

Hebrew Scripture

Genesis 6: 9-22; 7:24; 8:14-19

Build your ark before the storm

God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was a formless void, a soupy primordial ooze. And the Holy Spirit flew over the chaotic waters of creation, bringing order, and breathing life into every creature that God called into being. When God was all done creating, God looked at what God had made and said that creation was “Very Good.”

Then some time passed, the earth rotated, people multiplied, and God looked at what God had made and said “The earth is not so good. In fact it is corrupt, people are violent, and creation is a mess. Where is the do-over button?” We usually imagine God as having complete control over creation. God is all powerful, omnipotent. And God is all knowing, omniscient. So, how could creation have gotten so out of hand? But right here in scripture, the people of God’s creation have made a mess of the earth. They have filled the earth with violence and God is not pleased with the results.

If God was not pleased with the level of violence present in Noah’s time, I don’t even want to imagine how God feels about the amount of violence we perpetrate today. Violence is never a single act of destruction. It is always a self perpetuating cycle of destroying creation in an effort to control the world around us. Whether we are doing violence on other human beings or doing violence to our environment or doing violence to ourselves – it almost always stems from a desire to control and shape our lives and the lives of others. At some point, when the destruction becomes too great, the oppressed lash out and do violence to their oppressors, the ravaged landscape becomes toxic and uninhabitable, entire species become extinct and communities of people are wiped out by genocide.

If the violence that we live and hear about on the nightly news is overwhelming to us, we are in good company, even the all-powerful, all-knowing God who created us is appalled and wants a do-over button. God says, “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. But I will establish my covenant with you (Noah); and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you;”

We may all be so familiar with the flood story that we miss the most interesting piece of this scripture. God could have ordered an *entire* do-over. God could have destroyed *everything* – including Noah and his family and the animals, and just started creation over completely, from scratch. But God doesn’t work that way. To be sure, the world is a mess, filled with corruption and violence. But there is some goodness left. There are some righteous people and creatures that have not been exterminated - Noah and his family and the animals. So, instead of scrapping creation entirely, God chooses to save the good part so that it can start over when the rain stops and the water recedes.

God saves the goodness of creation in an ark, in Hebrew the word for ark is ‘teva.’ Interestingly, this word is only used one other time in the Hebrew scriptures. Teva is also the basket that floats Moses to safety on the Nile River while Pharaoh is slaughtering all the Hebrew infants. It seems that when God wants to save his people from violence and destruction, God asks someone to build a teva to keep the hope of God’s salvation afloat above the violence.

In the story of Noah, God saves just enough of creation, that when the violence of the flood is over, the seeds of the original creation can be replanted. Now, I know we might worry about the genetic diversity of a species populated by only two parents, but this is a story about God's salvation, not a science experiment. God chooses to use the original creation to repopulate the earth because God values creation. God isn't willing to throw it all out. God wants to save creation from the violence and corruption that is destroying it. Now, I realize that this does not sound like a very hopeful plan unless you belong to Noah's family and make it into the ark. But let's look at the story as a metaphor for our own lives.

There are times in our own lives when chaos, corruption, and violence threaten to destroy us. Sometimes it is a violence within us that threatens our lives, it could be a disease or an addiction that is doing damage to our lives. Sometimes it is violence from outside of us, a Baltimore neighborhood full of gunfire and drugs or a home threatened by domestic violence. Whatever the situation, God is appalled by violence, it grieves God to see creation hell-bent on destruction. God's response is to try and save the goodness and righteousness in an ark of safety. The ark gives the healthy seeds of creation a chance to survive through the dark night of danger and come out the other side into the light of a new day.

Each of us has found our own ark of safety to float us through an experience of violence and destruction. It may have been a cancer support group, a twelve-step recovery group, a neighborhood association, a church, a shelter, friends, family, and most importantly our relationship with God is an ark of safety, a teva to carry us through the storm. The difficulty with all arks of safety is that we have to build the ark before the rain comes. We cannot wait until the first drops begin to hit the ground, by then the time is too short and our efforts will be frantic and poorly planned. We stand a much better chance of being carried through the storm if we have been working with God ahead of time on the blueprints for our salvation. How many cubits does the ark need to be? How much lumber will it take? How many people are going to be in there with me? How long will we be floating on the water? What kind of supplies do we need to bring?

Jesus uses a different metaphor to describe this same experience of weathering the storms of life. Instead of floating above the chaos in an ark, Jesus describes a house built on solid rock. In the Gospel, Jesus is cautioning all who have been listening to his sermon on the mountain, it is not enough to just hear the words of salvation, you have to act on them in order to be saved. If you act on Jesus' teaching, if you build a relationship with God and your neighbor, if you care for the sick, share with the poor, visit those in prison, and clothe the naked, then your house will be built on a foundation of rock. There is no storm that life can throw your way that will destroy your house because you have such a deep relationship with God. You have a solid foundation of bedrock faith that you have been practicing from before the first rain drop fell on your roof.

The foolish person has heard all the words of salvation and has not changed his or her life to live them out. Jesus says that their house is built upon sand. It holds up just fine until the storm comes, and then the wind and water will wash away the shifting sands under their house. The foolish person has not done any work ahead of time to build a relationship with God and their neighbor. And as soon as the storm rages, prayers for help are sent up and frantic calls are made to the neighbors for help, but it is too late for relationships to be formed and that bedrock faith to be created. It takes time and patience and a lack of panic to build your house on a firm foundation.

In the Gospel and in the story about Noah there are two harsh realities – One, the world is a violent place, prone to raging storms and Two, not everyone makes it through the storm. Some people make it onto the ark and other people don't. Some people build their house on rock and others build on sand. We should never think that God desires the destruction of any part of God's creation. Rather, God grieves the violence and corruption that mars creation. God wants to save us from the evil we do to each other and from the harm we bring on ourselves. But we have to listen to the words of salvation and then do the work to build the ark. We have to reach out to God and nurture our faith while the weather is still seasonable. We have to join the cancer support group while our health is still good. We have to go to a twelve-step group before our addiction kills us. We have to build the community association that will stand up to the drug dealers before the community has moved away and abandoned the street corners. We have to get out of the house before we become another statistic of domestic violence. We have to practice our faith before we find ourselves in a storm of despair and hopelessness.

No one can build their ark alone. Noah needed his wife, sons and their wives. This is why we are called to be church together. Church is a place for us to help each other practice our faith and deepen our relationships. As a community built on faith in God we become an ark of safety that can help any one of us weather a terrible flood in our lives. We build our ark together with the words of salvation that we hear in The Bible and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We do not build our ark because we are afraid or anxious. We build because we trust that God will never abandon us and has given us a plan, a blueprint for salvation written down in the Gospels. So come and work on your ark at St. Mark's on the Hill before you ever have need of it. Deepen your faith, build your relationships, let your life be challenged and changed by the words of Jesus' salvation. When the storm comes you will discover yourself floating above the chaos, cradled in the safety of God's hand.

Amen.