July 12, 2020 • 6th Sunday after Pentecost • Online Worship

“Six Great Bible Stories: Noah’s Ark”
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Genesis 6:1-14; 17-22; 7:11-12; 8:13-14; 9:8-17

Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth.

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. Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. 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; 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; they shall be male and female. 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. 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.”

Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.

In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.

In the six hundred first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying. In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry.

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.”

In these days, biblical wisdom speaks into the present moment with astonishing relevance and power. Today—Part 2 of this six-part Sermon Series on great stories from the Book of Genesis—the story of Noah’s Ark. It’s a story we love to love, maybe thinking of all those cute animals marching in two by two. But it’s a story that takes us deeper as well, deep into the anxiety of this present moment and into the power of God and the promise of God’s everlasting covenant to create a new beginning for all of humanity and the whole of creation.

Probably most all of us have some passing acquaintance with this story, but here’s a quick recap. God became angry at humankind’s violent ways. He told Noah to build an ark, a big ship, big enough for his whole family and for 2 of every kind of animal. It was a really big ship. Today our first point is that Noah was faithful. He believed God when God told him to do this crazy thing. Good thing. Because we know what happened next. God made it rain for forty days and forty nights. As I’ve said before, you always know something important is going on in the Bible when it uses the number “40.” The Israelites wandered in the desert for—40 years. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for—40 days. The number 40 is like a big exclamation point or bold print. It means—pay attention, reader. This story is important.

And after those 40 days and 40 nights of rain, everything was flooded and washed away. Noah sent the dove out from the ark and she came back with an olive branch in her beak and Noah knew that the dry land had emerged again. And that life could start anew.

We’ve got the basics of the story as we know it outlined here. Or as we think we know it. What happens next actually reveals that there’s more going on here than meets the eye. The whole story takes us to insights we’d never considered before. Because what happens next is really quite astonishing.

You know that the flood waters recede, and Noah and his family and all the animals are so happy to find themselves on dry land once again that Noah leads them all in the worship of God. They give God thanks and praise. And all that makes God so happy that God paints a big rainbow across the sky. The biggest and most beautiful rainbow anyone had ever seen. And it went clear across the whole sky. And God spoke, just like at the creation. Because this was a moment of new creation, really. And God said: this will be the sign of my covenant with you, that I will never again let the waters destroy the whole of creation.

This is God’s gift—but it’s not easy to live it out, is it? To live into the new creation with ALL God’s peoples and all of God’s creation... You know, the Hebrew Scriptures command us once to “love our neighbor as yourself”, but in no fewer than 36 places are we commanded to “love the stranger.” This sense of God’s covenant being for all humanity—no “us” and “them”—wasn’t
any easier to grasp or to live out than it is now. We always want to divide the world up into them and us, friend and foe, the people that matter and the people that don’t, the people we love and the people we love to hate.

The world finds ways to write off the needs and the potential of the poor, of anyone who is “other,” and whole parts of the world. But God isn’t doing that. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks quotes an old Jewish teaching that says that God makes every person in the same image—God’s image—and each is different. Each is a child of God. And God makes one covenant with all. One covenant. One rainbow. Big enough to embrace us all as one new family. These are our brothers and sisters.

You see, today, hearing anew the story of Noah’s Ark, we find ourselves all in the same boat. And more than ever on this planet earth, it’s increasingly obvious to us that we will sink or swim together. As the old saying goes: a hole in the boat is a hole in the whole boat. We are in all this together! In these days, there are many things making holes in the boat—COVID-19, racial injustice, religious conflict, international tensions, the disparity between rich and poor, the degradation of the earth itself. We’re in it deep now, and it’s weighing us down. It’s keeping us awake at night. We see no end in sight to this present moment when so many holes seem to be sinking the whole boat.

I thought about Noah and his family on that big ark, and all the animals, too. We know how the story ends—40 days and nights of rain and then it stops. The sun comes out. The rainbow shines over the sky and they come out of the ark and return to dry land and worship God. But while still inside the ark, they didn’t know. Before all that good stuff happens, they’re just there inside the ark, the crowded, stinky murkiness of the inside of the ark. Not knowing. Not knowing how to count the time. Not knowing what the future will be, what their future will be, if there will even be a future.

That’s kind of where we find ourselves now, isn’t it? We don’t know. We can’t see where our story is going. We’ve been caught in the web of shameful racial injustice for 400 years. We’ve been in the time-warp of the coronavirus for 4 months. We ask what the future will be, when it will come. Has the rain stopped? Is the light shining out there? Is dry land in sight? Is there a future with hope?

How we need this story of Noah’s Ark and God’s rainbow covenant. This is a story that can carry us from the violence and destruction that preceded the flood, through these long days and nights of fear and uncertainty into a new world, a new future in which all life can thrive. The rainbow is the sign. It is the sign of God’s everlasting covenant with us and with the whole of creation. The sign of God’s tenacious, unrelenting covenant with us, always promising a new world, a new day, in which all life can flourish. God’s stubborn insistence on a hope-filled relationship with us draws us into deeper, more just, more beneficial, more life-giving relationships with one another and with the whole creation.

In the midst of this calamitous moment, alongside our anxiety and fear, have we not also felt a deep longing for a new world…based on justice, sustainability, health for all, equity and equality? Have we not yearned to grow in hospitality, generosity, and love?

Remember the story. God will set our feet on dry ground. And God will set a rainbow in the sky as a sign of God’s everlasting covenant. And thus a new beginning is possible. Through a process of deep pain, of soul-wrenching intentionalness and accountability, God calls forth a new creation, that we and all creation will come into a time and a life of well-being. The capacity of our Creator God will give new life. We will be set free from this ark to emerge on the other side of this story into a new day full of potential and promise.

In such a time as this, in this world of fear and suspicion and violence, God calls us to be signs of peace and agents of reconciliation. This is our time to witness to the abiding mercy and equality of God. The future of our world depends on our leadership and our faithfulness, co-creators of the future we long to see.

This is the gift of God’s arc of multi-colored bands, the great rainbow covenant, binding all within its lighted glory. Pointing us towards the vision of the Book of Revelation, the very last book of the Bible, in which we see the rainbow around the throne of God and the new Heaven and the new Earth revealed where God dwells among humankind as their God and they as God’s peoples, and God is with them to wipe every tear from their eyes. For death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. And there a great multitude from every nation, all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne, singing: “Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen!”

Notes:


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