

“Noah’s Ark”
Genesis 6-9 (Select Verses)
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June 10, 2018

What a sight to walk into the sanctuary and see the decorations this morning! Scott and I weren’t thinking about Vacation Bible School starting today when we planned out this preaching series and scheduled *Noah’s Ark* for today. But how appropriate to tell the story of Noah and his ark surrounded by all these symbols of the watery fun we are going to have this week on our *Rolling River Rampage*. We are surrounded by kayaks, and paddles, and tents, and campsites, and everything that evokes fun and adventure on or near the water. But if you are looking for the ark, its not here. It didn’t make the cut for the fun, adventurous tableau. Because, frankly, its kind of a downer. It’s like that bit from Sesame Street: “one of these things is not like the others, three of these things are kind of the same.” Kayaks, canoes, sup boards all remind us of the fun we can have with water. The ark reminds us of the chaos that water can cause.

We human beings have a tenuous relationship with water: we love it for all the fun we can have with it, and because it is essential for our life; but we are wary of the destruction it can cause. For all that we want to be on it, and near it, and consume it, deep down we also know it can turn on us. The same water that gives us a thrilling raft ride over the rapids can become a torrent that breaches dams and floods the valleys where we live, work, and play. The rain that we desperately need to water the earth and our fields, can come too often and too abundantly. And when it does, it can wash away all we’ve worked to build. Water can be both a source of life and a source of chaos. If that’s what you were thinking when we read the story of Noah and his ark this morning, great! That’s what you were supposed to think of. You were supposed to hear, in that story, the tension between the wonder of God’s good creation that harnessed chaos to create life and the power of chaos to undo what was created.

But that’s not the story we hear as children. That’s not the story we tell our children. We have distilled this story of *Noah and the Ark* down to a sanitized, G-rated version suitable for story hour with the wee ones. We have edited it down to adorable animals and a happy family on a pleasure craft under a rainbow. And is it any wonder? If we clued them in to the whole awful truth of

this story they wouldn't sleep for days. We simplify, and sanitize, and paint it in pastels because we can't handle the awful truth. We focus on the fuzzy bunnies and long-necked giraffes happily cohabitating with the lions and tigers under an idyllic blue sky because we really can't handle the death and destruction. And we want to, as long as is possible, protect our children from knowledge of the death and destruction of our world.

And that's fine for our children. We should not be telling our children stories that give them nightmares. But we aren't children. And we miss something important if we ignore the darker parts of this story.

We can't ignore, for instance, how evil the world was. God didn't just look out over creation one morning over coffee and say, "what a beautiful world; I think I'll destroy it today for no good reason." What we learn from the story is that the world had degenerated into a cruel and violent place. The worst of humanity had risen to the surface and taken over. The *good* that God had created was almost non-existent. This was not what God desired for creation or for humanity. We have just established that as adults we can't protect our children from the seedy underbelly of humanity. Is it any wonder God was moved by what was happening in the world? Wouldn't any good God want to protect God's good creation from the powers of evil? Wouldn't any good God want to wash up the mess that had been made of creation and leave it tidy and beautiful for the people he loved?

And that, friends, is what is remarkable about this story. It isn't remarkable that the ancient Hebrew people sat around the fire and told stories of God destroying the earth with a flood. All the ancient people sat around the fire telling stories about a god destroying the earth with a flood. The Babylonians - all of the cultures of the ancient near east and Mesopotamia - had stories about a god destroying the earth in a flood. Other ancient texts contemporary to the first Hebrew scriptures have been discovered and preserved, and they tell flood stories, too. The Epic of Gilgamesh and the Atrahasis Epic told stories of other gods creating the world and destroying it, with one heroic soul surviving to carry humanity into the future. They all told those stories. And their understanding was that the gods were fickle and unsympathetic. The gods created human beings to serve them or to entertain them, and when they were bored of humans, or annoyed with them, they destroyed them. Then along come the Hebrew people and their One God, and their story deviated from the formula.

In the other stories, the gods created human beings as playthings. In their story God created humanity for relationship. In the other stories the gods destroyed creation because they woke up in a bad mood and didn't have the patience to deal with it anymore. In their story, God destroyed creation in order to preserve what and who was still good in creation. In the other stories, humanity soldiered on in spite of the Gods. In their story God carried the people into a new and better future.

When we read the Bible – when we read these difficult stories – we begin by understanding them in light of how people understood them in that time and place and we pay attention to where they are headed. This story is headed to a new understanding of God! This story of *Noah and the Ark* is a mind-blowing new conception of a better, kinder, more peaceful God, whose greatest intention for humanity is non-violent peace and love. This was a mind-blowing new conception of a God whose greatest desire was a loving relationship with humanity.

This is important for us to know and understand because we live in a world where death and destruction are realities. We live in a world where we see evil people and natural disasters hurting human beings and this creation on a daily basis. And we can't ignore it. We can't ignore hurricanes, floods, volcanic eruptions, and mudslides. We can't ignore the tragedy of lives lost to violence and storms. We can't ignore that there is so much heartbreak in this world. It would be easy to see all of this happening around us and give in to fear.

There are two important themes in this this story and this is the first: there exists a deep human fear that order and life will collapse and disappear.

But the second theme is this: there exists a deep human hope that life will persevere and triumph in the end.

We can't ignore that death and destruction are part of life.

We can't ignore the pain and suffering of humanity.

We can, with confidence, acknowledge that this suffering is not the result of a vengeful God punishing us. Vengeful humans do a more than sufficient job of doling out judgement and punishment. And. God promised not to do that.

We can, with confidence, acknowledge that our God – who loves us and desires our welfare – is with us in the suffering moving us forward to bring hope and wholeness beyond the tragedy.

This story ends with a covenant: that the new world which emerges after the flood is a world sealed and protected by God. We can live with hope instead of fear because of the covenant God makes with the humanity. Here's the thing about covenants: they are relational; they are unbreakable; and, in this case, it is completely guaranteed by God – its his cost to preserve the covenant, not ours. The covenant is that God will never again destroy the earth or humanity. The subtext of that promise is that God still intends to preserve the earth and humanity from being consumed by evil. God just won't accomplish that by wiping out everything and everyone. God has other ways of securing our future and filling us with hope. And God will go to great lengths to fulfill the covenant. His name in Jesus.

But that's a story for another day. So, for now, fill your children's lives with fuzzy animals and sweet stories of all of them getting along in the ark. Sing silly songs with them. And decorate their nurseries with rainbows! They may not understand why that is important. But we do, and what more could we ask for our children that they be protected from all evil, from pain and suffering, and grow up loved and cherished, knowing that they are children of the promise, help in the loving care of almighty God, no matter how deep the water gets.

Alleluia! Amen.