July 20, 2025
Genesis 6:5-22

We'll be exploring call stories for a few weeks here through August.

There's no shortage of people who've been called by God. Some calls we discern as trustworthy.

On the other hand, I'm guessing we all know of someone who's proclaimed that they've been called by God to do this or that and we're left thinking, *hmmm, i'm not so sure about that.* Or other times it seems far more clear, *no! God definitely didn't call you to do that."*

It's worth exploring, then, two questions:
Who calls when God calls?
When God calls, what's called for?

Today we're going to consider this idea of Call through the story of Noah, which I think helps us discern the character of the God who calls and what this God calls for.

So I think a good place to start is when we're a fetus in utero, developing in our mothers womb because we also need to know something about ourselves, those who hear and respond to God's call.

Our hearing develops before sight. (I doubt there's much to look at, anyway.) When the ears are formed and establish the right connections with the brain, the silence of the womb becomes a loud echo chamber of the mother's heartbeat and voice, gushing fluids, and voices and noises from another world on the outside.

Apparently, it's about 85 decibels in there, which is about as loud as a vacuum cleaner. So it's pretty loud.

I remember in the immediate aftermath of our first-born Henry being born, the nurses took him and did what nurses do to newborns. I went to get my first real look. He was crying as newborns cry. When I greeted him and welcomed him to the world his cries stopped for a moment and his head turned toward me. He couldn't see me, of course, except for shadows and light.

Who can say why he stopped and looked my way? I like to think maybe my voice was familiar. (This isn't entirely out of the question, as it seems newborns can recognize their mother's voice and there are abundance of stories about newborns seeming to recognize music that's been played during pregancy.)

Amidst the flood of stimuli and utter chaos those first seconds of life must be, I like to think he experienced something familiar. Amidst a sea of confusion overwhelming all his senses, maybe he turned toward me looking for a sound he recognized -- a call to life.

Maybe not, who can say.

He cried again after a few moments of silence. A cry that called me into an utterly new world, a new life and existence, and new identity -- parenthood.

This call and response structure is at the very heart of life. We're called into life, to live is already to respond to this call. And then we respond with our own call.

The writers of the Book of Genesis imagined God calling forth Creation. God calls, and *let there be*…. Creation emerges to respond with light and dark and day and night and land and sky… and life.

The call of God comes before and beyond our arrival, before and beyond our language, before and beyond our understanding. And yet it becomes enfleshed the moment we draw our first breath. When a newborn responds to the call to life with a call of their own -- a cry that proclaims, "feed me, do not harm me; shelter me, do not abandon me"-- and is met with a response of nourishment and shelter the cycle of Call and Response is already underway.

I think the theologians of Israel who wrote the *Book of Genesis* had something like this insight in mind when they wrote the first eleven chapters of the book. These are the stories that take us from Creation and the garden of Eden through the murder of Abel by his brother Cain, the flood and Noah's building of the ark and then the tower of Babel. This is called Israel's prehistory.

These are stories that are trying to make sense of the world and God and how the God revealed to them relates to Creation. This isn't history, it's proclamation. And what is it proclaiming?

Like theologians at any time and in any place, Israel's theologians are working within a particular culture, using symbols, language, and stories that shape their worldview and that are assumed and understood by their readers and listeners.

And these stories bear a striking resemblance to other creation stories that were circulating in the Ancient Near East, which contain similar themes about the loss of innocence, knowledge of good and evil, a great flood, and so on.

So here in Genesis, we can be sure that the theologians of Israel are not making historical claims, rather, and far more significantly, they are making a theological proclamation about the God that's been revealed to them. They are saying something deeply profound about what God is like.

And contrary to the many god's circulating in their time and place, YHWH, was not a god who was distant and indifferent about creation. God is a God who calls out to Creation and awaits a response.

God is a God moved by creation, who is responsive. And not only that! God is a God who grieves. When Creation turns to violence, to ensure nourishment and shelter through coercion and violence instead of trust, this God is heartbroken.

In our reading this morning, God sees the evil that encompasses the earth and the text says God, "was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart."

The grief that God experiences is the same pain attributed to the pain women will now experience during child labor after Adam and Eve are exiled from the garden.

As the Bible Scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it, it is misdirected to read into this story God's anger and wrath. Rather this depicts God coming undone while watching the good creation being uncreated, falling into despair and destruction. Brueggemann says,

"God is not enraged but saddened. God does not stand over against but with creation… We are confronted in this text not with a flood, but with a heavy, painful crisis in the dealings of God with creation. It is popularly thought that the crisis of the flood is to place the world in jeopardy. But a close reading indicates that it is the heart and person of God which are placed in crisis."

God is in crisis because Creation is in crisis. If God's purpose and will for Creation are being undone, then God's relationship with Creation is also being undone. God has so identified with Creation, that God's very own identity is at risk.

Rather than turn away, God calls out to Creation in the person of Noah because the relationship between God and Creation is not a relationship between a strong and powerful God and an utterly needy world, rather says Brueggamann, it is now a "tortured relation between a grieved God and a resistant world."

Now if the relationship between God and humanity is to be sustained, they must be willing to call out to each other from their own woundedness. God and humanity are connected by their wounds.

Now I don't want to simply skip over some problematic bits of this story. Like the fact that God is still imagined to have caused a flood that destroyed most of life, save for Noah's family and select animals. Those questions are worth exploring another time.

But if we keep in mind the theological context in which the writers of Genesis are working in, this story is addressing the reality and anxiety of Israel. This anxiety is given language in the Psalms, when in the seeming chaos and uncertainty of life, has *God forgotten God's people?*

This story is a proclamation that God grieves with Creation amidst its divisions and fractures and calls out to it.

Here is a God who continues to call out to the primordial chaos and waters in hope that life will respond, trusting God with it's wounds.

Let's return to the moment of birth once more. Or at least the moment of my children's birth. We didn't have names picked out before either of our kids were born, so it took us a day or so to name them. I remember both times feeling a sense of loss when we finally decided on a name; it was almost like naming seemed too ordinary, even irreverent.

This was a sacred event -- a newborn arrived, like something from another world, a transcendence, they came as life. There was an overwhelming presence, where before there had been nothing. An irresistible presence, a life unmarked and uncontaminated, not-yet scarred by living.

To commemorate the moment with a name seemed like a responsibility too enormous to carry and as well as a gesture too feeble to hold the meaning of this new arrival.

There was a purity and innocence to their presence, and the naming, for me, seemed like the moment when they transitioned from the holy and sacred moment of transcendence to the "okay, now you're a person and it's time to get on with life."

And I remember experiencing that as some sort of loss, that maybe something like their essence was lost, or ruptured. It was now time to exist, life must get on living. *It's now time to come and join the rest of us, now you are one of us, and you will have to navigate this fraught and difficult world with us. You have now risen -- or fallen, I'm not sure--into the land of the living.*

For now our living is utterly intertwined and dependent on each other. Their wounds will now be my wounds, and no doubt my wounds have been handed down. We call out to each other and respond, immersed in a dialogue without which we both cease to be. And we hope something is being healed and something is being made whole.

I like to imagine this is something of the insight the theologians of Israel were trying to get at. The God who calls is a God who is vulnerable enough to be wounded and grieve alongside the wounded. And when God calls, God calls for healing and life.