

Bearers of Hope
Genesis 6:11-14a; 7:24; 8:14-19; 9:3-13
June 1, 2008

Here's a contemporary version of Noah's story: In the year 2008, the Lord came unto Noah, who was now living in the United States, and said, "Once again, the earth has become wicked and over-populated, and I see the end of all flesh before me. Build another Ark and save 2 of every living thing along with a few good humans."

He gave Noah the blueprints, saying, "You have 6 months to build the Ark before I will start the unending rain for 40 days and 40 nights."

Six months later, the Lord looked down and saw Noah weeping in his yard – but no Ark. "Noah!" He roared, "I'm about to start the rain! Where is the Ark?"

"Forgive me, Lord," begged Noah, "but things have changed. I needed a building permit. I've been arguing with the inspector about the need for a sprinkler system. My neighbors claim that I've violated the neighborhood zoning laws by building the Ark in my yard and exceeding the height limitations. We had to go to the Development Appeal Board for a decision.

"Then the Department of Transportation demanded a bond be posted for the future costs of moving power lines and other overhead obstructions, to clear the passage for the Ark's move to the sea. I told them that the sea would be coming to us, but they would hear nothing of it.

"Getting the wood was another problem. There's a ban on cutting local trees in order to save the spotted owl. I tried to convince the environmentalists that I needed the wood to save the owls - but no go!

"When I started gathering the animals, an animal rights group sued me. They insisted that I was confining wild animals against their will. They argued the accommodations were too restrictive, and it was cruel and inhumane to put so many animals in a confined space.

"Then the EPA ruled that I couldn't build the Ark until they'd conducted an environmental impact study on your proposed flood. I'm still trying to resolve a complaint with the Human Rights Commission on how many minorities I'm supposed to hire for my building crew.

"Immigration and Naturalization are checking the green-card status of most of the people who want to work. The trades unions say I can't use my sons. They insist I have to hire only Union workers with Ark-building experience."

"To make matters worse, the IRS seized all my assets, claiming I'm trying to leave the country illegally with endangered species.

"So, forgive me, Lord, but it would take at least 10 years for me to finish this Ark."

Suddenly the skies cleared, the sun began to shine, and a rainbow stretched across the sky. Noah looked up in wonder and asked, "You mean you're not going to destroy the world?"

"No," said the Lord. "It sounds like it's already been done."

We tend to have lots of fun with Noah's Ark: songs, collectibles, paintings. Those of a certain age may know Bill Cosby's version of the story better than we know the biblical story. Lost in the vision of an ark overflowing with animals is the origin of the story: the wicked ways of humankind and God's distress over immorality. The Bible says, "The Lord is sorry that humans had been made, and God's heart is greatly grieved." God is despondent and vows to destroy most of life.

But there is a glimmer of hope in the name of a man named Noah. Noah finds favor in the eyes of the Lord. Noah is a nonconformist who doesn't go along with the corrupt value

system of his society. Noah walks with God. He stands out as a herald of fresh possibility. As a model of faith and faithfulness, Noah embodies a new way of being. Noah becomes an instrument of salvation, a bearer of hope.

The ark Noah builds is a means of preserving life. The ark floats on the floodwaters as a beacon of life in the midst of destruction. God remembers Noah and all the animals that are with him on the ark. God remembers and longs for renewed relationship with the creatures of the earth. So God makes a wind blow and stops the flow of rain from the heavens. The waters subside. First a raven and then a dove are sent to scout out dry land. Finally the dove returns with a freshly plucked olive branch, a sprig of hope, a sign of renewed life. The ark comes to rest and Noah, his family, and all the animals disembark. Noah worships God at an altar and in turn, the Lord offers a covenant. God promises never again to blot out life upon the earth. "Never again will I deal in anger with the Creation."

God puts the rainbow in the sky, like a string around his finger or a not in his lunch box, to remind himself, the story says, not to remind us but to remind God of the promise, "Never again."

The story concludes with a promise, an everlasting covenant that God will not break. The message of the covenant is this: God will not deal with us in anger. God will deal with us in grace. We hear this covenant reiterated through Jesus and the testimony of John: "God so loved the world that God sent his Son not to judge the world but to save it..." (John 3:16).

Our world has witnessed much catastrophe in recent weeks. In Burma/Myanmar, Cyclone Nargis is responsible for the death and/or disappearance of over 100,000 people while millions struggle to survive in the aftermath. In China over 80,000 people are lost and 1.5 million remain victim to an epic earthquake, many of them children. Here in the U.S., tornados cut a path of devastation from Colorado to Oklahoma to Georgia and wild fires burned in California and Florida. All of these have devastating consequences and call us to wonder, "Is God once again anguished over the state of the world that he is causing such destruction?"

Some dare to proclaim that an earthquake or flood or hurricane or famine or drought are God's punishment. Some declare that the AIDS epidemic is God's punishment. But the Covenant with Noah says, "No! God will never use nature and its power to punish. Never again." In the face of natural disaster, God remembers the creatures God has made and longs for their health and well-being. There are still moral consequences to our decision and our actions. Sometimes the consequences entail suffering for people, not just for those responsible but also for innocent victims. But the covenant reveals that God is not present in the crisis in order to punish us for the past; God is present in the crisis to save us for the future, and to give us life.ⁱ In the midst of terror, there is grace. In the face of death, there is life. In the presence of despair there is hope.

The people of God are called to be bearers of hope, like Noah. We are commissioned to be a new community, to present an alternative way of living that is in the world but not of the world. The church is meant to be an ark, if you will, a vessel that serves to preserve and enhance life in the midst of chaotic forces that try to destroy and diminish life. Through our ministries we offer a refuge for the brokenhearted, pointing those who feel lifeless toward new life. We remember and remind people of God's promise, "Never again will God deal with us in anger. God will deal with us in grace."

One way in which we remember that covenant is through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In this holy meal we are reminded of the image of God's spread-eagle on the cross, eyes glazed with pain, doing his best to save the world from drowning. To save, not to destroy... Just

when we are tempted to think that God has given up on us, God manages, again and again, to renew our hope, with bread broken from the loaf, a cup of blessing, a moment of peace, a sense of acceptance, a second chance, another day of sobriety, a place in the ark, a rainbow, a sprig of green life. Signs of hope that we might bear blessings of hope to one another and to the world. Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Rev. Richard A. Corson, "A Sprig of Hope," August 21, 1994.

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