

## LEAVING THE ARK

### Genesis 9:8-17

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on February 21, 2021, the First Sunday in Lent. A limited number of people present but otherwise closed for the Coronavirus pandemic, and the service was livestreamed.*

---

#### Genesis 9:8-17

*Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”*

*God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”*

One of the best-known stories of the Bible – among children and adults, religious and non-religious – is Noah’s Ark.

- Explorers and archaeologists capture the attention of national magazines when they claim to have discovered or at least gotten closer to what they think is the location of Noah’s Ark.<sup>1</sup>
- Likewise, anyone who was had a child or grandchild in Vacation Bible School has likely heard the children’s song – presented on a church stage or sung in the back seat of the car going home: “Well Noah he built him an Arky Arky//Children of the Lord.”<sup>2</sup>

#### I.

Despite the satisfaction this story may give us as a potential source for archaeological verification of our faith or for the joy of upbeat children’s music, the four chapters this famous story occupies in Genesis pose theological questions as well.

- Having created the world and seen it quickly fall into family violence and murder,<sup>3</sup> does the Fall represent a flaw in Creation, what we might cynically call a “botched job” on God’s part that leads God to start over with the Flood, the Ark, and the family of Noah?
- While it is understandable that God might want to start over with Creation, why would God start over in such a violent and destructive way, destroying plants and animals and people except for those lucky enough to enter the Ark or descend from them?

---

<sup>1</sup> See for example: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/article/100428-noahs-ark-found-in-turkey-science-religion-culture>.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.google.com/search?q=noah%27s+arky&oq=&aqs=chrome..69i59j450l8.417234632j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1-3.

- Why would God follow the Flood with a promise that God would never again destroy humanity by means of a Flood, but not necessarily by other means?
- Why is Noah so blindly obedient? Why is he silent before God's announcement of his intention to destroy?<sup>4</sup> Why doesn't Noah push back at God, like many who would come after him – Abraham<sup>5</sup> and Moses<sup>6</sup> and Miriam<sup>7</sup> and Jeremiah<sup>8</sup> and Job<sup>9</sup> and the Syrophenician Woman<sup>10</sup> who questions Jesus. Why is Noah so silent in the face of divine destruction?
- And perhaps most of all, how seriously can we take a story from this primeval literature of the Bible, which sounds so much like mythology, with a magic garden,<sup>11</sup> a talking snake,<sup>12</sup> and "sons of God" who mate with "the daughters of humans" and produce Nephilim, "heroes of old," "warriors of renown"?<sup>13</sup> How can we take seriously a character like Noah, who lives for 900 years?<sup>14</sup> Does this part of the Bible really have anything to teach us?

\*\*

These are just questions from the *beginning* of the story. Near the *end* of the Noah story, from which our text comes, we have even more questions:

- Why is Noah *still silent* when God prepares him and his family to leave the Ark?
- Why is Noah *still silent* when God renews a covenant with all forms of life on earth, promises never again to destroy humanity and backs up that promise with a rainbow in the sky?
- When Noah leaves the Ark, why does he plant a vineyard, drink far too much of its wine, leave himself vulnerable to some kind of sexual violation that leads one of his sons to be cursed to servitude for centuries?<sup>15</sup>
- And why does that curse get racialized by the church across centuries and used by our predecessors in the Presbyterian Church to justify antebellum slavery?<sup>16</sup>

We are a long way from "Arky-Arky," but when we open the scriptures, we sometimes have to live with troubling questions that arise from its stories and characters.

## II.

A sermon series on Noah could address many if not all these questions, but that is not the preaching plan for Lent. We have only today to consider the passage of Noah's leaving the ark, as it is designated Old Testament lesson for this First Sunday in Lent.

---

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 6:11-7:5.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 18.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 32.

<sup>7</sup> Numbers 12.

<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah 12-16.

<sup>9</sup> Job 3-42:6.

<sup>10</sup> Mark 7 and Matthew 15.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 2:8.

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 3:1-7.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 6:1-4.

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 9:28.

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 9:18-28.

<sup>16</sup>This curse later develops its own tragic and unfortunate life in human history when it is used by preachers and teachers in the church to justify the enslavement of dark-skinned people, particularly in the American South, particularly by Presbyterian clergy in our country who still have revered institutions named for them. See Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

I have never preached on Noah, and what I am going to present today is based on the research by a colleague in the Moveable Feast Preaching Group of which I have been a member for nearly forty years. This research has been done by Reverend Margaret Fox, who, in addition to writing a fine paper on this passage, is the newest and youngest member of the group.<sup>17</sup>

What Margaret points out is: In our passage, God addresses Noah *three times*, introduced each time by the same words “*And God said...*”

*God said* to Noah and his sons  
*God said*  
*And God said* to Noah.

The Hebrew word for “And God said” is *vayomer*, the original title of this sermon. According to Robert Alter, one of the finest Hebrew scholars in America, *vayomer* is a *formulaic* way of God addressing a person, and it is an expression that *anticipates a response*. Thus, when God says to Noah “I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants,” the natural expectation on the part of God and the reader is that Noah will respond. But each time God speaks, Noah is silent.<sup>18</sup>

Then, when Noah leaves the Ark, still in silence, he plants a vineyard, drinks too much of the fruit of its vine, and becomes drunk. He is later found asleep and uncovered by one of his sons, who tells his brothers, who then cover their father with a blanket without viewing his nakedness. When Noah awakens, he senses that his first son has violated him; and he curses that son and his descendants to a lifetime of servitude.

\*\*

What my colleague points out is that when Noah emerges from the Ark, he shows several signs of being traumatized:

- He cannot speak.
- He turns to alcohol.
- He becomes vulnerable to being violated by a member of his own family.

Noah lives three hundred more years, but the only words in scripture he speaks – before or after the Ark – are the curse on his son. Noah spends all nine-hundred years of his Biblical life in silence.<sup>19</sup>

### III.

I realize this is a rather sad and dark portrait of Noah’s lengthy life. His overall story doesn’t ring true with the “Arky, Arky” of the children’s song. But in the grand sweep of God’s relationship with the human race – in which Noah plays a crucial role in God’s starting over – there is a *redeeming* feature to Noah’s life that comes to him even in his silence. Follow me along here:

- When Noah is freed from the Ark after forty days and forty nights floating across the waters of the Flood, Noah enters a wilderness. It is a wilderness of silence, of addiction, of family rift, of violation, and of curse. Noah passes from Flood to Wilderness.

---

<sup>17</sup> Margaret Fox, Moveable Feast Paper, Lent 1, Year B, Virtual Moveable Feast, January 5-6, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), page 51, note 12.

<sup>19</sup> Genesis 9:28-29.

- Likewise, when the people of Israel will later be freed from slavery by passing through the waters of the Red Sea, they too enter the wilderness, for forty years.<sup>20</sup>
- In the New Testament, when Jesus begins his ministry, he passes through the waters of baptism; and he, too, enters the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, tempted by Satan, surrounded by wild beasts.<sup>21</sup>

In each of these Biblical periods, there is wilderness, *but wilderness does not have the last word.*

- The people of Israel are given manna and quail in the wilderness.<sup>22</sup>
- Jesus is attended to, waited on, by angels in the wilderness.<sup>23</sup>
- And God moves forward with re-creating the world, even as Noah is silent or asleep.
  - God *continues to speak to Noah*: “And God said...” “And God said...” “And God said...”
  - God *promises a rainbow and delivers on that promise.*
  - God *establishes a new covenant* with all plants, animals, and every human being to be born on the face of the earth.
  - And Noah’s descendants then “*spread abroad on the earth* after the Flood,” *fulfilling* God’s *original intention* at Creation for humankind to “be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it.”<sup>24</sup>

Even though a traumatized Noah remains silent, God *carries* God’s divine intentions for Creation forward, and God *carries* Noah as well.

#### IV.

The novelist Marilynne Robinson writes of two other characters in Genesis who spend time in the wilderness – Hagar and her son Ishmael.<sup>25</sup>

Their time in the wilderness [Robinson writes] seems like a *specific moment of divine Providence* within the whole providential regime of Creation.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps Noah’s lengthy life – silent, unquestioning, obedient, yet traumatized – is likewise “*a specific moment of divine Providence,*” *despite* and *including* his time in the wilderness.

As Judaism and Christianity become develop over the centuries and the Bible comes together into the book as we know it, Noah is remembered:

- “In the time of wrath, says Ecclesiasticus, “he kept the race alive.”<sup>27</sup>
- Adds II Esdras: “All the righteous...have descended from him.”<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Exodus 15:22 begins their sojourn in the wilderness.

<sup>21</sup> Mark 1:12-13.

<sup>22</sup> Exodus 16.

<sup>23</sup> Mark 1:12-13.

<sup>24</sup> Genesis 1:28.

<sup>25</sup> Genesis 16 and 21.

<sup>26</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 119.

<sup>27</sup> Ecclesiasticus 44:17 (Apocrypha).

<sup>28</sup> II Esdras 3:1 (Apocrypha).

- And of Noah, the New Testament Book of Hebrews, breaks into lyricism: “By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, *respected* the warning and *built* an ark...by this he...*became an heir to the righteousness* that is in accordance with faith.”<sup>29</sup>

“A specific moment of divine providence.”

## V.

Good people of Westminster, by the time the Season of Lent draws to a close and we celebrate the Resurrection, we will be closer to dry land than we are today. But as in the days of Noah, dry land will still lie in front of us.

- The pandemic will be closer to our mastery of it, but we will not yet have brought the Ark ashore and disembarked, maskless.
- The impact of the climate on us and our impact on it will still be with us, hopefully responding to our prayers, our perseverance, our politics, whether we are thawed in Texas or spared in Virginia.
- The psychological and spiritual impact of our time in quarantine on the Ark will remain to be seen.
- The state of the economy will still be unfolding, in ways likely quite different for those at the top, those in the middle, and those at the bottom.
- The impact on our children of learning by Zoom will become clearer, as well as likely exacerbation to disparities already in existence.
- The impact of the pandemic on pre-existing racial disparities will not have disappeared during our time on the Ark.
- Deeper awareness of terrorist threats from within will await our response, as will our continued preparation against such threats from without.
- And a question we perhaps did not expect to be asking as to whether we still want to strive to be a democracy will hang newly in the air as we prepare to disembark from the Ark.

And such communal questions we face do not obscure or override personal questions that cling to us like wetsuits as we leave the Ark:

- Disease
- Dementia
- Depression
- Divorce
- Doubt about our family, our friendships, our work, our faith.

As Noah saw the land ahead, he saw through gray, cumulus clouds, always moving, that God had spread a rainbow over Noah’s life. It was a sign to Noah that:

- God carries *on*
- God carries *on with* Noah
- God carries *on through* Noah
- And God carries *Noah with him*.

The rainbow forms an arc over our world and our lives as well, as we sail *toward* the land that awaits us, as we sail deeper *into* our own hearts and minds and lives as well.

---

<sup>29</sup> Hebrews 11:7.

- God carries *on*
- God carries on *with us*
- God carries on *through us*
- God carries *us with him*.

*Vayomer.*

“And God said.”

That’s the word at the beginning and the end, the word that carries on, the word that carries us through.

Amen.

© Larry R. Hayward, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria VA