

## *Rain, Rain, Go Away*

A Sermon Preached by  
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
Bloomington, Minnesota

Matthew 7:21-29

Genesis 6:9-22, 7:24, 8:14-19

One of the things I especially like about preaching after Pentecost is that the summer months are when the lectionary gods usually use give us preachers some of the most familiar stories from the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Bible, to work with. We spend so much time in the Gospels throughout the year, and particularly during Advent and Lent, that it's fun to find our way back to the Bible stories that we grew up with and the ones that we continue to tell our children. So periodically throughout the summer we're going to spend some time with those old familiar stories.

Today, we're climbing aboard Noah's Ark, a Bible story so familiar that it's become part and parcel of our culture. When it rains for more than a week, we ask, "who's building the ark?" And one of my favorite cartoons appeared a couple of years ago in the *New Yorker* magazine, with a picture of the ark, Noah and his wife on the deck in the pouring rain, and one of the animals saying to another, "I told you it was a couples' cruise."

Years ago, author Robert Fulghum wrote an essay entitled, "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." Since then, his wit and wisdom has been borrowed for many different versions of the original, and in doing some work for this sermon, I ran across this one about Noah's Ark that's floating (no pun intended) across the internet these days. So, with apologies to Mr. Fulghum, "Everything I Need to Know, I Learned from Noah's Ark."

- One: don't miss the boat
- Two: remember that we are all in the same boat
- Three: plan ahead. It wasn't raining when Noah built the Ark.
- Four: stay fit. When you're 60 years old (or 600), someone may ask you to do something really big.
- Five: don't listen to critics; just get on with the job that needs to be done.
- Six: build your future on high ground.
- Seven: for safety's sake, travel in pairs.
- Eight: speed isn't everything. The snails were on board with the cheetahs.
- Nine: when you're stressed, float awhile.
- Ten: remember, the Ark was built by amateurs; the Titanic by professionals.

We all know the story of Noah's Ark, and most of us could probably even remember that it's found in Genesis, not too long after the story of creation. What we may not remember is just how long the story of Noah's Ark is! If you're interested in the whole story, it's all of chapters six, seven, eight and nine in Genesis. Don't worry, we're not going to read all of it this morning, but

let's at least read enough to say we've read the Cliff Notes. So beginning with the sixth chapter of Genesis . . .

It's an old, old story, and unfortunately these days we rarely hear it as anything more than a myth or a child's fairy tale that begins, "One upon a time, there was a man named Noah." But it is still part of *our* story, so before we throw the baby out with the bath water as it were, we need to listen for what it has to say to even the most skeptical of us twenty-first century Christians. For it is in listening to these stories that we know who we are. First of all, most ancient civilizations had flood stories, just as they had creation stories. It's how we learn to talk about ourselves as humankind, how we explain our relationship with God. This is the God whose relationship with us is expressed in the Covenant, the history of God's promises to humankind, of which we are the recipients.

And when we tell the story, we tell of the promises of peace to Noah, of land and nation to Abraham and Sarah, of the law to Moses, and the promise of a son to Mary. It's the same promise, the promise of an intimate relationship with God, but it has taken different forms as God has struggled to remain faithful to humankind, and we have struggled to remain faithful to God.

Whatever we believe about it, we would all probably admit that we like the story of Noah's Ark. I think we are especially enchanted by the whole idea of a boat as big as the one Noah was told to build. For those of us who don't think in cubits, the Ark would have been about 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high. "That makes it slightly longer than a football field and significantly taller than the Statue of Liberty. . . Inside of it there were three inner decks, and over one million cubic feet of interior living space."<sup>1</sup> That is one big boat. It was also one sturdy boat, made of cypress wood, covered inside and out with pitch, so it was light and durable as well as absolutely watertight.

But let's also admit that we really like the story of Noah's Ark as long as we don't have to actually think about what happened to everybody else. We love the image of Noah and his family, smiling down on the parade of animals marching up the gangplank two by two. We love the thought of the dove returning with an olive branch. We love to imagine the chaos on board, although for some reason we usually imagine it as great fun; we sing camp songs about Noah building an ark-y ark-y out of birchy bark-y, bark-y. We don't talk about the overpowering stench of wet animals and birds, nor do we talk about the cacophany of shrieks and hoots and growls and roars that had to have gone on day and night. We'd like our Ark clean and cheerful and, yes, quiet.

And so we have incorporated images of the ark and the animals and the rainbow into everything from garden tools to needlepoint kits; from tea sets to crib sheets. I can't tell you how many church nurseries or preschools are called Noah's Ark. Like the one I read to the children this morning, children's books about Noah's Ark are usually beautifully illustrated with scenes of animals and people happily co-existing in a big boat, waiting for the sun to come out. Little mention is made of the reason for their being on the Ark in the first place! All of which makes sense, of course, because if we told the story in its entirety, it would be way too scary to be included in children's literature.

One writer describes it this way: "All of us who have heard the story have imagined it: the big, roofed boat, looking more like a floating barn than a boat, filled to the rafters with life – zebras, flamingos, king snakes, box turtles, barn owls, giraffes, hyenas, groundhogs – all of them floating above the wet chaos below, where the rest of creation was perishing, seeking higher and

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Susan DeFoe Dunlap, "Noah's Ark: the Boat," February 25, 2007.

higher ground until there was none left, and then surrendering their last bubbles of air as the waters closed over their heads. It was awful, make no mistake about it. We focus on Noah and his zoo because they survived, but no one and nothing else did.”<sup>2</sup>

Now starting with the account where we did this morning, with the ninth verse of the sixth chapter of Genesis, our instinctive image of the God who destroys the earth and every living creature in it, might, indeed, be of a very angry, and vengeful God. But if we had picked up the story a little earlier in the Genesis account, we would have read these words: “God saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And God was sorry (to have) made humankind on the earth, and it grieved God’s heart.” The New International Version of the Bible says, “God’s heart was filled with pain.” In other words, the narrator has chosen to set the basic character of the human heart alongside the divine heart. “God appears, not as an angry and vengeful judge, but as a grieving and pained parent, distressed at what has happened.”<sup>3</sup>

Anger and vengeance might have prompted God to simply “un-create” the world by obliterating it completely. What happens instead is that God “re-creates” it, by choosing to save the straggly remnant on board the Ark. And so we read that two of every living creature, male and female of every living thing, were shut into the Ark by God, saved for the moment when the waters would recede and life would begin again.

One writer has pointed out, “The images of God developed in the story (of Noah’s Ark) are striking: a God who expresses sorrow and regret; a God who judges, but doesn’t want to, and then not in arbitrary or annihilative ways; a God who goes beyond justice and determines to save some creatures, including *every* animal and bird; a God who commits to the future of a less than perfect world; a God open to change and doing things in new ways; a God who promises never to do this again. The story reveals and resolves a fundamental tension within God, emphasizing finally, not a God who decides to destroy, but a God who wills to save, who is committed to change based on experience with the world, and who promises to stand by the creation.”<sup>4</sup>

Critical, of course, to God’s plan is the choice of Noah, described as a “righteous man, blameless in his generation; (one who) walked with God.” Noah’s faithful relationship with God provides the channel through which God can begin again. Being righteous doesn’t mean that Noah had to measure up to certain moral standards. Rather it means that Noah was a person who stood in right relationship with God. In the same way, being blameless doesn’t mean that Noah was without sin, but again that he was a person of high integrity. All of that is evidenced in Noah’s obedient response to God’s commands. Apparently without argument or question or even idle conversation, Noah builds an ark to God’s specifications, goes out and gathers up two of every living creature on the face of the earth, marches them on board, and then stocks the larder with food enough to keep them all alive for a very long time.

The narrator of the story in Genesis makes Noah silent. He simply does what he’s told to do, and in that moment of absolute obedience, provides a way for God to continue to live with what someone has called “the orneriest bunch of partners a deity ever had.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Refreshing God’s Memory,” *Gospel Medicine*, Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Terence Fretheim, “Genesis,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Nashville: Abington Press, 1994 p. 389.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 395.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, p. 31.

That would be us, my friends. Because it's still raining. And God's heart still breaks over a creation that cannot seem to give up violence and corruption and poverty of body and spirit. As we remember and re-tell this story of Noah and the Ark and the creation that was "un-created" and then re-created, let's also remember and pray for those who scratch out a living from dust, who pick up the pieces from earthquakes and cyclones, tsunamis and firestorms, who hold their children as they die of hunger and preventable disease. Let's remember and pray for those who live surrounded by water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink that isn't polluted and poisonous. Let's remember and pray for those who see the waters rising and have no way to build an ark, those who will perish because of our greed, our selfishness, our thoughtlessness and our pride. And then perhaps we will remember and pray for our own hearts and hands to be opened to help generously, thoughtfully, and selflessly.

"God said (to Noah), 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations. I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.'" But the promise of the rainbow in the sky is an empty one without our faithfulness to the Covenant.

Sometimes it's so much easier to just stay in the ark and ignore what's going on around us. Our ark is always warm and comfortable and clean, and we don't have to deal with the parade of homeless, hungry, poor, confused people who want to climb onboard, the ones who are in danger of drowning. It's so much easier to write a check or make them a mission project than to let down the gangplank and welcome them aboard.

But that's not what the ark was like. Everybody was onboard, because that's what God told Noah to do. And it's what God tells us to do. Last week Dries reminded us that we need to participate in God's activity in the world by stepping out onto the front porch; we can't continue to live in the backyard. We can't stay on the ark any more than we can stay at the manger at Christmas. That's not where God wants us to spend our lives.

Listen to these words from preacher Barbara Brown Taylor: "In our own time, the ark does not look so much like a barn floating on a choppy sea. It looks more like a blue-green ball bobbing on the dark ocean of space. Inside its gauzy atmosphere, there are black rhinos prowling the thorn bushes of the Serengeti and garlands of monarch butterflies hanging from eucalyptus trees in California; there are baby chimney sweeps cheeping in suburban fireplaces and coyotes howling in desert canyons. There are children in the Sudan eating hibiscus blossoms because there is nothing else left for them to eat and there are war-wrecked men and women who never leave their post at the small window of the ark, wondering when, please God when, will the dove return with the olive leaf in her beak." She goes on, "We have forgotten whose covenant partners we are and how that covenant – not to mention that God – means for us to be bailing water and handing out life vests as fast as we can, so that every living creature who rides this ark with us may share the unmitigated joy of walking down the rickety ramp to plant a foot, a paw, a hoof on dry land."<sup>6</sup>

May it be so. By God's grace, may it always be so. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 33-34.