

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Erica Schemper**  
**July 17, 2022**  
**Genesis 8:1–19, Matthew 14:22–32**

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“Boat Stories”

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I want to be very clear that I did not choose to preach about Noah for Bart’s installation because your building flooded the morning he was presented as candidate by your pastor nominating committee.

I mean, I don’t mind giving Bart a hard time about that, but the truth is that back in the winter of 2021, I started thinking about Noah, and it’s become something of a touchstone Bible story for me.

This started one dark, January afternoon that winter, when I surveyed the scene before me in my dining room, and thought, “this is so familiar...where is it from?”

In front of me was the general mess and frustration of nearly a year of my three kids doing school remotely. We were all trapped at home, muddling our way through yet another day of google meets and school assignments and frustrating educational apps on their iPad. And between the physical mess of the scene, and the absolute cabin fever of a family of five people and one dog, trying to make it through the long Covid winter, things were pretty bleak and monotonous. At least once a day, I found myself sitting at the dining table, despondent, with my head held in my hands.

And this scene reminded me of nothing so much as the illustrations of one of my favorite childhood books, Noah's Ark, by Peter Spier. Spier's book, few words, mostly just intricate pictures of the story, and many pictures that portray the mess and chaos of life on the ark.

I went to the kids' bookshelves and found the book, and there it was, the picture I was thinking of: Noah, the mess of life on the ark spread out before him, sitting at a table exhausted with his head in his hands.

Here was my family of five people and one dog, sailing the pandemic storm together, and honestly a bit sick of each other's company, wondering how long this could possibly go on.

"Good Lord," I thought, "When are we going to finally get out of here?"

And, when we do finally get out, what will the world look like?

And that was how Noah became my image for life during the peak of the virus...I'll own it that we were very privileged, able to be tucked up safe in our house, but also? trapped in the house with a bunch of wild kids, waiting for the chaos to subside so we could get back out there and get on with life in the world..

But as we now know, re-entering the world after the lock down phases of the pandemic has not been as simple as walking down the gangplank of the ark. Covid has cranked on, rolling in and out of our communities like a tidal flow, never quite leaving. Some of us have been the raven, with a little more wing-strength, flying a little further to find dry land. Some of us are the dove, circling back for refuge, bringing back a branch for those who wait.

And pandemic or not, life is never simple or linear: think about the twists and turns just to get you all and Bart to this day. Schedule conflicts, seasonal realities, .... a stroke, recovery, a death.

And that messiness of life is why these boat stories always have been and always will be, stories about the life of the church. We are always, in the Christian life, contemplating our first steps off the boat.

The boat, in fact, is one of our great metaphors for church life. Like the disciples, we are on a boat being tossed in a storm. Church buildings, some students of architecture say, are built with exposed wooden beams in the ceiling to remind us of the hull of a boat, turned upside down. In the churches I grew up in, Reformed churches that come out of the Netherlands, a famously seafaring bunch, we didn't call our regional groupings of churches a presbytery, we called them a "classis," a word

that comes from the Latin term for “navy,” (and I sort of love that image, of our regional churches going forward together as a little fleet of ships...)

There is something very cozy about imagining our churches as boats: a refuge from the storming waters around us.

I came across a 19th century hymn that imagines us Christians as the dove, and the ark is the church, and we circle back to the church for safety until, finally, the ark rests on “Zion’s shore” and we can safely disembark into heavenly bliss.

But what if the boat is not a place of safety from \*this\* life?

See, when Noah and his family do disembark, that’s not their final, safe destination, is it? God says the same thing to Noah and his family and their animal companions as God said to Adam and Eve: be fruitful and multiply. In other words, God commissions them anew to fill the earth, to cultivate, to come alongside God in the ongoing work of creation.

Even the dry land is not the final destination...

Because we can’t fully understand who we are in relationship to God, and to God’s created cosmos until we walk down the gangplank and into the clear light of the new day. The rainbow itself is a promise, and an open, ongoing invitation. You can never chase down a rainbow, can you? It’s a promise of something new on the horizon, over and over again.

Now, here's where these boat stories, Noah and the disciples, start talking to each other.

Noah and company depart the Ark with a degree of certainty about the solidity of the ground beneath their feet.

But Peter, well, Peter jumps out of the boat without fully knowing what he's getting into.

You have to love Peter for his enthusiasm, at the same time that you question his impulsivity. Could he have perhaps taken the lesson from Noah, and sent out a dove or something, just to make sure it was safe? Not Peter. He's all in.

Peter is taking the baptismal leap. Baptism, truly, is dangerous, a point that we often miss when we sprinkle a baby with a tiny bit of water over a little itty-bitty bowl. At the church where Bart and I served together, the baptismal font was pretty big, I think really about 3 feet across. It's one of my favorite baptismal fonts, partly for nostalgia's sake (2 of my three kids were baptized there, as were both of Bart and Kelly's kids) But also it's one of my favorites because it is so big. And when you baptized a baby over that font, you really had to lean in, and almost dangle the baby over the water. No one ever dropped a baby, but, you know, it was a possibility. Baptism isn't just a symbol of cleansing. It's a symbol of life and love winning out over the chaos of the water. In the water, we die and we rise with Jesus. And like Peter, we don't really know, at the time of our baptism, what we are getting into.

And we can't fully understand who Jesus is, or where Jesus is calling us, unless we leave the boat and get our feet wet.

And the most important part of that understanding comes at the moment when we find ourselves going down, the moment when we call out, and we understand that our security is not in our own sure footing, but in the hand of Jesus reaching out to grab us..

See, leaving the boat is not the final destination in this story. Like the rainbow, that infinite doorway, stepping out of the boat is an invitation to follow Jesus not once, but over and over and over again, sometimes with the careful planning of Noah, sending out ravens and doves to see if the way be clear. And sometimes with the beautiful faithful impulsivity of Peter, jumping over the edge to walk on water, to attempt the impossible.

So, what does this mean for a church at the beginning of a new chapter? The celebration of an installation is not just about a pastor. Today is not just about Bart, Bart is not Noah, leading you all off the ark after doing the research. Bart is not Peter, jumping over the edge. And Bart is certainly not Jesus, walking on the water.

Today is also about where you are headed as a church. In that process of calling a pastor, you made some careful decisions about who you are, where you've been, and where you want to go. So this is also a day to celebrate the congregation's answer to God's call.

And we are certainly at a time in the life of not just this church, but the life of the big C Church when there are plenty of reasons to think about what it's going to be like to leave the boat.

I'm convinced that the pandemic has not so much set off a new chain of events in the history of the North American church, but simply hastened the trajectory of some things that were already bound to happen. I think, in the coming years, we are going to be different, we are going to have to figure out what things we were doing that just don't work anymore or make sense anymore; what things we have been doing that are less about Jesus and more about the culture and trappings and traditions of 20th century American Christianity. And as progressive Christians especially, we are going to have to do serious work to show the world that Jesus is not constrained and defined by the narrowness of nationalistic, right-wing Christianity.

And you all, the saints at Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, find yourself in a good place: you're not in crisis, on the brink of collapse. You are having these conversations and doing the work already. And you have a good and faithful pastor who is ready to lead you toward the things that are coming.

But, I suspect that there will always be a temptation to go back to the safety of the boat.

At the end of that Noah's Ark children's book I love, there are finally pictures of the Ark starting to rot and molder. Meanwhile, beyond it, there's a vineyard and Noah's children have built houses, and new baby animals frolic on the good green earth. The ark is not the place to stay. When we're tempted to go back to the boat to feel safe, we need to remember, in our baptism, we are called to take the risk, to step out and do the work. In our life together as the Church, as Christ's hands and feet in the world, we are called to go out and cultivate, to be fruitful in this good creation.

And what brings us through the chaos of the water is not actually the boat.

It is the sure and steady hand of Jesus, reaching down to pull us back to our feet...and what calls us onward is the infinite doorway of the rainbow, promising God's faithfulness, and inviting us forward into God's work of Creation.

May we always be able to see the promise and follow the call.