



Noah's Ark



A Sermon By
The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell

June 30, 2019
The Third Sunday after Pentecost

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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Genesis 6:5-8; 7:1-5, 11-18; 8:6-18; 9:8-13

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The story of Noah's Ark is one of the most well-known tales in the Bible. For me, the mere mention of Noah tends to bring to mind images of childhood nostalgia – children's Bibles and nursery decorations. I can remember wallpaper and children's books from my childhood depicting the ark as a kind of floating zoo, with happy animals poking their heads out the windows, and a white-bearded, rosy-cheeked Noah keeping a benevolent eye on it all, while a rainbow arched over the scene, uniting it in bright, vivid colors. But the story of Noah's Ark is more than a children's tale, much more.

And so, this week in our summer preaching series, Misunderstood Stories of the Bible, we will take a closer look at this well-heard but often not well-understood story. The story of Noah's Ark is about more than childish fancy and cutesy animals. It's about judgement and destruction, salvation and liberation, relationship and covenant.

As we begin our discussion, I want to repeat something Rev. Andrew said last week when he preached on the story of Adam and Eve... He said that we do not understand these stories as historically accurate events, but rather these stories call us to look for theological truths. When we consider the story of Noah's ark, we're not asking what year this happened, or how a boat could hold two pairs of every species, rather we ask ourselves, what does this story tell us about God and about us? What deeper meaning does this story hold? What was the author trying to convey?

In the opening sentences of our reading from Genesis, the text tells us that God, observing the wickedness of humanity, was grieved and regretted having made humanity and the rest of creation. As a recap, Adam and Eve's disobedience put themselves at the center of meaning instead of God. As a result, the relationship between humans and God was damaged (Gen. 3). Then in the disobedience of their offspring, Cain, the relationship within human community is damaged (Gen. 4). From there, it is all downhill. Humanity begets violence against itself, against creation, and against God. What was so beautifully ordered in Genesis 1 is now utterly distorted in Genesis 6.

And so, God's heart is grieved. God regrets making creation. So perhaps it is not so surprising that God would wish to do away with a project that has gone so badly awry. However, there is a "but" in this story. Genesis 6:8 says, "But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord." Though God's heart is grieved by humanity, and it seems like God will give up on us. The opposite actually happens. God doesn't give up of us. God decides to try again with Noah, to give it another go.

Though God is grieved at the sin of humanity and decides to destroy creation, God makes provision for saving a remnant from the Flood. God harbors Noah and his family and the animals and saves them from the consuming, chaotic waters. Then, at the pivotal point of the story, God is moved to act on their behalf. And in an act of new creation that mirrors the first creation, God sends a wind to dry up the waters and bring forth life out of death.

Then God makes a covenant with Noah and his family, and with every living creature on earth, animals domestic and wild, cows and koala bears, jaguars and jellyfish, blue whales and bumblebees (Genesis 9:8-17). God makes a covenant, an unequivocal promise, never to destroy the earth with a flood again. God makes this promise not because humanity has changed. Indeed, both before and after the flood, God acknowledges that "the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth." Humanity has not changed; we will still bring corruption on the earth. The people of Israel make a golden calf and corrupt themselves (sh-kh-t) (Exodus 32:7). They turn away from God again and again to worship other gods, corrupting themselves (sh-kh-t) (Judges 2:19). Human beings are not changed by the flood, but God is changed.

God decides to commit Godself to this broken, corrupt, and sinful world. God's mercy wins the day. God will be faithful, not because of anything that human beings do, but because God is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6).

Make no mistake, God still takes evil seriously; but God will deal with human evil in other ways from now on: by calling Abraham and Sarah and blessing them to be a blessing (Genesis 12:1-3), by calling the Israelites to be a "priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). God calls prophets and priests, shepherds and kings, to proclaim God's judgment and God's mercy, and to call a people into covenant loyalty. Over and over and over again.

Humanity has not changed in the story of the Flood, but God has changed. Humanity continues to sin and to rebel against God. Humanity continues to fill the earth with violence. God judges but God also redeems, over and over and over again.

And finally, when human sin and corruption have become so great that they threaten to overwhelm the world again, it is God himself in Christ Jesus, who enters into the waters -- into the waters of a woman's womb, into the waters of baptism, to show once and for all that God is passionately committed to God's creation. God is faithful. God is committed. No matter how we respond to God's offer of covenant relationship, God will always be ready to extend a hand of friendship.

The story of Noah's Ark is the story of Scripture. Even with its many pairs of animals, it is not in fact a children's story. It is more powerful than that. It is a story about death and life. It is a story about human sin and God's redemption. It is a story, most of all, about a God who is forevermore committed to God's people. God is committed to us and love us, even when we grieve God's heart, even when turn away time and again. God is our refuge and our strength – in Noah's time, in the psalmist's time, in Jesus time, and today. Amen.