

Addiction: Sickness and Pain

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
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Scripture: Genesis 9:18-27

Sermon

In the first two chapters of Genesis, God sets up a series of boundaries. Earth is separated from sky; water is separated from dry land. Sun, moon, and stars take their places in the heavens; birds, fish, and beasts make their homes in the sky or in the water or in forests and fields. It's a beautiful picture.

But it all begins to unravel when boundaries are disregarded: when human beings claim possession of forbidden fruit (that's Genesis 3), when a man claims authority over his brother's life (that's Genesis 4), and when heavenly beings start lusting after human beings (that's Genesis 6). It's a royal mess. And that's the best way to put it. Because human beings had been crowned with glory and honor and authority (that's Psalm 8).

But there's more to it than crossing boundaries. It turns out that human beings don't have to disregard boundaries to make a royal mess. No; human beings can take permitted things, goods things, and make them bad. Human beings can even take sweet wine and make it sour vinegar. Which brings us to the story of Noah.

"NOAH WAS A RIGHTEOUS MAN, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God" (that's Genesis 6:9). But Noah was still an ordinary human being. Which means he had an amazing ability to make a royal mess out of things. And that's clear enough from the Scripture we just read.

In that Scripture, the Great Flood is over. The earth has been cleansed. It's time for a fresh start. And the fresh start begins with Noah, Noah and his family. But what a family! And what a father!

ONE OF THE TROUBLING THINGS about Noah is how he never seems to have any sorrow over the destruction of all life. When God tells Abraham that Sodom and Gomorrah will be destroyed, Abraham bargains with God. He tries to save the cities from their fate. But Noah is a different sort of man.

When God tells Noah about his plan to destroy all life on earth, Noah doesn't bargain. He just starts building the boat. Noah has no feelings at all, certainly no compassion. Not as far as we can tell.

BUT IN THE END, it seems like maybe all the death and destruction, it gets to Noah. So when his vineyard produces wine, Noah uses it to get drunk. And in his drunkenness, he strips off his clothes and reveals his shame. And why shouldn't he be ashamed? When God told Noah the flood was coming, he didn't try to save anyone else. And they all died. Only Noah and his own family survived.

Well, whatever is going on in Noah's head and heart—maybe it's survivor's guilt; maybe it's PTSD—whatever is going on, Noah deals with it by getting drunk, falling-down, make-a-fool-of-yourself drunk. That's when his sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, enter the picture.

THE STORY DOESN'T GIVE US much to go on.¹ But there is enough. First, Ham enters Noah's tent and finds him there: drunk, asleep, and naked. Ham responds by facing his father's problem head-on. He decides to be a truth-teller. And he begins by telling his brothers.

But Shem and Japheth aren't interested in the truth. They literally turn their faces away from the truth. Instead they engage in a coverup. They don't have it in themselves to face more pain. Also, they don't want to confront their father. And in no time, we find out why.

APPARENTLY HAM TOLD the rest of the family, not just his two brothers. And when Noah gets wind of that, he explodes! No intervention for him! The results for the family are devastating.

Now, I think Noah's family already was pretty broken. How could they not be? How could they not be traumatized by the horrific slaughter of the Great Flood? Only a family of sociopaths could escape being wounded.

Well, the damage explodes into the open when sobered-up Noah launches his tirade. Noah curses his son Ham and especially his grandson Canaan. The words keep spilling out of Noah's mouth, words that set up a chain of bitterness and rivalry that will continue for ages. There will be acts of war and enslavement and extermination. It's an ugly picture. But it is a familiar one.

¹ This section of the sermon was revised after delivery to better reflect the dynamics of the family situation.

THERE ARE LOTS OF STORIES in this room. All of us have our own narratives of pain. Some of those narratives add a new chapter every generation. But the basic story stays the same.

I wonder how many of you have stories of a drunk father who tore your family apart. I wonder how many of you have been that drunk father. And it's not just drunkenness. We can make a long list of addictions. Some of us know about multiple addictions.

WELL, WHAT'S TRUE OF ALCOHOLISM can be true of many addictions, as true as what we see in Noah and his descendants. It starts in brokenness. And who knows how far back the brokenness goes? Maybe as far back as anyone remembers. (That's how I hear a lot of those first stories in the Bible. They talk about the way things are and the way things have been as far back as anyone can remember.)

However it starts, the brokenness is there. It's the background noise to every conversation. It's the cracked foundation under every relationship. Addiction is an attempt to cover up the cracks. Addiction is an attempt to drown out the background noise. But addiction only amplifies the noise. Addiction only takes a jackhammer to the cracks. Addiction only adds fresh layers of pain to the ache that won't go away. So addicts are destroyed, and their families are destroyed with them.

So much pain! And nothing numbs it for long.

ADDICTION IS AN ENEMY. Yes; it's a behavior. But it's also a disease. And it's also a spiritual power that is turned against us. Addiction chews us up and spits us out. Addiction has no long-term use for us. All it wants us to do is to spread the infection and the pain. Because addiction wants to flood the earth with death.

Think of it. Addiction uses pain-pills to unleash new levels of pain. Addiction uses gambling to draft armies of losers. And addiction uses sweet wine to make many lives sour.

Brothers, sisters, is there no hope?! The Noah story makes addiction feel hopeless. Because it tells the story of a drunken episode that changed all history. It tells the story of sweet wine carving a sour and deadly path down the ages.

BUT THERE IS ANOTHER STORY TO TELL. And it is a story of hope. It's a story of hope that triumphs over all hopelessness. It's a story of healing that soothes all pain and binds up all brokenness.

When Jesus was on the cross, they gave him sour wine to drink. The vinegar was every bit as sour as his abandonment and shame. But the cross of Christ is a transfiguration of brokenness and pain and shame. And the blood and the water that flow there from the side of Jesus, they become the sweet wine of salvation. (That's another time that Jesus changed water into wine!)

THE BREAD AND THE CUP WE WILL SHARE in a few minutes, it's a sacrament of the One who surrendered his body and blood for the salvation of the world. It's a sacrament of the One by whose wounds we are healed, the One by whose weakness the powers are defeated, the One by whose death we live.

Listen. All authority in heaven and on earth belongs to Jesus. So he has authority over every power and over every addiction. How he uses that authority is up to him. But the good news is this: no addiction has the final say in our lives. So no addiction determines our destiny. In Christ alone, all hope is found, no matter how intense the pain and the shame. And for the addicts among us, in Christ alone, and at last, there is peace.

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Glory and thanks be to God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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