

“Noah: Rain & Rainbow”  
 delivered Sunday, June 13, 2010  
 by Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor  
 Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC  
 Gen. 6:11-22; 9:8-17  
*Children’s Stories for Grownups Series*

The story of Noah and the Ark, at least at the outset, is not a pretty picture. We have tried to make it one. It is a favorite theme of colorful children’s books, wall paper boarders and picture frames. We love that image of the ark full of happy animals paired up two-by-two, on a gently rocking sea – a sort of portable zoo. It’s easy to understand why children love it. A child has the imagination to capture a pair of lady bugs, to house a tiger right next to a rabbit, a fox next to a hen, to imagine a wooden boat big enough to float a rhinoceros, elephant and giraffe times two. But when you get right down to it, this is not simply a children’s story with a happy ending, and grownups have all kinds of concerns about what it means.

Quite apart from wondering how one would keep the woodpeckers and termites from sinking the thing, Noah’s Ark raises complicated questions about what kind of God we worship. Is God a vengeful and angry Creator who, when filled with regret for humanity hell bent on violence, decides to wipe it all out and start over? Or is God the tender-hearted, who repents of causing the flood, and promises forevermore to sweep us up in the arms of forgiveness after we’ve done wrong? Does God actually send the flood as judge and jury? Or does God save us when we are overwhelmed? These questions are older than faith itself, and the story before us this morning is a kind of parable that pre-dates the historical narrative of the Bible which begins in Chapter 12 with Abraham and Sarah. Noah’s Ark seeks a basic, even primitive, understanding of who God is.

Long before Jews and Christians were describing the God they came to believe in as the Author of Creation, there were other epic, catastrophic flood stories that hailed from the ancient Near East. One of the best known is called the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh. It’s older than the Noah story, but the similarities are striking. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, a man – like Noah – is chosen to survive the flood. He builds a boat and takes his family on board. The flood washes everything else away. Birds are sent out to mark the receding waters, and sacrifices are offered as the family disembarks. Some people read the Epic of Gilgamesh, and then make a quick leap to dismiss Noah and the Ark as simply an ancient myth, borrowed and updated to suit a newly forming religion. But if you consider the differences, as well as the similarities, you realize that Noah’s Ark presents a very different God than the gods from Gilgamesh. One of the most significant differences is the reason the flood comes in the first place. In Gilgamesh, it happened because of bickering among the gods and their irritation over the noisiness of human beings. The gods became like angry neighbors when the children next door had loud, raucous parties around the pool until two or three in the morning when they had to get up at six AM for work! (1)

But Noah’s God is not an irritated neighbor. God is not an angry tyrant, either. Rather God is presented here more like a troubled parent. The narrative gives us a glimpse into God’s own heart, and it is a heart that has been ripped apart by grief over humankind, who have become sullen and withdrawn, angry, rebellious and violent. As Old Testament scholar, Terry Fretheim writes, while God mourns over an increasingly violent humanity, “God appears, not as an angry and vengeful judge, but as a grieving and pained parent, distressed at what has happened...God does not stand in an indifferent or remote relationship, but personally enters into human

brokenness and works on it from within...Fretheim points out, "The images of God developed in the story are striking: a God who expresses sorrow and regret; a God who judges but doesn't want to; a God who commits to a 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." (2)

You see, there is a transformation that takes place within the heart of God in this Noah story that gives us hope – when it seems that the flood waters of life have overwhelmed us. Whenever there is any overpowering devastation, the story of Noah reminds us that God re-creates, and God's involvement with humankind is always bent toward salvation. There may have been a time when it was perceived that God was simply a perfectionist. A time when it looked like God would rather destroy the creation for human sinfulness and start over. But it seems that this understanding of God evolved. Out of a sense of love and loss, God changed, and promised to accept us the way we are, with all our flaws, and promised never to destroy us again. So the story of Noah is about God growing in relationship, maturing in it, moving from expectations of perfection in human beings to accepting us as flawed. In a word, God has become so intertwined with us that God's saving love always trumps God's judgment.

At the time this story was recorded to make this bold proclamation about the God of Israel, the people had already been washed out. Civilization as they had known it had been destroyed. They were exiles in a land occupied by another nation's government; they were refugees living in squalid camps. In this crisis, they came to understand the essential nature of God, against the background drama of the Great Flood. In the wake of all the natural disasters we've seen this year – earthquakes in Haiti and Chili, mudslides in Guatemala, the volcanoes, tornadoes, flooding – you name it – questions arise now, as they arose then, asking, Who is the God who governs the chaos of creation? Noah's story responds to these questions with this theological truth: God creates in goodness; people rebel and become violent. The earth heaves. But God always remembers his own love for the world, and works through whatever chaos comes our way to rescue and to save. This story, from the beginning to the end - from rain, through flood, to the rainbow – is about how God remembers us. "I have set my bow in the clouds," God says, "and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Never again. Never again will there be a flood to destroy."

In that area of the Gulf that has captured our attention again with the oil spill, over four years ago, following Hurricane Katrina, a group of clergy wrote a letter about the God of both rain and rainbow. When the flooding was absolutely overwhelming, so many people were displaced and homeless, and countless residents of New Orleans felt deserted, a Jewish Rabbi and a small group of Christian pastors wrote a letter entitled, "Why I Refuse to Despair." They said, "Though we are persons of faith, we are not unrealistic. We recognize the serious doubts and fears for the future voiced by our families and neighbors. Haunted by a legacy of political corruption and ineptitude, predictions of a diminished population and even the inevitable demise of our city abound. Uncertainty and despair assail us from every direction in the face of these new challenges. Whether from the guy down the block, or our local and national "civil servants," talk remains a cheap commodity in plentiful supply. Many even fear that for the rest of America, our pain and plight are yesterday's news. We beg to differ," they wrote. "We hold a brighter, though steadfast and unwavering vision. While the suffering of our citizens continues, despair is not an option. Belief and hope spring eternal on brighter days, but true fortitude manifests itself only in our darkest hours. We stake our undying faith knowing that God stands with those who suffer, and with those who selflessly rescued the countless victims of nature's wrath." They

concluded, “With trust in God, and in the goodness of the human spirit, let us join hands and hearts in the journey toward tomorrow.” (3)

In the midst of that flood, what that Rabbi and those Pastors, and I imagine the congregations they served, understood was – the truth of Noah’s story. *There’s a wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea.* Whether the floodwaters of life come as some huge natural disaster threatening whole populations, or whether they come in some overwhelming personal crisis, just beyond what we can see in the midst of it is always a rainbow. A promise. A reminder that God is for us. God is for us now. God is for us forever. AMEN.

#### NOTES

- 1) Lib McGregor Simmons, “A Flood of Tears,” UPC, San Antonio, 5/20/01.
- 2) Terence Fretheim, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 1, p. 389, 395.
- 3) Rabbi Edward P. Cohn, et al, letter, 23 December, 2005, quoted by Dana Ferguson, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, 2/5/06, in sermon “The Body Broken.”