

THE STORY OF NOAH AND THE ARK

(or, "It Is Not the Will of God
That We Should Perish!")

Genesis 6:5-22

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Genesis 6:5-22 (NRSV)

- 5 *The lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.*
- 6 *And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.*
- 7 *So the Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created--people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them."*
- 8 *But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.*
- 9 *These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God.*
- 10 *And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.*
- 11 *Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence.*
- 12 *And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth.*
- 13 *And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.*
- 14 *Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch.*
- 15 *This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits.*
- 16 *Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks.*
- 17 *For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die.*
- 18 *But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you.*
- 19 *And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female.*
- 20 *Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive.*
- 21 *Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them."*
- 22 *Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.*

The first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis are what is known as the "**pre-historical chapters.**" In other words, the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis contain stories that

were told around camp fires by the People of God many centuries before writing was invented. Those stories were “**pre-historical;**” they were before writing.

An example of this is “The Story of Noah and the Ark.” Down through the centuries an enormous amount of time has been wasted on *the argument and speculation and discussion about whether or not there ever was a man named Noah.*

Now, there are some perfectly good Christians who hold that (1) there was an actual man named Noah, and there are some perfectly good Christians who hold that there (2) was not an actual man named Noah. Both sides of the argument would agree that history tells us that numerous ancient civilizations had stories in their past which told of some tremendous flood of water that destroyed people and crops and homes and entire villages. *[In light of the devastation and tragedy last week in China, do you think that they would have any difficulty believing it?]*

This particular story in Genesis presents the Hebrew account of the flood. The Hebrew account of the flood differed from other cultural accounts of the flood because the Hebrew account emphasized the Hebrew God YAHWEH and YAHWEH’s concern for and with the Hebrew people.

The British Old Testament scholar Alan Richardson introduced me to a helpful concept in understanding the story of Noah and the Ark. In his book, Genesis 1 – 11, Alan Richardson speaks of Noah and the Ark as “**parable**” in the same sense that Jesus used stories such as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” Richardson writes: “The wonder is that the divine revelation can take the primitive and childish speculations and legends of the pagan world and can make of them the vehicle of ultimate truth---truth expressed in a form which the “pre-scientific” contemporaries of J and P [JTR=*two different historical account writers of the Pentateuch*] could grasp and which can speak in every age to all who are willing to lay aside their sophistication and become as little children.” (Richardson, Alan, Genesis 1 – 11, London, SCM Press, 1953, p. 97)

I wonder if it helps you to think of the story of Noah and the Ark in the same way that you think of the parable of the Prodigal Son which Jesus told.

This morning I have a present for our graduating seniors and the present comes in the form of at least **THREE TRUTHS which come out of the story of Noah and the Ark.** And while this present is for the graduating seniors, the rest of you are welcome to listen.

I. THE FIRST TRUTH INVOLVES THE MAN NOAH.

Do you think that I am correct in that very often you and I do not remember Noah in any serious vein?

We hear light references to Noah, and sometimes in comedy skits in plays and on television, there may be some long-bearded character surrounded by animals who is referred to as “Noah.”

How many of you remember the song that came out of Vacation Bible School:

***“The Lord said to Noah, There’s going to be a floody-floody;
The Lord said to Noah, There’s going to be a floody-floody.....”***

But we do not often think about the truth that the Genesis story of Noah tells us about one of the first people in history who had a close relationship with God! The Bible says: ***“Noah found favor in the eyes of God.”*** The Bible says further: ***“Noah was a righteous man, blameless in all his generation...”*** (vs. 9)

But the really telling thing that the Bible says about Noah is this:
“Noah walked with God.”

That is the way that the Genesis writer put it:
“Noah walked with God.”

The early writers of Genesis pictured a very “anthropomorphic” God... ***God is pictured as having human characteristics***...and God is shown doing a lot of ***human*** things such as changing “his” mind, or getting angry, or shouting at Adam in the garden.

So, it made sense to the pre-scientific, Genesis mind to say,
“Noah walked with God.”

But perhaps this very important and telling comment about Noah is made clearer to our 21st century minds in the translation by James Moffatt (1935) which says,
“Noah lived close to God.”

The paraphrase of Scripture known as The Living Bible has it:
“He tried always to conduct his affairs according to God’s will.”

But I like the way James Moffatt (1935) put it:
“Noah lived close to God.”

Forgetting the Ark, and forgetting the flood, what a tremendous insight into a person:
“Noah lived close to God.”

If you are as I am, in our better moments, in our religious selves, in our times of spiritual search, in the very core of our being, do not you and I YEARN and LONG to ***“live close to God”***?

Now, there is something very interesting about Noah which most of us overlook. Throughout the whole story of God choosing Noah, and the building of the ark, and the loading of the ark, and the long time spend in the ark, and the landing of the ark, NOAH NEVER SAYS A WORD.

The intimation is, the inference of the story is that Noah listened to God.

And that raises the question for you and for me: How long has it been since you and I sat quietly and listened for a word from God?

The first part of the present that I have for today for our graduating seniors is the truth involving the man Noah.

II. THE SECOND PART OF THE PRESENT FOR OUR GRADUATING SENIORS IS THE TRUTH INVOLVING THE FLOOD.

One of the differences between the Hebrew flood story in Genesis and the flood stories from other pagan cultures is that the Hebrew story is definitely meant to tell us something about God and God acting in relationships with human beings. The Hebrew flood story must be seen in light of the earlier stories of SIN involving both Adam and Eve AND their two sons, Cain and Abel.

Now, I want to share with you my own very personal, James T. Richardson, understanding of the flood in today's story. I have no doubt that **the ancient Hebrew writer of the story told it as an act of the will of God.** What the writer did was that he saw the flood event and then he interpreted it as the will of God. In other words, the writer had a point he wished to make, and the flood story helped him make it. Genesis does say very clearly that it was the will of God to destroy His creation which He had earlier pronounced good.

NOW, LISTEN TO THIS: the point that I am trying to make concerns the *theological interpretation* that is given to an event.

For example, we see this every day in some tragic happening which we do not understand and we interpret it by saying that it was **"the will of God."**

Or again, how often have we heard someone say that a person's death in an accident of some kind was **"the will of God."**

Well, I just do not believe in that God! Don't tell me that it was the will of God that 6,000,000 people died in concentration camps in World War II.

Don't tell me that it was the will of God that our first little girl, Mary Leslie, died because she had only half a heart.

Don't tell me that it was the will of God that 80 thousand of people have been killed by an earthquake in China.

Don't tell me that it is the will of God that millions of people are dying today of starvation in a world where you and I are struggling with having a landfill where we can bury our garbage.

I just do not believe in that God. That is NOT the God whom we meet and come to know in Jesus Christ.

- “The will of God” has become an insurance term to explain hurricane damage.
- “The will of God” has become a pseudo-medical term to explain what we do not know about heart disease and cancer.
- “The will of God” has become a psychological term to help us forget our inhumanity to human beings in Nazi Germany and in Vietnam and countless other places throughout the world.

But that is NOT the God whom we meet and come to know in Jesus Christ.

Listen to this: In the story of the flood in Genesis, we see a *theological interpretation* placed upon a tragic event of gigantic proportions in an effort to deal with the sinfulness of human beings which has just been described in the story of Adam and Eve with their tragedy of their son Cain killing their son Abel.

And one of the really sad things about this flood story is that the word-less Noah, the one who listened to God and did not speak, the one who acts in faith to build the ark, the one who “walked with God,” the one who lived close to God, the one who was to personify RECREATION in the innocence of A NEW GARDEN on Mount Arrarat, the one who was to be a *new* Adam, finally speaks, and his first words in the whole story: NOAH CURSES HIS GRANDSON!

Can you believe it? NOAH CURSES HIS GRANDSON!

And that has the exact same *sound* of someone eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden!

I must confess that at this point in writing today’s sermon I was very distressed. For, it seemed that the story of Noah and the flood ends in *tragedy*.

Is there any hope? Well, thank God, there is!

III. THE THIRD PART OF THE PRESENT FOR OUR GRADUATING SENIORS IN TODAY’S STORY GIVES US HOPE, AND IT INVOLVES THE ARK.

Now, we dare not get too literal about the ark. If you figure that *18 inches* is a *cubit*, then the Ark in Genesis was about half the size of the Queen Mary, the retired ocean liner, and the Queen Mary was about the length of one and one-half football fields: *150 yards long*. So, the Ark was about *75 yards long*.

What I am saying is that the SIZE of the Ark is unimportant. What is important is what the Ark means.

Listen to this: The Ark was the way revealed by God in which the people of God’s choice could survive the punishment for sin that was to fall upon everything else.

Or, said another way: The Ark was the way revealed by God whereby human beings could survive the storm of evil and sin. A *theological* word which is first used here in this Genesis story and which carries with it this meaning implied by the Ark is the word **COVENANT**. The word *covenant* basically means agreement. And in the story, the *covenant* is symbolized by the **RAINBOW**.

Another meaning for the word *covenant* is the word *testament*. In our Bibles, we speak of the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, or the Old Testament and the New Testament.

As Christians, we believe that because of the sinfulness of human beings, the Old Covenant built upon “works” failed. The New Covenant, built upon Jesus Christ, succeeds.

In one Charles Schulz PEANUTS CARTOON, Lucy Van Pelt is talking to her little brother, Linus, as they both look out the window at a rainstorm:

LUCY: Boy! Look at it rain!

What if it floods the whole world!

LINUS: It will never do that.....

In the 9th chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow.....

LUCY: You’ve taken a great load off my mind.....

LINUS: Sound theology has a way of doing that!

And it is both SOUND THEOLOGY and GOOD NEWS that there is a NEW COVENANT that we learn about in Jesus Christ. It is this NEW COVENANT IN JESUS CHRIST which sets us free from sin and all that would make us less than God intended for us.

I want to remind you of a story that the gospel-writer Matthew recorded.

And when Jesus got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but He was asleep. And they went and woke Him, saying, “Save us, Lord; we are perishing.” And Jesus said to them, “Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?” Then He rose and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great clam. And the men marveled saying, “What sort of man is this that even winds and sea obey him?” (Matthew 8:23-27)

Listen to this: It is NOT the will of God that we should perish. It IS the will of God in Jesus Christ that we are saved!

Now, isn’t that Good News a great gift for our graduating seniors [and for anyone else who came here this morning just hoping that they would hear some Good News]?

And in addition, this Good News is also a wonderful invitation to all of us who trust Jesus to gather around this Holy Table one more time.