

## The Narrowing<sup>1</sup>

One of the limitations of reading and preaching about the Bible in the course of an hour-long worship service is that we are usually limited to examining a few verses at a time. What I'd like to attempt this morning is a more sweeping look at a section of Genesis, namely the story of Noah's family. Unfortunately, Noah, the ark, and the flood never becomes an adult story for us. We like the cute picture of the ark bristling with animals. It makes a great wall-hanging for a nursery or children's Sunday Class room. So what I'd like to do is to retell Noah's story in a way that lets us see just how momentous and challenging it really is.

Let's go in our imaginations to Noah and his family—his three sons and all the animals—emerging from the ark. What was that huge flood all about anyway? We all know that God destroyed the world's evil by letting it be drowned in the waters of chaos. The world had clearly veered off the course that the Creator had planned and God wanted to start over.

But here's a surprise. God makes a promise to the world. He isn't going to do that again. We remember the rainbow which is a sign of the covenant. It's helpful to remember that a bow is a weapon of war. And the colorful bow in the sky reminds us that God will never again treat humanity as an enemy to be shot at again.

Now, the section that we read contains God's instructions to Noah: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." Wait a minute. These are exactly the instructions that God gave to Adam and Eve—the first humans. Noah is like a new Adam. We've got a great big fresh start, except it's going to be an even better start. God has not committed himself eternally to never judge and annihilate his world and his nations again. Now, we know that humanity is going to revert to its sinful behavior in a nanosecond. But God will have to deal with humanity in a new way. And that way remains to be seen.

The story now moves on to a lengthy genealogy, you know so-and-so begat so-and-so. We tend to skip over the genealogies in the Bible. We figure, "Okay, I get the picture, lots of children, lots of generations." Genealogies just don't seem that important. Everybody's got a genealogy.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on October 17, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA 30240. Other sermons and information may be found at [www.fpclagrangerange.org](http://www.fpclagrangerange.org)

But if you read the genealogies you begin to notice something interesting. Let's take Noah's son, Japheth as an example. We read that he had 7 sons. Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras. From there, only the sons of Gomer are traced out. The other sons with their descendants are omitted. The reader has to ask the question, why Gomer and not any of his brothers? There's no answer. Generation after generation sees this pattern. A household may include a handful of kids, but only one carries forward the story. Now, after several generations we're going to get to Terah and his sons, among them Abram or Abraham.

Now, the hasty reader might think that the purpose of the genealogy is to show that Abraham can trace his ancestry right back to Noah getting off the Ark. But that's not the proper conclusion. The proper conclusion is that everyone on the face of the earth can trace his or her ancestry back to Noah on whom God conferred special blessing. The point of the ancestry is to show that Abraham is really no different from anyone else. He is one man, possibly picked from millions of humans spread all over the world, who are all alike in their relationship with Noah and in being heirs of God's rainbow covenant.

A comparison with the Muslim world might be helpful. We all know that Muslims fall into two major denominations—Shiites and Sunnis. The Shiite-Sunni division dates back to the prophet Mohammed and the question of who was to succeed him as leader of Islam. Sunnis believe that Abu Bakr, Muhammed's father-in-law, was the rightful successor and that all others were to be elected by the whole of the Muslim community. Shiites believe that Ali, Muhammed's cousin and son-in-law was specially appointed by the Prophet and that succession was carried on by Ali's direct descendants. Now, what is interesting is that there is still division and disagreement over who was the right one even to this day. The question is, who was closest to the Prophet.

Biblical thinking is radically different. When it comes to the question of who the selected one is or who bears the blessing, the Bible resists anybody's claim to fame. In other words, Abraham is called to be father of all the nations. But who's Abraham? Was he chosen by Noah? Was he Noah's first son? None of these! Abraham is seemingly picked out of the blue. He's generations away from Noah. He's not particularly righteous. He's not particularly connected with important people. There

seems to be a blessing that flows down through the generations and Abraham has it. But so does everyone else! God picks Abraham. He picks him to become a great nation and occupy a great land. And, importantly, God picks Abraham to be a blessing to all the other people who are equally heirs of Noah and the rainbow covenant.

We left open a question that we're now ready to answer. If God has renounced the instrument of total destruction—as in the Flood—to cleanse the world from human sin. If God has given all of humanity the rainbow covenant as a promise that God's intentions are not destruction. How then is God going to deal with people—all people—when they carry on in a manner not intended by God when he set up the creation? If not by destruction, how about with grace? And the grace will come through a small group of specially selected people—Abraham's descendants and later the followers of Jesus Christ. You see once destruction is ruled out, God moves on to bring Israel into being.

Let me attempt to summarize because this is a bit of a long and winding story. From the very beginning, God created and loved and intends to heal all people, all cultures, all nations. And he will do this through the instrumentality of a select group who will carry the blessing to the rest of the world.

Someone's thinking, "Hey, this sounds like predestination." If that's your thought, you're right on. Now, for you here who are put off by a 25 cent word like *predestination*, let me define it for you quickly. Predestination is God's very intentional choosing of some people and not others. Predestination is a cherished doctrine of we Presbyterians. It appears in the Bible and in Catholic theologians like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and Protestant theologians like John Calvin.

Obviously, we're seeing this process of God choosing of people clear back in the Book of Genesis. And, importantly, we're seeing why they are chosen. It's not for special benefits so much as for special responsibility. We're predestined not so much to get our ticket punched so we can escape this world and go to heaven someday. We're predestined to bring heaven into this world with God's help.

Now, why do I tell you all of this? It's because the story of Noah and his descendants plus the rainbow covenant, give you and

me some orienting background into who we are. By some unspeakable mystery, you and I find ourselves pulled aside by God. If you're like me, you might even be thinking, "How'd I get to be a Christian? Why am I in church? My siblings aren't very religious. Maybe you yourself don't think of yourself as very religious or deserving or insightful. But you're here. Something draws you to Jesus. My response is that you are just like every other believer, especially the believers in the Bible. You're just like Abraham. God taps ordinary people for the extraordinary task of carrying his blessing into the world.

You see, your next door neighbor who may not know Jesus Christ is also loved by God. So is the person in the next cubicle in your office. And it is God's intention to touch that person with God's love through you! That's how God operates. He is redeeming the world through a small group of people of his special choosing.

You and I are like Mary the mother of Jesus. Mary is an altogether good example of an ordinary person chosen out of the blue by God. She has no particular connections or resume to be special in God's plan. But she allows herself—even her body—to be used by God. Pretty soon, God is entering into the world through Mary's life. God's wants something like that to happen through each of us in this room. You and I have been chosen for that.