**Sunday, February 21, 2021
The First Sunday in Lent
Genesis 9:8-17
The Rev. Dr. Chris Keating**

Noah is one of those great stories of the Bible that everyone knows. Noah and the Ark is as ubiquitous story as any we can name. It is a story splashed across church nurseries, recast into cute figurines sold as collectables, inked as cartoons for the comics, repurposed into situational comedy, set as the backdrop to movies -- some of which are better than others – and even turned into a stage show in Branson.

Too bad the sons of Noah didn’t register their father’s name as a trademark.

Not long ago I saw a poster that said, “Everything I needed to know about life I learned from Noah’s Ark,” with these very Biblical-sounding ten commandments: Don’t miss the boat. Remember we are all in the same boat. Plan ahead, it wasn’t raining when Noah started to build the ark; Stay fit, because when you’re really old someone might ask you to do something big; Don’t listen to the critics, just keep focused on the job you are doing; build your future on high ground. Travel in pairs. Speed is not always an advantage, remember that snails were on board with cheetahs. (I’m guessing the cheetahs had the advantage, however). Number 9, when you’re stressed, just float for a while, and number 10: Remember the ark was built by amateurs but the Titanic was built by professionals.

We know all about Noah—even in an age when surveys show that as many as one in five churchgoers never read the Bible.[[1]](#footnote-1) When it comes to Noah, it is possible that you could say we “know-a” a lot.

We know that Noah, he built him an arky, arky.
We know that the animals, they came on by twosies, twosies.
We know that it rained and poured for forty days-ies, days-ies.

But if all we have done is to relegate Noah to children’s stories, then perhaps we do not know as much as we might thing. If Noah is only the central figure in a cute story, we will have forgotten that this story does not begin with thunder, but with the sound of God’s deep grieving over the evil and wickedness that had stained creation. If we have only told this as a Sunday school lesson, then we may have forgotten that this is a story about mass genocide, utter destruction, and a God who orders the deaths of every living thing.

There’s more to this story than meets the eye. There’s more than just raindrops and rainbows, more than just lions and tigers and chimpanzees and apes.

There’s a storm – a storm that obliterates all creation.
There’s a flood – a flood that creates widespread havoc and destruction.
There’s chaos -- chaos that arises from the fear of genocide and death.

If all we remember about Noah is distilled into a children’s story, we will forget that at the end of the story Noah does not only come off the ark, he also falls off the wagon—though spending all that time on a boat with every wild animal and all of your children might drive any one of us to drink.

Go back and read the account of Noah in Genesis chapters six through nine. Go back and read the Biblical story and see it for the PG-rated account that it is. And then answer this question: if you were on that boat, would you have been willing to be the first one off when the storm was over? Go ahead, and try wrapping your mind around the purpose of God who caused the death “of every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out.” I do not have a good answer for that question.

But when I do read this story, I also discover again and again the presence of a God who is present as the storm subsides. This is a story of the God who looks at rainbows, and remembers all that God has promised.

Those who first told this story in Israel also were trying to understand the presence of God that had sustained them in times of chaos and struggle. As they told this story to their children, it was not to stir up cuddly images of animals nestled together onboard but rather to remind them of the wondrous love of God who protected those who were faithful, whose presence sustained those tossed around the flooded lands, and whose grace had protected them.

This story is a story about remembering God’s covenant faithfulness when the storms are passing around us.

Chaos, as Jane Anne Ferguson reminds us, is more than an ancient phenomenon. We have seen the impact that chaos brought during the winter storm that passed over us last week. We have witnessed first hand the chaos wrought by disease and epidemics. We have seen, says Ferguson, chaos come into our lives through broken relationships, global injustices, physical illness, addictions, death and estrangement.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Most of us would say that 40 days and 40 nights of rain would be a vacation compared to over 350 days of socially-distanced pandemic, which is why we are the ones who need to hear this story. We are those who need the assurance of God’s faithfulness, even as we watch Jesus enter his journey through the wilderness.

Aboard the ark, things were just as harsh. Animal stench mixed with the smell of damp wood. Spirits were as low as the waves were high. The ark endured the storm, assaulted by rolling winds and pitching waves.

in the end, signs of hope emerged.

And this is the good news: God remembers, even in the midst of the storm. God is faithful, even during times of chaos. God’s covenant faithfulness withstands the storms outside and the stench inside.

Whatever else we have learned about the story of Noah, we must not forget the promise of God that rides out the storm. In the end, when the storm had passed and the land had dried, it is God who has changed. And it is God who declares: “There will never again be a flood to destroy the earth.” (9:11, Common English Bible).

Never again. This is not a story about a pleasure cruise. Rather, it is the story of how God redeems all that is broken. It is the first of many covenants in the Bible, a legal agreement between all parties. As a sign of the covenant, God points to the brilliant rainbow shining over the fading storm. The word for bow is the same word the Old Testament uses for weapons—the upside down bow is the reminder that God has hung up violence. God promises to never again seek destruction, and by the words of this covenant we are summoned to the great hope of faith--protecting creation, honoring its diversity, setting aside violence.

When God sees the bow, God remembers.

Instead of shattering creation, God makes a promise. There is a remarkable way that God works through acts of self-limitation and grace—which is the promise we hold as the storm passes over us.

When the storm is over, Noah does not return to normal. How could he? When the storms of our lives have subsided – when the temptations end, when the wounds are healed, when we can finally hug our friends again, we can be certain that life will not return to the way things were.

Noah and his family spent little more than a year aboard that damp, smelly gopherwood creation. I wonder about the shape of their faith by the time the storm had finished. I wonder who went off the ark first – did they say, “Who knows whether we can trust if things are going to be ok? Maybe we should send one of the small animals first – let’s send a rat or a guinea pig. We can spare one of those. Let’s put out a few of those earth worms, or maybe even a cricket or two.”

Here is the promise for us this Lent: the clouds will pass. And God’s promise remains. As the chaos ends, the sun appears. And as as the words of that great spiritual remind us,

Courage, my soul, and let us journey on,
Tho’ the night is dark, it won’t be very long.
Thanks be to God, the morning light appears,
And the storm is passing over, Hallelujah![[3]](#footnote-3)

Amen.

1. See https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/july/epidemic-of-bible-illiteracy-in-our-churches.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jane Anne Ferguson “Pastoral Perspectives,” Genesis 9:8-17, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1,* p. 28.) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “The Storm is Passing over” https://hymnary.org/text/courage\_my\_soul\_and\_let\_us\_journey\_on [↑](#footnote-ref-3)