

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

Psalm 46

Romans 1:16,17, 3:22b-28

MATTHEW 7:21-29

What's up with our getting the story of Noah in grown-up church? Isn't that just a children's story with no relevance to adults? Or, should we all pack up and go to Mount Ararat and look for remains of Noah's Ark and so "prove" the Bible is "true"?

Both of those reactions really miss the purpose and value of this story for, yes, people of all ages. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are revelations from God to humanity (through the ancient Jewish scribes who wrote them down) that tell us about the nature of God, the nature of humanity, and the nature of reality. Important stuff. And yes, the story of Noah's Ark has truths which *can* be understood by a young child – and truths which need to be understood by *all* ages – which can be *proved* as *true* spiritually (the sense in which they are intended) without leaving our pews or our homes to become another "Indiana Jones."

The first eleven chapters of Genesis – from the first Creation story through the story of the Tower of Babel – tell us that there is one all-powerful God who created, rules over and judges the Creation and all who dwell in it. God is extraordinarily generous and loving *and* has high standards of justice and righteousness. This is in spectacular contrast to some ancient pagan myths which portray the world as made and ruled over by competing deities who could be cruel, petty, self-centered, vengeful, and have no particular moral standards.

The opening chapters of Genesis also tell us that human beings were made by God as the crown of Creation with special authority over *and* responsibility for Creation, over which God continued, and continues, to exercise ownership, and that God even gave us freedom to disobey God and rebel. Which we have done. It's called Sin. And as a result of human sin – part of our make-up as a species which is revealed in innumerable individual actions and inactions called sins, plural – we live in a world of broken relationships between people, between people and the Creation, and between people and God. If we ask the question, "If God is both loving and powerful, why is so much of the world a mess?", all we have to do is look in a mirror, and look at our 6½ billion fellow human beings. As St. Paul says in today's Epistle, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

The story of Noah's Ark is the story God tells us about what giving the world a "do-over" would look like as most people would envision it – God using God's power to destroy, save and repopulate. (Keep reading Genesis and you'll

see that this “do-over” didn’t work – only a new start for humanity and the Creation led by *God’s* self-sacrifice in Christ Jesus on the cross will work.)

Let’s look carefully at this story to see the principles at work. First, God decided to bring the flood because “the earth was corrupt” and God judged, at the time, that some people were beyond redemption. Judgment, therefore, was based on moral standards. This is so obvious to us – partly *because* of this story – that you may wonder why I make a point of it. Read the Babylonian flood story and you’ll learn that in that account, humanity was to get wiped out for making too much noise and bothering the gods. The power of Babylonian deities was used arbitrarily and in self-serving ways; the real God metes out *justice*.

God saved Noah because God judged him to be “righteous.” Again, we could say, “Well duh, of course.” But in the Babylonian myth, the hero of the flood was saved by one of the gods because the hero was the “teacher’s pet.” Power in Babylonian theology was arbitrary and not necessarily connected to moral standards. The real God judges people by their faith and by their deeds – the theme of all of our readings today.

Noah, notice, had to demonstrate faith as well as display his previous track record of righteousness. *It wasn’t raining when he was told to start building the ark.* It took faith to start what would have been a lot more than an afternoon project in his garage. Also, if you read the design specifications for the ark, you will notice that no rudder or steering wheel is included. *It takes extra faith to build a ship and be content to let God steer.* There’s one other boat in the Bible which is described as having no rudder; anybody remember what it was? Yes, it was the basket into which the baby Moses was put in the river Nile. That took faith, too, that God really would steer. Do we have that much faith?

It is important to remember that the ark was designed by God; the Titanic, on the other hand, was designed by “experts.” In whom do we put our trust?

The full account of the Noah story carefully notes that both “clean” animals – Kosher animals – *and* “unclean” animals went into the ark. *All species were preserved* whether or not they were to be used by faithful Jews and whether or not they were “useful” to human beings at all. (Personally, I’ve always wondered about mosquitoes being included on the ark.) *Species are valuable because they were made by God, not because they are useful to human beings.* By golly, this ancient manuscript sounds like a 21<sup>st</sup> century environmental tract. Or, just maybe it’s the other way around.

All the creatures – including the human creatures – went in “two by two,” and “everything that moves on the earth went out of the ark by families.” Those who first heard or read this story, like most of the people in the world today, could not imagine things any other way. It is only “modern” western men (mainly), who have promoted the notion of the “rugged individualist” who takes on the

challenges of life alone, without relationships. Uh, let's go back to the design concept authored by God, in which relationships between people and God, people and other people, and people and Creation are crucial, and the breaking of them is what got us as a species into this mess in the first place. Trying to ignore relationships won't get us as a species out of the mess we're in.

My final point about the ark is this: **everybody was in the same boat together**. That's another basic environmental principle which a pre-schooler playing with a wooden Noah's ark, people and animals, can understand, and the most learned environmental scientist will affirm. The scientist would simply state that our modern day **"ark" is this planet**, what The Book of Common Prayer calls "this fragile earth, our island home." God gave us the story of the ark, I think, on the theory that if a four-year-old could understand it, we adults might be able to also. Let's hope. We're all in the same boat together.

St. Paul reminds us that we cannot save ourselves from the consequences of human sin – or save the world – by our own actions alone, that it is only the grace of God through the atonement of our sins by Christ's death made "effective through faith" on the part of believers that saves us.

Just in case we then run off and start singing, "All you need is faith" [to the tune of the Beatles' "All you need is love"], Jesus himself corrects this notion in today's Gospel: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." So people who only try to act as Christians on Sunday mornings will not "make the cut." When the gangplank gets raised on the next "ark," in whatever sense you understand that, "lip service Christians" will be left outside.

Divine judgment will come, for each and all of us, and for the whole world. For human beings, both faith and behavior will be on "the final exam." Only God will score our final exams. Only by God's grace do we, any of us, have any chance at all. God's grace is not cheap; grace came by the most precious blood of Our Savior Jesus Christ. And yes, the behaviors on our final exams will include behaviors towards God, towards ourselves, towards other fellow human beings near and far, and towards "all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small."

Other lives are being impacted right now by the choices we make. Let us think about all those we share this "ark" with, and shape our behaviors by our deepening faith that we may share the grace we have received, to the glory of God.

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