

SESSION 3

Through Water

Noah, the Household Covenant, and the Bow in the Clouds

LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim. Participants discover that God's covenant with Noah widens the bond from a couple to a household, that the flood is an act of re-creation as much as judgment, and that the New Testament itself names the flood a figure of baptism.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church has always seen Noah's ark as a figure of the Church and the flood waters as a prefiguration of baptism, "which now saves you" (1 Peter 3:21; CCC 845, 1219).

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Genesis 6 opens with the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent already at war, exactly as Genesis 3:15 promised: humanity has grown, but "the wickedness of man was great in the earth" (6:5). The heartbreaking line is 6:6, God "grieved... to his heart." This is covenant language; contracts are breached, but only family grieves you to the heart. Against that darkness, one man "found favor" and "walked with God" (6:8 to 9), the very verb used of Eden (3:8). Noah is a remnant of the original communion.

The word "covenant" (*berith*) appears in Genesis 6:18 for the first time in the Bible: "I will establish my covenant with you." Interestingly, God says establish (*heqim*), not cut, which many scholars take as confirming rather than creating, upholding the creation bond from Session 1 through one faithful family. Either way, notice the scope: "you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you." The covenant unit has widened from a couple to a household. This is Thread A moving, though the group should not be told so yet.

The flood is deliberately narrated as de-creation and re-creation. The waters above and below, separated on day two of creation, collapse back together (7:11 reverses 1:6 to 7); the earth returns to the watery chaos of Genesis 1:2. Then creation happens again: a wind (*ruach*, the same word as the Spirit hovering in 1:2) passes over the waters (8:1), dry land emerges, the animals come out to "be fruitful and multiply" (8:17), and Noah, a new Adam, receives the original blessing verbatim (9:1 with 1:28). The flood is not God losing his temper; it is God washing the world and starting the family again.

The covenant of Genesis 9 comes with a sign, just as, in this study's covenantal reading of Genesis 1, the creation bond carried the Sabbath as its sign: "I set my bow in the cloud" (9:13). The Hebrew word is simply the word for a war bow, and many interpreters have seen here God hanging up his weapon, a warrior's gesture of sworn peace. And the text says, remarkably, that the sign is a reminder for God: "I will look upon it and remember the everlasting covenant" (9:16). God binds himself.

Note also what the covenant permits and demands. Blood enters the diet with a restriction (9:4) and human life is fenced with the image of God (9:6): the first explicit law about blood, planting Thread B. And note honestly what the covenant does not fix: within a few verses Noah is drunk and shamed in his tent; his son Ham dishonors him in an episode whose exact nature is debated, and Noah's curse falls, strikingly, on Ham's son Canaan (9:20 to 27). The flood washed the world, but not the heart. Something more than water will be needed, and the rest of the study is the story of God providing it.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

The New Testament reads Noah's story in two directions. Forward from Noah: Jesus compares the days of his coming to the days of Noah (Matthew 24:37 to 39), and Hebrews 11:7 holds up Noah's obedient fear as faith. Backward from the sacraments: 1 Peter 3:20 to 21 says eight persons "were saved through water," and then, with a boldness that startles many readers, adds "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you." The Greek word is *antitypos*: baptism is the antitype, the reality to which the flood pointed. The Church's Easter Vigil blessing of baptismal water still names the flood among the great foreshadowings.

The Fathers extended the figure to the ark itself: one wooden vessel, one door, one family, salvation inside amid judgment outside, and even the dove returning with the olive branch as an image of the Spirit and peace (compare the Spirit descending "like a dove" at the baptism of Jesus, Matthew 3:16, over the waters of the Jordan). The ark became the Church; the flood became baptism; the dove became the Spirit. None of this is strained: Scripture itself started the chain, and the Church completed it.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Augustine *City of God, Book 15, Chapter 26*

St. Augustine taught that the ark is without doubt a figure of the City of God on pilgrimage, that is, of the Church, saved by the wood on which hung the Mediator. He even saw meaning in the door set in the ark's side, through which all who were saved entered: an image of the wound opened in the side of the crucified Christ, from which the sacraments flow.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyprian of Carthage *On the Unity of the Church, Chapter 6 (c. AD 251)*

In the third century, St. Cyprian argued from Noah for the unity of the Church: if anyone outside the ark of Noah was able to escape the flood, then someone outside the Church might also escape. His point was pastoral and urgent: God gave one vessel of salvation, and schism is a decision to swim.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom *Homilies on Genesis*

Preaching on Noah, St. John Chrysostom lingered on the loneliness of righteousness: Noah walked with God for decades against the current of an entire culture, with no congregation but his household. Virtue, Chrysostom insisted, does not take its cue from the crowd; one faithful family was enough for God to save the world through.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 56 to 58. After the unity of the human race was shattered by sin, God at once sought to save humanity part by part. The covenant with Noah after the flood gives expression to the principle of the divine economy toward the nations, and it remains in force during the times of the Gentiles, until the universal proclamation of the Gospel.

CCC 701. At the end of the flood, the dove released by Noah returns with a fresh olive tree branch in its beak, a sign that the earth is again habitable. When Christ comes up from the water of his baptism, the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, comes down upon him and remains with him.

CCC 845. To reunite all his children, scattered and led astray by sin, the Father willed to call the whole of humanity together into his Son's Church. The Church is the place where humanity must rediscover its unity and salvation. She is "the world reconciled." She is that bark which, in the words of the Fathers, is prefigured by Noah's ark, which alone saves from the flood.

CCC 1219. The Church has seen in Noah's ark a prefiguring of salvation by Baptism, for by it "a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water."

THREAD WATCH

Leader only. Do not reveal. These threads are planted and developed quietly; participants discover them.

- Thread A, the widening family: couple has become household ("you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives," Genesis 6:18). Say nothing; the chart comes around Session 8.
- Thread B, blood and oath: blood is legislated for the first time (Genesis 9:4 to 6), and Noah's first act on dry land is an altar and a sacrifice (8:20). The pleasing aroma that moves God to swear peace is the thread tightening.
- Thread C, the mountain: the ark rests "upon the mountains of Ararat" (8:4), and the new world plausibly begins with worship on high ground (an inference from 8:4). Second mountain of the study; keep the tally privately.
- The covenant formula has still not been spoken. One session away. Let the anticipation build in your own preparation.
- Baptismal thread opens tonight via 1 Peter 3:20 to 21 and will resolve sacramentally in Session 11 (the Church, baptism, Eucharist).

SESSION GOALS

1. Participants have located the first occurrence of "covenant" in the Bible (Genesis 6:18) and noticed the widened scope: a household, not just a couple.
2. Participants can describe the flood as de-creation and re-creation, with Noah as a new Adam (Genesis 9:1 beside 1:28).
3. Participants have discovered 1 Peter 3:20 to 21 themselves and wrestled honestly with "baptism... now saves you."
4. Participants understand the bow in the clouds as God hanging up his war bow, a sworn and self binding peace.
5. Participants can articulate why the flood was not enough: water washed the world but not the heart (Genesis 9:20 to 27).

TIME NOTE (90 MINUTES)

Ninety minutes. Opening prayer and Win, 15 minutes. Build, 55 minutes: protect 20 minutes for the 1 Peter discovery and the steelman that follows it; that exchange is where the session becomes Catholic formation and not just Bible trivia. Send, Live It, memory verse, and closing prayer, 20 minutes.

- If running long: Compress Q3 (de-creation parallels) by supplying the Genesis 1 references yourself instead of having the group hunt them.
- If running long: Assign the Dig Deeper box on the dove for home reading.

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DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

Father, when the world you loved filled up with violence, you grieved to your heart, and yet you would not let the story end. You found one family, you built one vessel, and you carried life through the waters. Carry us tonight. Wash what needs washing, keep us inside the one ark you have given, and hang your bow where our fear can see it. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN | OPENING QUESTIONS

W1. Have you ever had to hold a conviction alone, at work, at school, in your family, while everyone around you shrugged? What kept you standing, or what wore you down?

W2. What is something you own or keep purely as a reminder of a promise (a ring, a photo, a keepsake)? Why do physical signs help?

BUILD | INTO THE WORD

1. Read Genesis 6:5 to 9. Verse 6 says the LORD was "grieved... to his heart." We said in Session 1 that a contract exchanges goods and a covenant exchanges persons. Which kind of relationship grieves you to the heart when it breaks, and what does this verse therefore tell us about how God holds the world?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Breached contracts anger or inconvenience; only broken family bonds grieve to the heart. The verse confirms Session 1 from God's side: he is not a vendor reviewing a failed account but a Father over a ruined household. Note too that "Noah walked with God" (6:9) uses Eden's verb (3:8): amid the wreckage, one man still keeps the garden relationship.

LIVE DISCOVERY *(let the group find it)*

2. Your homework asked you to count. Where does the word "covenant" appear for the first time in the entire Bible, and read the verse aloud: who exactly is included in it?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Genesis 6:18, the first *berith* in Scripture: "I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you." Let the group notice the roster. In Eden the covenant bond, as we read it in Session 1, embraced a couple; here it embraces a household: two generations, four married couples, under one roof. Do not explain why that matters yet; just make sure they have seen it. (Leader note: God says establish, not cut, which many take as upholding the creation covenant rather than starting from scratch.)

3. The flood is told as creation running in reverse. Compare Genesis 7:11 with 1:6 to 7, and Genesis 8:1 with 1:2. What is being undone, and what begins again?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Day two of creation separated the waters above from the waters below; in 7:11 "the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened," the separation collapses, and the world returns to the watery chaos of 1:2. Then 8:1: a ruach, the same Hebrew word for wind or spirit that hovered over the waters in 1:2, passes over the earth in a deliberate echo of creation, and dry land emerges again. The flood is de-creation followed by re-creation. God is not merely punishing a world; he is washing one.

4. Read Genesis 9:1 to 7 beside Genesis 1:28 to 30. What does God say to Noah that we have heard before, word for word, and what two new laws about blood appear?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" is Adam's blessing repeated verbatim; Noah steps into the world as a new Adam, head of a renewed human family. The new material is about blood: lifeblood may not be eaten (9:4), and human blood may not be shed with impunity because man is made in God's image (9:6). Blood, the carrier of life, is being fenced off as sacred. File it; the study will keep returning to what blood is for.

5. Read Genesis 8:20 to 22. What is Noah's very first act on the renewed earth, and what does God do in response? What does that sequence teach about the relationship between worship and covenant?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Noah builds an altar and offers sacrifice before he builds a house, plants a field, or does anything else; and it is in response to the pleasing aroma that God resolves never again to destroy every living creature. Worship precedes and undergirds the covenant of peace. Also notice where this happens: the ark rested on the mountains of Ararat (8:4), so the narrative strongly suggests the new world begins with sacrifice on high ground. Eden was high ground too. Keep watching the elevation.

6. Read Genesis 9:12 to 17. The "bow" God sets in the cloud is, in Hebrew, simply the word for a battle bow. What is God doing with his weapon, and, strangest of all, who does verse 16 say the sign is meant to remind?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The word is the ordinary Hebrew word for a battle bow, and many readers, ancient and modern, have seen God hanging up his weapon, a warrior's pledge of peace. What the text states outright is stranger still: God will look on it "and remember the everlasting covenant." The sign is for God's own remembering; he has bound himself, publicly, in the sight of every generation. Covenants run on oath, and here God swears one to the whole biosphere, "every living creature of all flesh."

LIVE DISCOVERY *(let the group find it)*

7. Does the New Testament ever tell us what the flood was ultimately about? Somewhere in 1 Peter 3, the apostle connects Noah's water to something in your own life. Find the passage and read it exactly as written.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

1 Peter 3:20 to 21: eight persons "were saved through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of

Jesus Christ." Let the plain words land before anyone softens them: baptism now saves you. The Greek behind "corresponds to this" is *antitypos*: the flood was the type, baptism is the reality. This is why the Easter Vigil blessing of the font still names the flood.

Build, Then Press | "Baptism Is Only a Symbol"

State the position at full strength, because devout Christians hold it. On this view, baptism is an outward testimony to an inward faith that has already saved the person; the water does nothing, God does everything, and to say water saves is to confuse the sign with the thing signified, even to smuggle in works. Verses like 1 Peter 3:21 are read as shorthand: baptism "saves" only in the sense that it pictures the salvation faith already received. It is a serious position motivated by a serious concern: protecting the sufficiency of Christ.

8. Honor the concern, then press the text. Peter seems to anticipate exactly this debate: he denies one thing about baptism and affirms another. What does he deny it is, what does he say it does, and through whose power does he say it works? And if it were a bare symbol, why does he choose the verb "saves" and anchor it in the resurrection rather than in the believer's testimony?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Peter denies that baptism is "a removal of dirt from the body," a mere external washing, and affirms that it "now saves you... through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." The power is Christ's, not the water's; that is precisely the Catholic teaching, that the sacraments are efficacious because in them Christ himself is at work (CCC 1127; on baptism specifically, CCC 1227). The symbol only view protects Christ's sufficiency by muting Christ's chosen instrument; the Catholic view protects it by letting him work how he said he would. Noah, note, was not saved by his interior faith floating alone: his faith built the ark and got in (Hebrews 11:7). Grace supplied the plan and the rescue; faith obeyed through wood and water. So it is with the font.

Leader note: someone sharp will raise the good thief, or a catechumen who dies before Easter, or the unbaptized martyr. Welcome the question; the Church asked it first. Her answer holds both truths without blinking: "God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments" (CCC 1257). The Church has always held that those who die for the faith (baptism of blood) and catechumens who die desiring baptism (baptism of desire) are saved without the font (CCC 1258 to 1260). This is not a loophole that shrinks the sacrament; it is the largeness of the God who gave it. The normal, commanded, covenant path is the water (John 3:5); the God of the covenant remains free to save by extraordinary paths, and that freedom is his, not our presumption. One more precision, especially in mixed company: St. Cyprian's ark image teaches the necessity of Christ and his Church; it does not declare that every person visibly outside Catholic communion is knowingly refusing rescue. The Church distinguishes full incorporation from real but imperfect communion, and teaches that those who through no fault of their own do not know Christ or his Church may yet be saved by grace that always comes from Christ through his Church (CCC 837 to 838, 846 to 848). Schism as a deliberate decision is one thing; a person's inherited situation is another, and God alone judges hearts.

DIG DEEPER The Dove Over the Waters

Three water scenes, one bird. The Spirit hovers over the waters of creation (Genesis 1:2). Noah's dove goes out over the flood waters and returns with an olive branch, the sign that judgment is over and the earth is habitable (Genesis 8:10 to 11). And at the Jordan, as Jesus comes up from the water, the Spirit descends on him "like a dove" (Matthew 3:16), and the Father speaks peace: "my beloved Son." The Catechism (701) draws the line explicitly. Every baptism is a small flood story: the old world drowned, the dove descending, the family walking out onto new ground.

9. Now the honest ending. Read Genesis 9:20 to 23. Within a few verses of the everlasting covenant, what happens in Noah's tent, and what does that tell us about what the flood did and did not accomplish?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Noah, the new Adam, plants a garden (a vineyard), takes its fruit, and ends up naked and ashamed while sin coils through his family; the echoes of Genesis 3 are deliberate. The flood washed the world but not the human heart. Judgment, even total judgment, cannot fix what is broken inside us. So the story cannot end here: God will have to do something more surgical than a flood, and next session he starts, with one old man under the stars.

SEND | TAKING IT OUT

S1. Noah walked with God against an entire culture with only his household beside him. Where is your ark right now, the community that keeps your head above water, and who are you helping keep afloat?

S2. The bow in the clouds was a sign even God looks at. What visible, physical reminder of your baptism could you put where you will actually see it this week?

Live It This Week

- Find out your baptism date this week (ask a parent, or call the parish office). Put it on your calendar as a yearly feast.
- Next time you enter the church, sign yourself from the font slowly and deliberately, and say in your heart: "I came through the water."
- Before next session, read Genesis 12:1 to 9 and Genesis 15. In chapter 15, pay attention to what happens to the animals, and who passes between them.

Closing Prayer

Father, you carried eight souls through the drowning of a world, and you have carried us through the waters of baptism into the ark of the Church. When the rain is loud and the culture is louder, keep us inside. Show us your bow when we are afraid, and make our households, like Noah's, small vessels of your covenant. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth."

Genesis 9:13 (RSV2CE)

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LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order of use. Mark these in your Bible before the group arrives.

Core Passages (in order of use)

- Genesis 6:5 to 9, grieved to his heart; Noah walked with God
- Genesis 6:18, first occurrence of covenant in the Bible; the household roster (live discovery)
- Genesis 7:11 with 1:6 to 7, and 8:1 with 1:2, de-creation and re-creation
- Genesis 9:1 to 7 with 1:28 to 30, the new Adam; the blood laws
- Genesis 8:20 to 22 and 8:4, altar on the mountain, the pleasing aroma
- Genesis 9:12 to 17, the unstrung bow; God remembers
- 1 Peter 3:20 to 21, baptism now saves you (live discovery)
- Genesis 9:20 to 23, the vineyard and the tent; what water could not wash

Supporting Passages

- Hebrews 11:7, by faith Noah constructed an ark
- Matthew 24:37 to 39, as were the days of Noah
- Genesis 8:10 to 11 with Matthew 3:16, the dove over the waters
- Matthew 3:16 to 17, the Jordan, the dove, the beloved Son
- Genesis 3:8, walking with God (Eden echo)
- Wisdom 10:4, wisdom steered the righteous man on frail wood (optional enrichment)