

Noah And The Robots

Genesis 9:8-17, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15
Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
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Pastor Tom Thews

Genesis 9:8-17 (NIV)

⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: ⁹ “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you ¹⁰ and with every living creature that was with you — the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you every living creature on earth. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

¹² And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: ¹³ I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. ¹⁶ Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.” ¹⁷ So God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.”

1 Peter 3:18-22 (NIV)

¹⁸ For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, ¹⁹ through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison ²⁰ who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also — not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand — with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Mark 1:9-15 (NIV)

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ As Jesus was coming up out of the water, He saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

¹² At once the Spirit sent Him out into the desert, ¹³ and He was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended Him.

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ “The time has come,” He said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Noah and the Robots

It sounds like a rock group, doesn't it —“Noah and the Robots?” Some of you probably think the title of my message is a bit frivolous. It may be, but the subject matter we are going to discuss this morning is not frivolous at all.

I read something interesting about the famous novelist Charles Dickens. It seems that Dickens wrote all his great stories in installments. Week after week, Dickens would spin out his tales and the English public would breathlessly wait to see what was going to happen next to such characters as Oliver Twist, Pip, Miss Havisham, and all the other great characters Dickens created.

Dickens used to say that when he began a novel, he really had no idea how the story would end. He said that his characters, which began as figments in his imagination, quickly assumed a life of their own. Sometimes they made decisions that surprised him as the author. While Dickens thought that he was the sole author constructing the narrative, his characters were busy taking the story in a direction that he, the author, had not originally intended.

When I read that, I couldn't help but think of the creation of human beings. When God created us, He did the most shocking thing imaginable.

HE GAVE US THE FREEDOM TO DECIDE OUR OWN DESTINY. GOD GAVE US FREE WILL.

Think about the implications of that truth for a moment. God created us to be free moral agents.

Many theologians believe that this is what the writer of Genesis meant when he wrote that God created man and woman in His own image. It didn't mean that we look like God. The scriptures are quite clear, God is Spirit. We are flesh. We have no idea what God looks like, but chances are it's nothing like us.

No — but I think that one of the ways in which we are like God is that we can think and dream and, most importantly of all, we can decide which of the things we think about and dream about are worth our time. We can decide which of the things we think about and dream about are in our best interest and the best interest of others that we share this earth with. We are free to be all we can be — or we are free to destroy ourselves and everything good in our lives.

Can you imagine God taking such a risk? Surely God realized that we might give in to our dark side. Surely God realized that we might disappoint Him. But God did it anyway. Obviously God didn't want to share the world with a bunch of puppets where He would always be pulling the strings. He wanted creatures He could love, and who would love Him in return. But what a risk! What if these beings that God created and whom He loved decided they didn't want to have anything at all to do with Him?

Let's use an analogy from the modern world — particularly from the near future. This is where the robots come in.

If you have ever read articles about the future, you are probably aware that one of the great fears that many very bright people have about the future is the rapid development of so-called artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence or AI, as it is popularly known, refers to the development of computers that are able to do things normally done by people — in particular, things associated with people acting intelligently. Some of you have Siri on your iPhone or Google Now or Microsoft’s Cortana on your computer. Those are forms of artificial intelligence. Self-driving cars — which are already on the road in some places — are another form of AI.

Anytime a piece of equipment is programmed to perform like a human — as if that equipment had a brain like ours — that is artificial intelligence.

To put AI into perspective, you have to understand what’s happening in the world of computers. Computers are getting faster and more powerful at an astounding pace. In fact, according to Moore’s Law, they are doubling in speed and power every couple of years.

To put it plainly, this means that, in the very near future we will have computers that are smarter than we are. The fear is that these super-smart computers may one day decide that they don’t need humans anymore!

This is not merely the plot of a bad science fiction movie. Our children and grandchildren may live in such a world. One well-respected futurist has claimed that such a scenario may be possible as soon as the year 2045. Do the math and see whether you will still be around by then. Many of you will.

Normally when we think of intelligent machines, we think of robots. Elon Musk, the brilliant creator of the Tesla automobile and founder of SpaceX suggested recently that once the intelligence of robots exceeds ours these robots might use humans as pets.

Musk claims that when computers become smarter than people, they may treat us like “pet labradors.” Musk also said that humanity needs to be careful about what it programs super-intelligent robots to do. He uses the example of asking these robots to find out what makes people happy.

Musk said, “[Robots] may conclude that all unhappy humans should be terminated. Or that we should all be captured [and have] dopamine and serotonin injected directly into our brains to maximize happiness because [these robots might conclude] that dopamine and serotonin are what cause happiness, therefore [they ought to] maximize it.”

Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak made similar comments this past year. He says artificial intelligence predictions are rapidly coming true — and it is a dangerous reality. Along with famed scientist, Stephen Hawking, Steve Wozniak and Musk are seeking to warn people about the possible risks of the rapid advances that are taking place right now in science and technology before it is too late.

I know that seems far out, but think about it. The time to face such possible dangers is coming very fast.

OUR POINT FOR TODAY, HOWEVER, IS THAT IT’S ALWAYS RISKY TO GIVE ANY NEW CREATION FREE WILL — THE ABILITY TO DECIDE WHAT IS RIGHT OR WRONG — WHAT IS APPROPRIATE OR INAPPROPRIATE.

Those creatures may turn against you. Yet God took that risk. He created humanity in His own image, giving us the freedom to pursue our own destiny.

That brings us to our lesson for the day from the book of Genesis. It is the story of Noah — one of the best known and best loved stories in the Scripture.

You know the story. God created humankind in His image, giving us the freedom to decide our destiny — and what did we do? Certainly not what was pleasing to God. We read in Genesis 6: “The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that He had made human beings on the earth, and His heart was deeply troubled. So the Lord said, ‘I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created — and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground — for I regret that I have made them (vs. 5-7).’”

Some might say that God would still say the same thing today. As humorist Will Rogers once said, “God made man a little lower than the angels. Man has been getting lower ever since.” Mark Twain once said, “Man is the creature made at the end of the week’s work when God was tired.” This, said Twain, explains everything.

Do you ever wonder why people do some of the crazy things they do? People are amazing!

Whether from our flawed nature or from pure stupidity, we as a species — even the best of us — are at times certainly a disappointment to our Creator. The story of Noah and the flood is the culmination of that disappointment.

Saul Lieberman, a professor of the Talmud, or Jewish scriptures, once asked another professor to choose the most tragic character in the Bible.

The professor named prophets like Jeremiah or Ezekiel. Professor Lieberman disagreed. He declared that God is the most tragic character in the Bible. As proof, he pointed to the fact that in the beginning, God had declared His Creation to be very good. But only a few generations later, by the time of Noah, God was so dismayed over humanity’s corruption that God regretted creating humans in the first place.

God was so disappointed in humanity that God decided to wipe the slate clean and start all over. So God sent the great flood to destroy all life on the earth. Except God decided to save a remnant: Noah and his family as well as two of every kind of animal on the earth. This is important. God allowed a remnant to remain.

GOD NEVER GIVES UP HOPE ON HIS BELOVED PEOPLE.

You and I would give up. We would decide to cut our losses, walk away, conclude that humanity is hopeless. But not God. Francis Thompson called God the “Hound of Heaven” who pursues us “down the labyrinthine ways.” Regardless of how far we run away from God and His love, God remains in pursuit.

It's like a story that artist and pioneer missionary Lilius Trotter once told. Lilius served as a missionary in Muslim North Africa in the nineteenth century. In her writings, she includes the story of a girl named Melha. One day Lilius watched Melha go up to her father who was nearly blind and point to one of the pictures on the wall. It was a picture of Christ calling a little child to Him.

Melha turned to her father and said, "Look at Jesus!" Her father quite naturally replied, "I have no eyes, Oh my daughter — I cannot see." This did not faze this imaginative child. Melha lifted her head and eyes to the picture and said, "Oh Jesus, look at father!"

Lilius Trotter concludes her story with these words: "Was not that a bit of heavenly wisdom? Even when we feel lost, unseen, and insufficient to know God's grace, God sees us and offers us healing. [God] cares when we are in pain or hurt by others. Though we often face injustice in this world, God's healing and compassion will prevail for eternity."

Max Lucado, in his book, *A Gentle Thunder*, talks about the natural love of a mom for a newborn baby: "Your baby didn't even tell you she was coming. She just came. And what a coming. She rendered you a barbarian. You screamed. You swore. You bit bullets and tore the sheets. And now, look at you. Your back aches. Your head pounds. Your body is drenched in sweat. Every muscle is strained and stretched.

"You should be angry, but are you? Far from it. On your face is a for-longer-than-ever love. She has done nothing for you, yet you love her. She's brought pain to your body and nausea to your morning, yet you treasure her. Her face is wrinkled and her eyes dim, yet all you can talk about are her good looks and bright future. She's going to wake you up every night for the next six weeks, but that doesn't matter. I can see it on your face. You're crazy about her. That's the way God felt about Israel, and us."

Why did God choose to save Noah? According to Genesis, Noah was the only righteous man left in the world. That's kind of depressing — the only righteous man. But notice. The story of Noah has an ironic twist. After the waters subsided, and he leaves the ark, what does Noah do? He falls into a tawdry sin that would itself have brought God's wrath under other circumstances. Noah got drunk and lay naked in his tent. This was a no-no in Jewish culture. But do you see the irony in this quaint story? God chooses the only righteous man on earth — and he turns out to be not so completely righteous at all.

So this is where the story begins. God is disappointed with humanity. But fortunately, that is not how the story ends. The waters recede and God puts a rainbow in the heavens as a sign of His eternal grace. God makes a covenant with humanity. Never again will God send great floods to envelope the earth. Of course, on the cross of Calvary God makes a new covenant, a covenant that says that those who seek to have Christ's heart in their life will never die. We are not robots. We have free will. And sometimes we stumble and fall. But God never gives up on us. Remember that the next time you see a rainbow.

God's love will never fail you. And so if you have not already done so, I invite you to come into a relationship with God that we call salvation. You do that by accepting by faith God's Son, Jesus Christ, as your Lord and Savior and putting Jesus in charge of your life. If you have not previously done that, but do choose to do that today, please come and talk to me after the service so I can help you with your walk of faith. God bless and amen.

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