when such violence visits their own doorstep. When that happens they'll know, a God like that is insufficient.

A God who only ever dispenses mercy, who never takes sin seriously, is not a God worthy of our worship. But the alternative, a God who only dispenses justice and never shows mercy is terrifying. Trusting in a Divine Judge, in light of all we've just learned, should be easy. He is a God who cares about injustice. He holds people accountable for their sin. But what about when we are the ones in need of mercy? What about when we are the rule breakers? What then? Everyone wants a God of justice to right the wrongs in this world, until they are the ones in the wrong and then they realize that a God who only ever dispenses judgment is not what we want either.

Please hear me on this. The God of Scripture, our Heavenly Father is neither of these two extremes: He is not strictly a God of justice, nor is He exclusively a God of mercy. These are both mischaracterizations.

Beyond the fact that these two views are incomplete and incompatible with who God truly is, there's another reason why it's important for us not to hold either of these extreme views of God.

The purpose of our study of Scripture is to learn about who God is and who He designed us to be. If our view of God is incomplete, or worse, if it's faulty, then our understanding of who we are in Him is also incomplete and faulty. If we are made in His image- if we contain God's character and His heart- then it's essential we understand Him correctly because our lives are shaped accordingly.

The danger of believing that God is a callous judge who only cares about justice is that we'll grow to reflect a heart like that. If we become cold hearted, insensitive people with only the rules to keep, and punishment for those who break them, we will become just as unapproachable and fearful as that kind of God would be.

The danger of believing that God is only ever merciful and does not care what anyone does is that we'll grow to reflect a heart like that. We'll say 'live and let live' about everything, from our own behavior to the behavior of our kids, all the while leaving a trail of pain and dysfunction and brokenness in our wake. We will become just as undiscerning and permissive and untrustworthy as that type of God would be.

The way we understand God is crucial, because we are shaped by it- we are molded and formed by the kind of character we attribute to Him.

So who is He? If God is neither the completely callous judge nor the always merciful one, then who is He? I want to suggest to you today that our God is a God of justice, while also at the same time being a God of mercy, but He is more than justice and mercy combined. He is our Gracious Judge. That's who He is.

Some of you might still recoil at the judgment part. When you consider the cost of sin, when you consider that punishment is still on the table it makes you uncomfortable. You're not alone. When you read verse six of our text today, it's easy to focus on the first part of the verse, but let's read the entire verse again. "**6** *So the Lord was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth. It broke his heart.*" God was not indifferent to the violence He witnessed on earth. The pain that people were inflicting upon each other brought Him pain. He was heartbroken by it. It mattered to Him, so much so that He regretted putting the world into motion. The flood tells us that He was not content to let it continue. There would be a punishment for all of this violence. God is a divine judge, He distributes justice, but He is also merciful. Don't forget vs. 8 of our text. Noah found favor with God.

(Genesis 6:17)

17 *"Look! I am about to cover the earth with a flood that will destroy every living thing that breathes. Everything on earth will die. 18 But I will confirm my covenant with you. So enter the boat—you and your wife and your sons and their wives.*

God could have started over from scratch, but He didn't. Do you think it was because Noah and his family were without sin? Verse 9 of chapter six could lead you to believe that was the case. It describes Noah as a righteous man, the only blameless person on earth, but the word used for righteous did not mean perfect. Noah wasn't faultless. Even if he was, where did that leave his wife and sons? They

aren't counted as blameless. God did not spare this family's lives because they were without sin. He showed mercy on them because of their faith.

Hebrews 11:7 helps us understand this. We read: *7 It was by faith that Noah built a large boat to save his family from the flood. He obeyed God, who warned him about things that had never happened before. By his faith Noah condemned the rest of the world, and he received the righteousness that comes by faith.*

Noah boarded the boat with his family in faith, and because He trusted God- because God saw that level of faith in Noah- he and his entire family are spared. They ride the waves in a boat built to God's specifications instead of sinking into the waters. God is merciful. But there's a difference between mercy and grace. I've described our God as a Gracious Judge- not the Merciful Judge. Do you want to know why?

God is a Gracious Judge and that is exactly what we need Him to be. If he were strictly a God of justice, then we would get what we deserve. If He were only a God of mercy then we simply wouldn't get what we deserved, but He is those things and more. He's our Gracious Judge, which means that He gifted us with what we did not deserve. That's what Grace means: getting what you did not deserve.

Think about the rainbow for just a moment. That's the promise God leaves with Noah after the waters have receded and he and his family have left the ark. You find that piece of the story in Genesis 9 (Genesis 9:12-15)

12 Then God said, "I am giving you a sign of my covenant with you and with all living creatures, for all generations to come. 13 I have placed my rainbow in the clouds. It is the sign of my covenant with you and with all the earth. 14 When I send clouds over the earth, the rainbow will appear in the clouds, 15 and I will remember my covenant with you and with all living creatures. Never again will the floodwaters destroy all life.

I love seeing rainbows. They are incredibly beautiful. Any time I think of them I can't help but remember that viral video from a couple of years ago. Do you remember it? A guy is out camping in the wilderness and from his campsite on the top of a hill he sees a double rainbow and loses his mind. Full on double rainbow across the sky!! He's blown away by the beauty of the rainbow, and frankly I'm right there with him. But consider this for just a moment. The rainbow only reflects the mercy of God. God says, "*Never again will the floodwaters destroy all life.*" That's mercy- not getting what we deserve. We can view the flood as a symbol of God's justice- that's what we deserve. The rainbow is a symbol of His mercy- God spares us from that fate. But do you know the symbol He gives us to remind us of His grace?

It's these tables in front of us. It's the bread and the cup. These are the symbols of God's grace.

Please understand this, He's not simply a God of the free pass, it's even better than that. He gives us what we do not deserve. He gave us Himself. At these tables when we take communion- the bread and the cup- we are reminded of this.

Through Christ, God has clothed us with His righteousness. In Jesus He calls us His sons and daughters. Why Jesus, you ask? What does He have to do with this? In case you think God's grace cheap, don't forget that this gift came with the full burden of our sin still being paid for. Only none of us had to pay this debt- none of us ever could- God Himself paid it on our behalf. Jesus, God in the flesh, came and took the punishment we deserved. He died with our sins as His burden, though He had none of His own, so that we could receive this gift of grace. Salvation is found in no one else.

We were bought with a price. The judgment for our sin still applied to us, but God, our Gracious Judge chose to pay that price Himself. We should have been drowned in a great flood. We should have been washed away. Our sin, like an anchor tied to our feet should have caused us to sink below the waves, but instead, when we put our faith in Christ, He offers us all the benefits of being His children with none of the punishment our sin requires.

Our God is a Gracious Judge. Sin is costly and justice must have a place in this world, but never forget that the love of God is abundant. He provides a way for people who approach Him in faith. Noah received a taste of God's mercy, in Christ we find complete salvation.