

“How Do You Noah?”

Genesis 7

May 15, 2011

For many Christians, the flood story, like the creation narrative, is a part of our basic cultural heritage. Many of us probably remember the illustrated books of our childhood that tell the story of Noah’s Ark. Yet this story not only exists in the Judeo-Christian tradition, recent scholarship has shown there to be stories of great floods in many traditions around the world. As a seminal story in the first book of our Bible, this story has found relevance to people of faith throughout the ages:

Then the LORD said to Noah, ‘Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. ²Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; ³and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth. ⁴For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.’ ⁵And Noah did all that the LORD had commanded him.

6 Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters came on the earth. ⁷And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood. ⁸Of clean animals, and of animals that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground, ⁹two and two, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God had commanded Noah. ¹⁰And after seven days the waters of the flood came on the earth.

11 In the six-hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. ¹²The rain fell on the earth for forty days and forty nights.

You know, when I chose the story of Noah and the Great Flood as today’s text, I have to say that the furthest thing from my mind were the floods that have taken place both in Canada and the United States this weekend. I’m sure many of us have seen the images from Manitoba of people filling sandbags and building flood barriers as they prepared for the breaking of the dike near Portage La Prairie. And then there was the news from Morganza, Louisiana where floodgates were opened to relieve pressure from the Mississippi River.

I wonder how the people affected by these floods would hear the words of this Biblical text if they were to hear it today? After all, if we go back to where the story of Noah begins in the Book of Genesis, in chapter 6, we would hear how God confesses to Noah that he is sorry that he made human beings. God laments to Noah that the world had become so full of violence that he wants to put an end to it and start over. God’s reaction is not much different than that of a child who after constructing a miniature city out of blocks becomes dissatisfied with the results that with one quick swipe, he brushes everything aside in order that he might begin building something new.

In Noah's story, the Great Flood is not only an act of divine judgment, it is an act of divine condemnation as almost everything is about to be destroyed. So I wonder how many in the 150 or so homes that are threatened by the floodwaters in Manitoba might feel about this text? In as much as officials are calling it a "controlled flood," I doubt many of those folks feel as if they have much control this morning. I would hope that they wouldn't see themselves as being under the vengeance of an angry God...but there is really nothing preventing them from this possibility. And who could blame them? -given their present circumstance and the presence of this story in the Bible.

Without a doubt, I would hazard to guess that everybody here this morning knows something about Noah's Ark and the great flood. This story is a part of Christian, Jewish and Muslim scriptures. As Flo mentioned, recent scholarship has discovered stories about great floods in many ancient traditions. There's something these ancient stories bear witness to. They were preserved because men and women of days gone by believed they had something to say to us. For those of us who are Christians, how do we understand this text? How do you Noah? Or do you? Perhaps you think this is one of those irrelevant pieces of Biblical literature that doesn't have anything to say to us in our current age.

The text this morning begins at the point where all the real action seems to start. God tells Moses to get on the Ark with all the animals because he's got a week before the rain begins. We don't get an all out list of what animals exactly made it onto the Ark, just a general description that refers to all of the animals which God has made. And then, with long range weather forecasting that seems more reliable than what we get these days, we read that God is true to his word. The rain starts to fall. The text says it rained for forty days and forty nights...which by the way, is Biblical language for a sufficient amount of time to get the job done.

I find it curious that the text takes pains to mention how old Noah was when all of this happened. Not once, but twice we hear references to Noah being 600 years old. These seminal creation stories early in the Book of Genesis often speak of individuals who live these extraordinarily long lives! Many scholars believe that this was intentional in order to separate these early texts of Genesis from the ones that come later. We are to read these parts of the Biblical narrative more like fables. Yet this does not mean these stories are therefore unreliable or meaningless, they have been included with an eye towards the story of faith.

The story of Noah has been used in all sorts of different ways over the years. Because of its fable-like qualities, the story of Noah and the great flood has been a long-time favourite in the instruction of children. This past week I attended an address given by Russ Dalton of Brite Divinity school who is currently researching the development and use of illustrated children's Bibles and storybooks. In his work, he has discovered that illustrated children's Bible stories to appear during the 1700's. He noted how during that time period people

were surrounded by death. Infant mortality rates were high and children had to deal regularly with the death of siblings and even parents at a young age. So one thing Russ Dalton noticed was how the theme of death was heavily pronounced in the stories of Noah produced at that time. The children's Bibles depicted scenes of dead, naked bodies strewn about when they were caught up in and even after the flood. The whole point seemed to be to get children accustomed to the idea or at least reflect the ever-present reality of death.

Following the Civil War, when the United States was entering a period of nation building, the children's Bibles and stories that were produced featured illustrations that emphasized the values of obedience and hard work. The pictures were of Noah following God's commands and of him laboring tirelessly to build the Ark. -Things you want to focus on when building a country. Then in the late 20th and into the present century, the way the story is being portrayed seems to have shifted again, in our "Age of Entertainment." Nowadays, when you pick-up an illustrated version of Noah's Ark, there is a tendency to reflect our cultural obsession with having fun. You get pictures of Noah, surrounded by animals on the Ark and they all have smiles on their faces. It's all about a fun boat ride with the animals.

Which again, begs the question, how do you Noah? What does the story of the great flood mean to you? I mean, besides those folks in Manitoba or Louisiana this morning who are facing the real deal. There are all sorts of other floods going on in this world around us. How many people are feeling swamped by work, overcome by the downpour of information that they are bombarded with each day, or sinking deeper in debt. How many in our world are drowning in a pool of self-pity or find themselves hit with a tidal wave of expectations?

Like the sign that currently appears on the front of a church in a weather weary part of Nova Scotia this week. How many people out there are saying, "Whoever is praying for rain please stop!"

In Noah's story, the rain does stop and the floodwaters do recede.

I remember years ago, visiting the Royal Ontario Museum when it had an exhibit of art on loan from the Vatican. One of the pieces on display by Italian artist named Manetti was a painting entitled, "After the Deluge." And it wasn't a painting of SSOTH after the garage sale either! "After the Deluge" is a portrayal of the scene following the flood in the story of Noah.

The painting is very dark and dreary with many different shades of gray. The shadow of the Ark sits in the distance. The surrounding land is soaked and looks like the bottom of a lake bed. There are pools of water about, fallen trees and a lot of mud. Birds fly out of the Ark like a twisting column of smoke. And there is also a great stream of animals moving quite slowly, look quite tentative as they exit the Ark into their strange new surroundings.

In the midst of the picture...in the midst of the murkiness and the cloud...there are also these subtle hints of color...there is the rainbow of hope. When we see it...we are reminded that God is there in the midst of it all. -Because the flood story is ultimately a story of hope. That's one of the reasons it's in the book of Genesis. Genesis, means "beginning." Noah's story is all about beginning again. For us as Christians in this season of Easter, we can see that at its heart, Noah's story is a resurrection story. Noah is God's agent through whom God brings about the possibility of a new creation. This is something God does time and again, it is this same creative power that God embodies for us in Jesus.

It is something that each of us embodies as the church. You know for ages people have understood the church to be like Noah's Ark. Like a vessel that carries with it the hopes and dreams of God. That's why a lot of churches have been built to resemble upside down boats. The roof of the sanctuary is sometimes referred to as the "nave"...the root of the word navy. How we "Noah" says a lot about how we understand the church.

Some of you are likely familiar with the line from the Apostle's creed, "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church." The theologian Karl Barth once reflected on this line by saying this does not mean that we believe in the church. It means rather to believe that God is present and at work in the church, that "in this assembly, the work of the Holy Spirit takes place. ... the Holy Spirit becomes an event." It's not about maintaining the status quo, it's about carrying the spirit of resurrection which is a spirit of hope in action.

I was reminded of this Ark like existence when during the Garage Sale I delivered a couple of dressers to a woman in an apartment building with some other members of the congregation. When we arrived with the delivery, we discovered this woman didn't have a lot of furniture in her apartment. And when you factor in what she paid with, our time and gas and delivery, we maybe came out a few dollars ahead on the transaction... maybe! But for a woman with almost no furniture? Who knows what the deluge looks like to her? She had the dignifying experience of buying some furniture for herself, the dressers get a prolonged life, we all got the life giving experience of reaching out and connecting with others. I know I'm a better person because of this event, because of the garage sale. This to me was part of the beauty of what events like our garage sale do. Sure we raise some well needed revenue for this congregation, but we also make some space for ourselves and others to breathe the Holy Spirit. The spirit that enables us to come together, to reach out, to worship and pray, to work, to sweat, to laugh and give thanks. We become God's agents of hope and change for ourselves, for others, for the world. It's how we "Noah."

-Thanks be to God.