

August 9 2020 – The Raven and The Dove

The story of Noah's Ark is a long-standing favourite among Sunday school teachers and in children's storybooks and even kid's songs.

I'm not sure I really understand why.

If you first heard about Noah

through these child-friendly stories and songs,

then I bet the images that came to mind

when I first said "Noah"

are the big flood,

all the birds and animals on the ark, and the bright rainbow at the end. Full stop, and no need to go further; it's just a kid's story, after all.

I wonder, though, if we leave the story alone beyond that point, because it really isn't child-friendly at all.

Maybe it's safer not to look too hard at it once we're grown-ups.

But today, I invite you to

set aside the image of the floating zoo

and the pretty rainbow;

I invite you to dust off your imaginations,

and enter in Noah's story once again.

Let's read together how the story begins:

Genesis 6:5-8, 13-22

⁵ When the LORD saw how wicked everyone on earth was and how evil their thoughts were all the time, ⁶ he was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. ⁷ And so he said, "I will wipe out these people I have created, and also the animals and the birds, because I am sorry that I made any of them." ⁸ But the LORD was pleased with Noah.

¹³ God said to Noah, "I have decided to put an end to all people. I will destroy them completely, because the world is full of their violent deeds. ¹⁴ Build a boat for yourself out of good timber; make rooms in it and cover it with tar inside and out. ¹⁵ Make it 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high. ¹⁶ Make a roof for the boat and leave a space of 18 inches between the roof and the sides. Build it with three decks and put a door in the side. ¹⁷ I am going to send a flood on the earth to destroy every living being. Everything on the earth will die, ¹⁸ but I will make a covenant with you. Go into the boat with your wife, your sons, and their wives. ¹⁹⁻²⁰ Take into the boat with you a male and a female of every kind of animal and of every kind of bird, in order to keep them alive. ²¹ Take along all kinds of food for you and for them." ²² Noah did everything that God commanded.

In the beginning, it must have felt like a grand adventure for Noah and his family.

To be seen by God as good and decent people,

chosen from among the sea of broken, corrupt humanity,

to do this incredible thing for the Lord.

To be tasked with building such an enormous ship
 – there's no Home Depot to buy lumber and supplies from, either.
 This building enterprise, from start to finish,
 was the work of Noah and his family.

Imagine the sights and sounds of this great work:
 the thunk and crack of hammer and chisel,
 the rap of mallets, pounding in wooden pegs;
 piles of lumber slowly taking shape
 into a ridiculously massive ship;
 the smell of hot tar as it was slathered
 over the sides,
 provisioning for humans and animals
 alike for months...
 ...the laughter and questions of the rest of humanity,
 wondering why Noah is investing so much
 of himself, his family, his resources
 into this seemingly pointless project.

I wonder if Noah and his family tried to explain,
 tried to offer one last warning
 that God's just judgement was coming,
 that this boat, this ark,
 was being built at God's command.
 Or was it simply too late for everyone else?
 I wonder if Noah and his family were frustrated and afraid
 and just as grieved to the heart as God himself was,
 when it came to their neighbours.

As the smell of ozone made the air metallic,
 as dark clouds gathered on the horizon,
 as the flashes of lightening
 and the distant boom of thunder drew nearer...
 ...I wonder if any doubts crept into the minds
 of broken, corrupt humanity,
 in amongst their evil thoughts.
 For Noah and his family and the animals and birds,
 what a gift from God the ark must have seemed;
 the gift of a life-line, a rescue from the oncoming storm;
 and also the gift of purpose and certainty,
 a task and a mission from God,
 as history's biggest downpour was about to begin.
 Picture in your minds a great ship,

sitting in the very driest of dry docks,
 ship's hold open, provisions standing by...
 ...and the first rumble of thunder in the distance.

Let's read what happened next:

Genesis 7:11-24

¹¹ When Noah was six hundred years old, on the seventeenth day of the second month all the outlets of the vast body of water beneath the earth burst open, all the floodgates of the sky were opened, ¹² and rain fell on the earth for forty days and nights. ¹³ On that same day Noah and his wife went into the boat with their three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and their wives. ¹⁴ With them went every kind of animal, domestic and wild, large and small, and every kind of bird. ¹⁵ A male and a female of each kind of living being went into the boat with Noah, ¹⁶ as God had commanded. Then the LORD shut the door behind Noah.

¹⁷ The flood continued for forty days, and the water became deep enough for the boat to float. ¹⁸ The water became deeper, and the boat drifted on the surface. ¹⁹ It became so deep that it covered the highest mountains; ²⁰ it went on rising until it was about twenty-five feet above the tops of the mountains. ²¹ Every living being on the earth died—every bird, every animal, and every person. ²² Everything on earth that breathed died. ²³ The LORD destroyed all living beings on the earth—human beings, animals, and birds. The only ones left were Noah and those who were with him in the boat. ²⁴ The water did not start going down for a hundred and fifty days.

The province of Ontario went into lockdown on March 17;
 it'll be 150 days this Friday, August 14, if my calculations are correct.

We know, all of us, as never before,
 exactly what 150 days feels like.

Add forty days of rain and storm
 to that 150 days at sea,
 and that's what Noah and his family
 and the animals and the birds
 experienced.

In your mind's eye, picture what life inside the ark must have been like. Everything and everyone would be damp.

The air must have been pretty foul,
 with all those animals and birds and people,
 crammed together in a minimally ventilated space.

That 18" gap under the eaves
 might have been both blessing and curse:
 letting in fresh air,
 but also rain and seawater.

Humans and animals both, I imagine, would be getting pretty seasick, too,

with the wind and the storm and the surging waves.
 And then there is the misery of confinement,
 shut into the ark by God himself,
 into the damp and dark,
 with rationed food and the same company,
 for weeks and months with no end in sight,
 tossed about on a ship
 that must have suddenly seemed small compared to the endless sea.
 But Noah and his family and the Ark
 were never, not for a moment, lost on that endless sea.
 They were exactly where God planned
 and wanted them to be.
 Everything that was happening to them
 was part of God's task for Noah,
 still part of God's plan for creation.
 Being chosen by God, the industry and purpose of building the Ark,
 the escape from destruction, yes, we definitely get
 that that's part of the plan.
 But now, so is an endless sea
 and unrelenting days of rain and sunless skies.
 And that's a little harder to see
 as part of God's plan.

In Scripture, we find a repeated idea
 of time in the wilderness
 being part of our spiritual journey
 toward wholeness in God.

After fleeing Egypt, Israel was not lost to the desert,
 even if they didn't quite know where they were all the time;
 at the beginning of his ministry,
 Jesus was not lost when he faced temptation
 in another desert, generations later.
 Being in the wilderness does not mean
 we are outside of God's care
 or that we've taken a wrong turn, somewhere in our lives.

But it does mean that our journeys may become hard, from time to time,
 and that we may feel far from God,
 though of course he is never far from us.
 I wonder if Noah and his family questioned
 how the waiting and the damp
 and the smell and the misery
 could really be God's intent for them?

I wonder if they feared that it had all gone
wrong somewhere along the way?

But after forty days of rain and 150 days at sea,
the Ark ran aground on a mountain-top.
Let's read what happened next:

Genesis 8:6b-13, 18-20

Noah opened a window ⁷ and sent out a raven. It did not come back, but kept flying around until the water was completely gone. ⁸ Meanwhile, Noah sent out a dove to see if the water had gone down, ⁹ but since the water still covered all the land, the dove did not find a place to light. It flew back to the boat, and Noah reached out and took it in. ¹⁰ He waited another seven days and sent out the dove again. ¹¹ It returned to him in the evening with a fresh olive leaf in its beak. So Noah knew that the water had gone down. ¹² Then he waited another seven days and sent out the dove once more; this time it did not come back.

¹³ When Noah was 601 years old, on the first day of the first month, the water was gone. Noah removed the covering of the boat, looked around, and saw that the ground was getting dry

¹⁸ So Noah went out of the boat with his wife, his sons, and their wives. ¹⁹ All the animals and birds went out of the boat in groups of their own kind.

²⁰ Noah built an altar to the LORD; he took one of each kind of ritually clean animal and bird, and burned them whole as a sacrifice on the altar.

Noah sent the strongest, smartest bird he could find in the Ark
to survey this new landscape they found themselves in.
The raven flew and flew, back and forth,
a swooping black speck in the clearing sky
until eventually land emerged and the raven flew on.

Then Noah followed an ancient mariner's tradition of releasing doves,
because a dove will instinctively fly
straight and true towards dry land.
It took three doves,
but eventually Noah knew that it was really over.

Imagine what those first steps out onto the mountain-top must have felt like;
to stand at last on firm, dry ground once more.
Close your eyes and picture it in your mind:
an altar built of stones, solid and grounded;
smoke rising up into the brilliant blue sky,
Noah with his arms uplifted,
responding to what God has done;

And sunlight, catching the last of the rain as it evaporates
 and God using it to stretch a rainbow across that sky,
 a symbol of his covenant promise with Noah and with us.
 I wonder how Noah experienced that promise,
 how deeply it filled his heart and mind
 with trust and confidence in God.

Noah's story is full of vivid imagery;
 and it's so much more than a cheery children's story
 about a floating zoo and a rainbow.

And that's because it reveals all the murky complexity
 of being men and women of faith in the real world.
 Noah's world and the people in it
 had collapsed under the weight of sin and brokenness:
 their own, each other's
 and the kind of brokenness that pervaded
 all creation, since nearly the beginning.
 God's heart broke, too,
 but through Noah and his family
 and the animals and the birds in the Ark,
 God gave his people hope;
 hope for renewal, for re-creation
 and for restored wholeness after the flood.
 Noah's story takes us from the excitement,
 the purpose and the drive of building the ark,
 the mystery of every animal and bird,
 even the wild and dangerous ones,
 marching two-by-two into the belly of the ship...
 ...to the gray, damp misery of life in a wave-tossed world,
 full of uncertainty;
 and then finally out into a world remade,
 ready to move forward into wholeness
 and in relationship with God.

I wonder...can we each of us find ourselves,
 our own spiritual journey, echoed in Noah's story?
 Where have you already travelled?
 Where do you find yourself today?
 Is it in the industry and God-gifted purpose of ark-building?
 Tossed about at sea...though never truly lost to the wilderness?
 Sending out ravens and doves, looking for dry land?
 Or standing before God,

lifting up your hearts in grateful and joyous response
to Him?

Although we can't see past the present moment, God can.

And God has not and never will give up on us.

There is always hope.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.