

Noah Drinks Too Much

Psalm 104:14-15, Prov. 23:31-35, Genesis 9:18-29 by Patty Friesen (Feb. 5/17)

Of all the weird Old Testament stories we'll encounter this winter, this is one of the weirdest. While we have parallel creation and flood stories in other ancient Middle Eastern literature, there is no other story anywhere to parallel Noah's binge story. And needless to say, we didn't cover this story in Grade 6 Bible Class at Osler School! But it is in Genesis for a reason so let's explore what that is and what modern application we can glean from it.

We have come from the creation story with a general decline in the behavior and thoughts of humankind. So much so that by Genesis 6:12, every thought of humanity was continually evil. So God wipes the slate clean with the Flood, returning to the waters that covered the earth at creation. But God saves the remnant of Noah and his family in the ark to begin again and we have the beautiful story of their emergence from the ark, stepping on a new earth with plants growing as the dove discovered with the olive branch of hope that she brought to Noah in the ark. The Flood story is horrible and hopeful at the same time and the story of God's care of the animals and birds makes it one of my favourites as a child growing up.

As Noah steps forth on the new earth, he becomes another Adam, the first human to walk on a fresh creation and become the first gardener and grower of a grapevine. What is interesting is that planting a vineyard and inventing wine was a discovery attributed to the gods in other ancient Middle Eastern literature – the gift of the gods so to speak, so it is interesting that the Hebrews make wine a human prerogative. Noah's skill at farming and crop development demonstrates a new level of settlement and shift from a

nomadic life to agricultural life, providing some relief from being totally at the mercy of whatever they could gather from the wild. If we have our bibles, let's turn to Genesis 5:29, 5:29 about the birth and naming of Noah, "When Lamech had lived one hundred eighty-two years, he became the father of a son; he named him Noah, (meaning relief or rest), saying, 'Out of the ground that the Lord has cursed (back in Genesis 2), this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands.'" So Noah functions as a new Adam, whose original calling was to till the ground and keep it and from whom all nations of the world originate.

The development of vineyards and wine is an important story for the economic reality of Israel and comes to symbolize God's blessings of life and fertility. It was a gift parallel with the gift of food for the gladdening and strengthening of the human heart as we read in Psalms. But as with every good gift, there can be too much of a good thing and that which makes the heart glad can also promote drunkenness; what is good within God's creation often gets messed up by greedy human behavior.

The flood did not rid the world of sin and in this text sin manifests itself in the effects of drunkenness, disrespect of parents and familial conflict. The narrator does not explicitly judge Noah's drunkenness itself but the fact that it opens Noah to victimization and creates all kinds of family suffering. Noah, meaning rest has drunk himself into an restful unconscious state and lies naked in his tent. In this respect, he is naked like Adam in the Garden of Eden but gone is that state of innocent ignorance about being naked. Now nakedness is like when naked Adam hides from God and covers up with a fig leaf. Now, nakedness represents exposure and shame and vulnerability and something to hide that neither God nor anyone else wants to look at. It's revealing our ugly, sinful side.

The theme of nakedness is an issue of no little consequence in Israel, in both religious and social life. The prophets use this same theme to portray Israel's apostasy and resulting divine judgment, in which Israel's shameful behavior will be exposed for all to see in Ezekial 16.

Ham's seeing his father naked constitutes the problem, as confirmed by the detailed report of how his brothers make sure they do not see it. Yet, the problem involves more than seeing which was likely inadvertent; Ham errs in what he does with what he has seen. Rather than keep quiet or seek to remedy the situation, Ham tells tales to a wider audience. The matter entails the public disgrace of his father. Parent-child relationships were considered to be of the highest importance in Israel, which prescribes capital punishment for sons who rebel.

When Noah awakes from his stupor, he learns what has been done, because it is now public knowledge and he loses it. Likely hung over and grumpy, he curses his youngest son Ham's son Canaan. He is likely over-reacting but the power of his words in blessing and cursing seem to request a generational reach. In chapter 10, the lineage of Noah's sons focuses on Ham and Canaan as the ancestors of the Canaanites and Egyptians, Japheth the ancestor of the sea-faring people the Philistines and the favoured Shem, the ancestor of Abraham and the Israelites. Despite this divide of the nations, they all still have their same origin in Noah and the mix of good and evil will accompany every human endeavor, whether in individuals, families or nations down through the ages to our own time. Actions have consequences and sometimes, generational consequences.

This generational bible story of wine and drunkenness leads to my own generational story of wine and drunkenness, which my cousin chronicled in the Friesen

Family History he wrote 25 years ago. Cousin Carl wrote about the post-traumatic effects of the Russian revolution on Grandpa Friesen and his emigration from starvation in Russia in 1924 to the failed attempt at farming in Rosthern, Saskatchewan and Duchess, Alberta in the dirty 30's. Carl wrote publicly about Grandpa hanging out at the bars and coming home drunk, while Grandma tried to scrape together food for their 14 children at home. It is a memoir of painful family memories and it made my Friesen aunties mad that Carl exposed and shamed their father, making their family difficulty with alcoholism naked for the public to see.

Our family history with this disease shaped the next generation's attitude towards alcohol. My dad was an abstainer – refused to touch the stuff because he was afraid he was genetically predisposed to alcoholism. I'm grateful to have grown up in a stable home where my dad was always in control. He could get mad and swear in Low German but he was never out of control mad or passed out. I do not take that for granted. It meant however that we never really observed how alcohol could be used in moderation and celebration and we severely judged others who drank but the next generation went after the forbidden fruit with enthusiasm as teenagers, which was a disaster. In our small northern Alberta community, alcohol abuse resulted in teenage car wrecks, suicides and domestic violence.

Like my dad, I became an evangelist for abstinence and preached my first sermons as a youth minister on the call for total abstinence. If alcohol leads to such horrible consequences, we Christians should set the example for others and should never touch the stuff. Then I met Patrick - who like Noah made his own wine. Now I enjoy the

stuff and in this sermon would like to make the case for moderation and open conversation about our family stories of alcohol.

When paired with food, wine is a gift of the gods that gladdens the heart with friends around the supper table. But too much of a good thing, whether wine or food makes a problem and this could be a sermon about gluttony as well as drunkenness; any abuse of a good gift to fill our insecurities or loneliness or whatever empty addiction happens when we are alone in front of the TV. It's just that misuse of alcohol has weightier consequences on our families and communities despite its seeming social acceptance. Which is why this year our government is trying to change our drinking and driving culture from the top down with fines and vehicle confiscation.

But our confessions and conversations about alcohol and it's use and abuse need to happen from the bottom up, in church, challenging social norms of drunkenness and trying to talk openly about it amongst ourselves and with our teenagers and creating a safe culture for those who struggle with it. It appears that Noah drinking too much is a family story that never gets outdated and is still fitting for our time.

Let us pray: Gracious God, thank you for giving us all good gifts of the earth and giving us the wisdom to discern their use. We pray for ongoing discernment, courage and strength to know our limits with alcohol and to challenge others to know theirs. And most of all, we desire to be filled with Your Spirit for the work of your kingdom here on earth. Amen.