

Don't Look Up

Stephen Van Kuiken
North Congregational U.C.C.
Columbus, Ohio
July 16, 2023

Ancient Witness: Genesis 6:1-7

This story of the flood and the wiping out of humanity is one of the oldest stories in human history. It originated as a poem called the Epic of Gilgamesh, a story about a hero in ancient Mesopotamian mythology. The myth is thought to be based on a real king of the same name who ruled the city of Uruk, sometime between 2,000 and 2,500 BCE. That's almost 5,000 years ago! They have found fragments of this ancient poem that were written around 2,100 BCE, and it is one of the oldest surviving pieces of literature. So this story was first written by the Sumerians and later carried on by the Babylonians over 1,000 years later.

Most biblical scholars agree that this flood myth existed many generations before the Hebrew story of Noah that was probably written about 1,300 years after the Sumerians. And there are lots of similarities. Gilgamesh, the hero, was 2/3 god and 1/3 human. And we have this strange language in the Hebrew version:

When people began to multiply on the face of the earth and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that they were beautiful and they took wives for themselves. (vs.1-2)

What does this mean? Well, the “sons of God” refer to these divine beings who belonged to the heavenly court. And when they had sex with the human women, the women bore children that were a mix of divine and human called, the Nephilim, these beings that were gigantic, with superhuman power. And the Hebrew text says, “These were the heroes of old, the warriors of renown.” (vs. 4) These Nephilim sound a lot like Gilgamesh—part god and part human.

The ancient myth said that Gilgamesh was searching for immortality, and he meets Ut-napishtim, a character upon which Noah was based.

Ut-napishtim was commanded by the assembly of the gods to build a ship to weather the great deluge that destroyed humankind. Like the story of Noah, the extent to the flood was global, and it was the result of humanity's wickedness. And like Noah, Ut-napishtim brought his relatives and all species of creatures aboard the vessel. In the Babylonian version, the flood lasted six days and nights, whereas the Hebrew version has it last 40 days and nights. Both stories have the hero send birds to test if there was dry land. Ut-napishtim landed on Mt. Nizir, and Noah landed on Mt. Ararat, about 300 miles away.

So it's pretty clear that an ancient myth about a catastrophic flood was circulating in the culture for over a millennia, passed down generation to generation orally. And both the Babylonians and Hebrews adopted this myth as their own, making changes and adapting their versions of the story.

Now, modern people—post Enlightenment and scientific people—like to focus on facts. Did this really happen? Was there really a global flood? How big was the boat? And so forth.

But for ancient people, the myth was meant to convey deeper truths about the nature of humanity and a call to a higher way of living, a call to heed a deeper wisdom.

The primordial flood story was about an extinction event, a horrific disaster of unimaginable proportion. It was the result of human wickedness—selfishness, greed, lust for power, and callousness toward the needs of others. It is the story of a catastrophic future that the people had an ability to avoid. But alas, they did not.

Last year, I saw the film, “Don’t Look Up,” that appeared on Netflix. It has an all-star cast: Jennifer Lawrence, Leonardo DiCaprio, Merril Streep. It had been labeled a satire and as an allegory. True enough. But I also saw it as mythic literature, similar to the ancient Sumerian story that survives today. And it’s a lot like prophetic literature that functions to awaken people, before it’s too late, to the destruction and devastation that injustice brings.

However we may want to characterize or categorize the film, I recommend it, not as a cinematic masterpiece, but for its message and relevance.

The story is about an astronomer and his assistants who discover a huge comet that is on a collision course toward earth. Like the meteor that hit the earth 66 million years ago, this comet would also be an extinction event. So the two main characters try to warn the world, to awaken people, so they might do something to stop it from happening. In the ancient extinction-event myth, God is the cause, because God was seen as the cause of everything. In the modern extinction-event story, the comet just appears, because that’s just how the universe works sometimes.

But in both stories, it is the greed, selfishness and willful ignorance that prevent humankind from averting catastrophe. One character, a mixture of Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk, sees the potential to make trillions of dollars. So he convinces the government to follow his risky plan to wait until the last moment to break up the comet to harvest the precious metals as it enters the atmosphere. Of course, this over reliance on technology fails, and the path of hubris and arrogance leads to utter and complete destruction.

The scientists do their best to warn people, to show them the facts and the reality. But they are thwarted by politicians who are blinded by their own lust for power, and they minimize and downplay the threat. In one scene, we have this exchange:

Dr. Oglethorpe: Madam President, this comet is what we call a planet killer.

President Orlean: So how certain is this?

Dr. Randall Mindy: Ninety nine point seven eight percent to be exact.

President Orlean: Call it seventy percent, and let’s just, let’s move on.

Kate Dibiasky: But it’s not even close to seventy percent.

President Orlean: You cannot go around saying to people that there’s a hundred percent chance that they are going to die. You know? It’s just nuts.

Eventually, everyone can actually see the comet in the sky heading toward earth. And the scientists shout, “Just look up! See for yourselves!”

The politicians and their followers responded with “Don’t look up!” like the chant “U.S.A!” that one hears at rallies. It represents a short-sighted lust for power, a willful ignorance and a denial of reality. As a modern myth, it reveals something important about the nature of humanity, an age-old truth. There are those who are righteous, selfless and heroic. But there is also selfishness, greed and callous disregard for others—what the Bible often refers to as “wickedness.”

Of course, one cannot hear any of these extinction stories without thinking of global warming. The warning signs are all there. The science is indisputable. The reality, undeniable. And yet, powerful forces prevent us from the collective effort to avoid disaster. Lust for power and greed, and fear and complacency seduce us from looking up, from taking needed action.

Last week, we had the hottest day on planet earth ever recorded, and probably the hottest average temperature in 125,000 years. Then we broke that record the next day. And then we broke *that* record the day after that. The ocean temperatures are also setting all-time record highs. Make no mistake; the globe is warming. The Midwest and Eastern U.S. experienced this summer something that we have experienced for several years, now, in the West. Wildfire smoke blew down from Canada and the air quality reached dangerously unhealthy levels from New York to Chicago. And with warmer, dryer summers, these fires will continue to increase in both frequency and intensity year after year. This is the new normal. And it’s a warning of far more terrible things to come.

And we will not be able to meet the challenge of rising levels of CO₂ and global warming with just voluntary individual actions. I agree with Naomi Klein in her book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (2014), in which she says that we need a total, collective effort and sacrifice on the scale that we had for World War II to marshal our resources as a nation through laws and governmental action. “We are stuck,” she writes, “because the actions that would give us the best chance of averting catastrophe... are extremely threatening to an elite minority that has a stranglehold over our economy, our political process and most of our major media outlets.”

Now, the ancient myth is pretty grim. There is immeasurable pain and suffering. Almost all life and humanity are annihilated. No rainbow can sugar-coat this kind of horror. And yet, there is an affirmation that God will find a way to a new future. What can this mean to our modern minds? Perhaps, if we cannot overcome our own wickedness, our selfishness, our inaction as a species—another extinction event will unfold and the story might continue perhaps in another galaxy, other planets, other forms of life.

The timeless, ancient story beckons us to *look up*, to face our objective reality, to come to terms with our shortcomings and destructive tendencies, our lust for power, our greed, our lack of concern for future generations and for the sacred life of all things. We are called to look up, but also to *look within*.

In the ancient creation myth, the Hebrew word, *adam*, literally means “mud creature.” But human beings are creatures not just of the mud, but of the stars. There is the divine image within us all. So the ancient myth calls us to look within, to a deep wisdom, to the heroic journey, to courage to speak truth to power and to fight for justice. It calls us to be guided by love for others and by a reverence for life.

It’s still the same story. Perhaps the only story. And we have a choice.

Amen.