

Noah's Ark and a Sprig of Hope¹ **St. Martin's Church, Feb. 21, 2021**

I

This morning's story from Genesis is only a piece of the Noah story, of course. What we heard this morning is God's covenant made with Noah ... with all humanity after the Flood ... that God would never again destroy all flesh with rampaging waters. That God would never abandon God's creatures, and that this promise was forever.

But if you back up two chapters, you get the first part of this story, the story of Noah's ark and the great flood that covered the whole Earth. And of course, even if you don't know a lot about the Bible, I'm sure you know the story of Noah's ark.

See, it starts out being a story of God's despair over humanity, about how God regretted the whole thing, and resolved to blot out the entire human race. All except for this old guy, Noah, who was about ... oh ... 500 years old or so, when he and his family carted their stuff into that ark. A black, dark tale really.

But think about this: Myths, Bible stories, folk tales, fairy tales for the young – all these stories have a way of telling the truth of our lives, don't they ... becoming stories about us instead. So what are the truths here in the whole story of Noah ... the whole story from curtain up to last call? Let's look.

So again, the story line here begins with God's telling Noah that He's determined to destroy every living creature on the face of the Earth. 'Cause God's creation's filled with evil, that humans are filled with violence, with vicious hate ... hat the Earth is doomed. That humankind has slipped so far beneath what's intended by its Creator that it's spiraling toward doom.

Well Noah wonders – is this God's voice? Then ... then this voice, coming from within, urges him to stand up and move, gives him a mission in a world spiraling toward doom, a mission to act to save it. The voice says, "Make yourself an ark of cypress wood." It says, "Because for my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the Earth to destroy all flesh that breathes."

And so now Noah has to decide. Is this voice God's, or some imaginary fantasy of his own ... some trick of his mind? Some wish to hear something other than his own inner prattling, some wild desire to flourish and live? And so Noah struggles to discern the voice ... because if it's God's ... if it's God's voice, if that command comes out of the center of Life itself, then he has to obey. I mean, there is no alternative. To not build the ark becomes unthinkable.

Well, as someone's said, when you have to decide what you're going to do with your whole life, which way you'll bet your life on ... look at your feet. 'Cause it's your feet that finally tell the tale. So which way did Noah's feet move? Which way do the feet go?

II

Well, come to think of it, that's finally the question in your's and my life, isn't it? Finally you move, this way or that. And so finally, Noah's feet also move. Maybe a bit halting, maybe shuffling, dragging a bit ... but they do move. And they move in the direction of his toolshed ... as he bets his life on that voice he heard clear as a bell ... though soundless, but ringing, powerful in his ears.

Well, of course to Noah's neighbors, he must have looked nuts. There they were, landlocked, not a lake, not a stream, not a drop of water for the next 10 miles. And there he was, knocking together this thing – a boat I guess, knocking it together in his backyard. Three hundred cubits long and 50 cubits wide and 30 cubits high, all three decks of it.

And when they ask him why, all he can say is that he's heard a voice telling him to. And then they laugh and say only a fool would pay attention to a voice that told him to do such a crazy thing. And so all their voices like a chorus tell him to put aside such foolishness, "get back to your job, relax a little, play a little golf, take a vacation, you're working too hard, you've gone over the edge."

So Noah, pounding on the planks of his ark, plastering on the pitch, becomes the bearded joke on a soapbox shouting "repent!" You know, that crazy guy parading around with a signboard on Broad Street that says, "God will return."

Well, what are you thinking, old Noah, as you go about pounding together your zany craft while the world goes round like a merry-go-round, and there's not a cloud in sight? Are you thinking what you've always known in your heart ... that all our busyness, all our wheeling and dealing, is an illusion all along, and that we're all doomed if left to our own devices?

And so sure enough, the flood comes and the heavens spill their torrents. And the violent waters spill across fields and rage across kitchen floors. And foaming waters fill computer rooms and run down basement stairs, and rise above cell phone towers, and "death is everywhere as death is always everywhere. Men and women are trapped alone as they're always trapped, always alone, in office, in locker room, in bar, in bedroom. Folks grasping out for something solid and sure to keep themselves from drowning" – fighting for a few feet of dry ground.

Well, that jury-rigged ark rose and rose, pitching in surging waves, creaking and groaning, but holding together at the seams, with that crazy captain at the helm, and pairs of all living creatures tucked into its hold. Oh ... that old tub wasn't much, but by God, it stayed afloat. And the whole vessel was rocking and noisy and smelled to high heaven. But the creatures ... the creatures inside took some comfort that they were huddled together and life lived on in that ark.

Finally, after some time, Noah stood at an open porthole and pitched a dove out over the waters to check for dry land. And in the evening that dove flew back with a sprig of leaf in her bill. Now if you could look at old Noah's face, you'd see tears streaming down as he hugs that bird to his chest. And his face just shines, shines at the sight of a "little sprig of hope held up against the end of the world."

III

Well, as I said before, I think these old Bible tales are about us, about you and me and about our lives and about our fears, about our anguish, about our hope against hope. Oh yes, these stories are about you and me. So maybe, after all, maybe we give them to our children to read, so that the truths embedded in them won't be entirely lost altogether.

So what are these truths about ourselves here in this story? Well, I think there are at least two. And here's the first one: Left to ourselves, we're doomed to perish. Left to our own devices, we're lost. See, death and destruction and despair are part of the human lot. And even our best intentions are mixed and polluted with sin. We fight a war against an evil aggressor, and now see hell in its wake. Nightmares and noble intentions, all tangled up together ... dooming us to our own passions. So the raging waters of chaos are always menacing our flood walls.

But I guess you don't really need the story of Noah to tell you this truth. Just look at the front page of the paper to confront the horror of the human condition all around. And look at your own heart to tell you also of evil.

But I think this story has other truths as well, 'cause despite the horror of Noah's nightmare, that ark carried them through. In fact, God knew that ark was enough. And it is enough. Because the ark is the place where we come together as human beings, where our differences stop mattering. The ark's where all the imagined differences of age and color and orientation and education just drop away. And even if you and I go on seeing each other as odd fish, that ark is where our oddness gets celebrated as we delight in each other's weirdness.

'Cause beneath our differences, we are all in the same boat. And we are all "outward bound on a voyage for a distant and unknown port." All sailing together, clinging to each other with the same hope of peace, dreaming of love. So ... the story of Noah. Poor old Noah, who looked like a fool as he hammered his ark but saved the world.

Finally, here's the second point – the real point beneath it all: I believe that in Noah you can see the shape of One who also looked like a fool, "spread-eagled up there" on a wooden cross, face racked with pain. That One who finally saved the whole world from drowning.

And so as you begin Lent, remember Christ as He saves the world still. 'Cause wherever you and I meet and touch and love in this ark, Christ is there also. So build this ark carefully, with attention and love, and ride out the storm with courage. And know that that little sprig of leaf

the dove brings back shows a reality beyond the storm more precious than you can ever imagine.

A little sprig ... of hope. Amen.

1. *Genesis* (Interpretation Series), Walter Brueggemann, 1982; *A Chorus of Witnesses* (Thomas G. Long and Cornelius Plantinga Jr., Eds.), "A Sprig of Hope" by Frederick Buechner.