

Rebuilding the World with God

From the Theology of Work Project

Some situations may be redeemable. Others may be beyond redemption. In Genesis 6, God laments the state of the pre-flood world and its culture, and God decides to start over.

“The Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created..." But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.” (Genesis 6:6-8)

From Adam to us, God looks for persons who can stand against the culture of sin when needed. Adam failed the test but sired the line of Noah, "a righteous man, blameless in his generation" (Genesis 6:9). Noah is the first person whose work is primarily redemptive. Unlike others, who are busy wringing a living from the ground, Noah is called to save humanity and nature from destruction. In him we see the progenitor of priests, prophets, and apostles, who are called to the work of reconciliation with God. We also see the work of those who care for the environment. To greater or lesser degrees, all workers since Noah are called to redemption and reconciliation in their various occupations.

Noah's first task is a building project. And what a building project the ark is! Against the jeers of neighbors, Noah and his sons must fell thousands of cypress trees, and then hand plane them into planks enough to build a floating zoo. This three-deck vessel needs the capacity to carry many species of animals and to store their food and water. Despite the hardship, the text assures us that "Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him" (Genesis 6:22).

In the business world, entrepreneurs work against conventional wisdom to come up with new products or processes. They must be able to tolerate risk and take a long-term view, without getting hung up on short-term results. Noah faces what at times must have seemed like an impossible task, and some biblical scholars suggest that the actual building of the ark took a hundred years. It takes faith, tenacity, and careful planning to persist in the face of skeptics and critics. Today, innovators, entrepreneurs, and those who challenge prevailing opinions need a source of inner strength and conviction. When confronted with opposition and discouragement, they must turn to prayer and to the counsel of those wise in God.

For more than half a year, Noah, his family, and all of the animals bounce around inside the ark as the floods rage. When at last the flood subsides, the text echoes Genesis 1. God blows a "wind" over "the deep" and "the waters" recede (Genesis 8:1-3). The text emphasizes the continuity of God's creation, and yet it is also, in a sense, a new world, reshaped by the force of the flood. God was giving human culture a new opportunity to

start from scratch and get it right. For Christians, this foreshadows the new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21-22, when human life and work are brought to perfection within the cosmos healed from the effects of the Fall.

In this redemptive work, God assigns a human being the task of saving the animals and repopulating the planet. People have not been released from God's call to "have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). God is always at work to restore what was lost in the Fall. In doing so, God uses humanity as his chief instrument. People are fallen but are also in the process of being redeemed. By partnering in God's work of restoration, we become active participants in our own redemption.

On dry land, Noah's first act is to build an altar to the Lord. God binds himself to a covenant with Noah and his descendants never again to destroy the earth by flood, and God gives the rainbow as a sign of his promise. He repeats his blessing that Noah and his sons will "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1). He also affirms his promise of provision of food through their work, and sets requirements for justice among humans and for the protection of all creatures.

Although the earth and its people go through radical change, this story shows two things that remain consistent: 1) God's blessings for humanity, and 2) God's purpose for work.