

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Genesis 6:9-22;7:24;8:14-19

NRSV

The story of the Flood tells us that, despite widespread evil in the world, God does care for, and preserve, those who are faithful to him. This story is, in its plot, like one found in the *Atrahasis Epic*, a tale widely known in the ancient Near East. Flood stories are found in many cultures. While other flood stories show gods to be capricious, our God is just and merciful, and fulfills promises. This story is long, so only parts are read today. Why does God destroy most of what he had created? Perhaps the answer lies in the stories of Cain and Abel, and of Lamech. Cain and Lamech are examples of murderers, of people who polluted the earth with blood. Blood was seen as life itself. Humans were *lawless* (6:11, "violence"). The Flood cleanses the earth of spilt blood, so there can be a new start, a new age. Because humans have an inclination to evil (8:21), to avoid the earth being so polluted again, laws are needed. 9:1-17 tells of God giving laws to Noah; one is "you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood". Murder is forbidden "for in his own image God made humankind" (9:6).

6:11-12 tell of the sorry state on earth. God sees this, and acts immediately (6:13): as humans have *spoilt* the earth (as the Hebrew says), God will *spoil* ("destroy") them; he will complete what they have begun. But because Noah is faithful, he is to build an ark before God destroys all other living creatures (6:14-17). In 6:18-21, God offers a "covenant" to Noah: he, his family, and sufficient animals, birds, and *creeping things* are to embark on the ark, with sufficient food. Noah obeys God's command (6:22). In 7:1-4, God instructs Noah again, but a little differently: note "seven pairs of all clean animals" and "a pair of ... [unclean] animals" versus "two of every kind" in 6:19: evidence that the story is from two sources. In 7:6-16, all board the ark and the Flood begins. In 7:17-23, the waters rise, killing all who are left on the earth. Only Noah and those with him are saved. In 8:1-5, "God remembered Noah" and those with him; the waters recede, helped by a wind God causes to blow. In 8:6-14, Noah sends out birds from the ark to find out when the land can be inhabited again. The "raven" is also part of the *Atrahasis Epic*, as is the "dove". When it returns with a "freshly plucked olive leaf" Noah knows that the time is soon; when it does not return, he knows that "the earth was dry". At this point, the creation is as it was after God's creative act in Genesis 1. In 8:16-19, God commands all on the ark to disembark, so that they may "be fruitful and multiply". They all leave the ark. In 8:20, Noah sacrifices "clean" (ritually pure) animals and birds to God. (If this verse were from the same source as 6:19, there would be no animals left, so it must be from the second source.) In 8:21-22, God promises never again to do such a horrible deed, even though humans tend to unfaithfulness. Never again will he intercede so destructively in human affairs. He has saved a remnant.

This psalm tells of God's protection and defence of his people. Perhaps the psalmist thinks of Isaiah 8:6-7; there "streams" (v. 4) are what God provides to the godly. The "city of God" is Jerusalem, God's dwelling place on earth. Even if natural disasters (earthquakes, vv. 2-3) or political turmoil (v. 6) occur, or earth returns to its primordial chaotic state ("waters", v. 3), God will remain ("not be moved", v. 5), answering night-long prayer in the "morning". Israel has suffered "desolations" (v. 8) for not doing God's will. In a liturgy, a priest or prophet invites participants to consider God's deeds: he ends political turmoil, bringing peace (v. 9). Recognize that God is supreme over all the earth! (v. 10) He is with his people and keeps them safe (v. 11).

Romans 1:16-17;3:22b-28,(29-31)

NRSV

Paul unashamedly preaches the "gospel" in (or to) the seat of world power, Rome. The good news is, for the faithful, whatever their ethnic origins, God exercising his "power" to restore us to oneness with him. We respond in faith to God's trust in us ("faith for faith", 1:17). This is God's gift ("grace", 3:24) to us, given in Christ's death on the cross ("sacrifice of atonement", 3:25), emancipating us, buying us back ("redemption", 3:24), by cancelling our sins. God has every right to punish us, but he chose not to ("forbearance", 3:25), thus showing his ultimate goodness and integrity ("righteousness"). God acted to show his uprightness and his acceptance of the one who believes (3:26). "Boasting" (3:27) about our achievements is pointless, for God acts on the principle ("law") of faith, not of deeds. A person is brought to oneness with God by faith without needing to obey Mosaic "law" (3:28). The God of Israel is God of us all ("God is one", 3:30), so we are all saved by the same means: faith. "Law" in 3:31 means *the whole of the Old Testament*. Paul affirms its message, properly understood.

Matthew 7:21-29

NRSV

Jesus has said that those who speak for him will be known "by their fruits" (v. 20), and has warned of "false prophets" (v. 15). Those who acknowledge him, and even do miracles, but lack his love, can expect to be judged harshly by him when he comes again. In vv. 24-28, he uses a parable to illustrate an important point. Perhaps he thinks of the houses being built beside and in a Palestinian *wadi*, a ravine with steep sides. Dry in the summer, it turns into a raging torrent when the rains come. The "wise man" (v. 24) prepares for what is to come by going to the effort of building on the side of the ravine, but the "foolish man" (v. 26) does not think ahead and so takes the easy way. Clearly, the first man stands for those who live a life of Christ's love and of the ethics he expects. In taking this example, perhaps Jesus recalls Noah and the Flood. V. 28 marks the end of one of the five teaching sections of Matthew; the evangelist ends the others in similar terms. This section is the Sermon on the Mount. Both Jesus and "their scribes" (v. 29, non-Christian ones) taught based on tradition, but Jesus understands the will of the Father (v. 21) and lives and does accordingly. He teaches the whole of biblical tradition but the scribes limited themselves to legal material.