

NAVIGATING THE STORM

a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, August 28, 2016

Based on Genesis 6:11-21, 7:12-18, 7:24-8:11

This morning is the beginning of a new sermon series entitled, “Navigating the Storm—How to Journey in Faith through Troubling Times.” The image of a ship caught on stormy seas is a recurring image in the Bible. From the story of Noah through the story of Jonah to the story of the disciples in a storm on the sea of Galilee and the story of Paul in a great storm on his journey to Rome, we encounter repeatedly this image of people of faith, or wavering faith, struggling to journey through raging seas. It is an image that relates directly to our present time—because whether you look at world events or the political situation today in America or perhaps at your own personal life, in various ways we find ourselves on stormy seas. What does the Bible tell us about how to journey well through troubling times? This will be our focus as we begin this sermon series. Let us be for a moment in spirit of prayer . . .

One of the earliest stories in the Bible, after just five chapters in the book of Genesis, is the story of an enormous storm—the flood of Noah. The storm is the result of human sinfulness. The book of Genesis, in rapid fashion, describes how God creates human beings in the image of God, how humans turn from God and become alienated from God, and how human beings then descend into all kinds of wickedness, mistreating one another and making a mess of God’s world. It is a pretty apt description of our world today. The story of Noah thus starts out with the summary statement, “The wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and the inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.” (Genesis 6:5) Then comes the storm. Indeed much of the stormy trouble that we see in the world today is the direct consequence of human sinfulness.

In the story of Noah, the flood is God’s judgment on the sin of the world. The story makes plain that there are consequences for sin. Some people, when thinking of the story of Noah, stop at this point and consider the story to be all about judgment. But of the 93 verses in the book of Genesis that tell the story of Noah, just 16 verses speak of human sinfulness and God’s judgment through the flood. The other 77 verses tell of God’s action to save humanity and all of creation through Noah and the ark. The accent is on salvation—how in spite of human sinfulness God acts with grace and saving power to bring humanity and the whole world out of destruction into a new future. So the great bulk of Genesis chapters six through nine is the story of God bringing Noah and his family and all the animals on the ark safely through the storm into a bright tomorrow, symbolized by the rainbow. Thus the story is a model for us—how in spite of our own sins and failings, and the stormy seas of our times, God can be at work to bring us into a good and bright future.

In the process of Noah and the others coming through the storm, there are three key elements. The first crucial element is faith. According to Genesis, “Noah walked with God,” (Genesis 6:9) which is a pretty good description of what faith is. Faith is trusting in

God, fellowship with God, and following God. It is in faith that Noah is receptive to God's saving action, and it is in faith that Noah follows God's call to build the ark.

The second key element is the boat. The ark receives a lot of attention when people think about the story of Noah. Indeed the ark has gotten particular attention just in the last two months, with the opening of a new Noah's ark theme park in Kentucky. Called Ark Encounter, the park features a life-sized replica of the ark. The park opened in early July and cost 100 million dollars to build, which is why it will cost you \$40 to get in. Cheaper than Cedar Point I guess. But Ark Encounter is primarily a promotion of founder Ken Ham's very literalist understanding of the Biblical story of creation, with views that are contrary to most Biblical scholarship as well as modern science. I'd spend my \$40 on Millennium Force.

What is interesting in the Bible is that while the ark itself is important, the details of the ark are not. Of the 93 verses in the Bible that tell the story of Noah, just 3 describe the ark. There is a one verse description of the construction method—it was wood covered with pitch, which isn't saying much, because this is how ancient near eastern people always built boats. [*Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark and cover it inside and out with pitch. Genesis 6:14*] There is a one verse, very basic description of the appearance of the ark—it had a roof and a door on the side and three decks. [*Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above, and put the door of the ark in its side and make it with lower, second, and third decks. Genesis 6:16*] And there is a one verse description of the ark's dimensions—that it was to be 300 cubits by 50 cubits by 30 cubits. [*This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Genesis 6:15*] A cubit was the distance between your elbow and the tip of your fingers. Since that is a somewhat fuzzy dimension, there is a range of possibilities for how long exactly the cubit in Genesis was. At Ark Encounter, they went with the high end of the range, since the basic rule at a theme park is: the bigger the better. They figured a cubit at more than 20 inches and so built an ark over 500 feet long. A Biblical cubit is more typically considered to be about a foot and a half, which would make the ark 450 feet long. But either way, this is the one significant detail that the Bible presents in its picture of the ark—it is a big boat.

Later in the story there is mention of at least one window in the ark [*Noah opened the window of the ark he had made Genesis 8:6*]. But overall the Bible is just not concerned about the specifics of the ark, because it is the ark as symbol that is important for the whole Biblical story. Noah and his family and the animals are able to come through the flood because they get on a vessel of salvation that carries them through the storm. So the ark becomes a symbol of the community of faith and ultimately becomes a prime image for the church. I experienced a version of that when I was in seminary at Duke Divinity School, and the school logo was the ship of faith—a combination of the ark, the cross, and a rainbow.

The key point here is that for Noah, and for all Biblical people of faith after him, the journey of faith was not a solitary venture. Faith involves journeying with others. Noah

journeyed with his wife and their three sons and their sons' wives—eight people altogether, plus a huge assortment of animals. Later, the people of Israel would journey as a whole group to the Promised Land, and Jesus' disciples would journey together. Today people often want to imagine that a spiritual journey is a private thing. But the Bible proclaims the precise opposite—that if you want to journey well through life, you need to join the community of faith. So the church becomes the modern-day ark. We may have stormy seas all around us, but as we journey together in faith, we are sustained by God's power and enabled to travel toward God's promises.

Here then it is significant that the ark is big—there was room on the ark for every kind of creature. Today in the church there is room for all. We live in an age when people so often want to exclude others, or vilify other people who think or act differently. But in the church there is room for all kinds. We have room for Republicans and Democrats and people who want to be neither. This is one of the great strengths of our church—to be a community where people of all sorts, in spite of differing opinions, can journey together in faith.

So the key elements of the Noah story are, first of all, faith in God, and then secondly, the boat, representing how the people of faith come together to journey as a community. Then finally there is the journey itself, which in terms of time span represents by far the longest part of the story of Noah and the ark. Once the rains fall, and the ark is lifted up on the waters of the storm, it is an extensive journey.

When I was in high school, I was in a play in my church which sought to dramatize the whole story of the journey on the ark. It was a dud; because do you know what happens during the journey on the ark? Not much. Here is the timeline of events, as presented in the Bible, from the point when Noah and his family get on the ark to the point when they get off.

First there are forty days and nights of rain. [*The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights . . . and the waters increased and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. Genesis 7:12,17*] Then there are 150 days of floating, on open water. [*The waters swelled on the earth for 150 days. [Genesis 7:24]*] Then the ark hits ground . . . on a mountaintop. [*The waters gradually receded . . . at the end of 150 days, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. Genesis 8:3-4*]; and they sit there while the water continues to go down for another two and a half months. [*The waters continued to abate for two and a half months, and the tops of the mountains appeared. Genesis 8:5*] Noah opens a window, waits another forty days, then sends out a raven, and after that a dove, to see if the waters have dried up. [*At the end of forty days, Noah sent out a raven . . . then sent out a dove, to see if the waters has subsided. Genesis 8:7-8*] No dice; the dove comes back. [*But the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to the ark. Genesis 8:9*] Noah waits more, then sends out the dove a second time. [*He wanted another seven days, and again sent out the dove. Genesis 8:10*] This time the dove comes back with an olive leaf, a sign that there are at least the tops of trees someplace. [*The dove came back, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf.*] Noah waits another week, and sends out the dove a third time. [*Noah waited another seven days, and sent out the*

dove again. Genesis 8:12] This time the dove does not come back, indicating that dry land is appearing. *[The dove did not return any more. Genesis 8:12]* So Noah opens up the ark, and spends two months watching the ground dry. *[Noah removed the covering of the ark, and saw the ground drying. Two months later the earth was dry. Genesis 8:13-14]* When God finally tells Noah and his family that they can get off the ark, it has been a year and ten days since when they got on. *[Then God said to Noah, “Go out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and their wives. Genesis 8:15-16]*

You can understand why it is that when filmmakers take up the story of Noah, they always do crazy take-offs on the story, and never the actual story, because if they did a straight portrayal of the story, people would fall asleep. This is a story of tedium. But it is precisely this aspect of the story that can be helpful for our own journey of faith. When we are dealing with some problem or issue in life, one of the great challenges is when nothing is happening, when we see no progress day after day after day. In this regard the journey of the ark is a great story of perseverance in faith—how we are calling to keep trusting in God even when no resolution of our circumstances is in view. This becomes in fact a regular theme in the Biblical story, expressed in many later admonitions to “wait for the Lord.” (Psalm 27:14, Psalm 37:34, Psalm 40:1, Isaiah 8:17; 40:31, more) Like Noah and his family, we are encouraged to keep looking to God in faith, trusting that God’s good purposes will unfold.

So this morning, at the start of this sermon series, we have noted three key elements in Biblical teaching about how to navigate through the storms of life. First, put your trust in God. It was only by the guidance and power of God that Noah and his family were able to make it through the storm; likewise we need God’s saving power today. As this sermon series progresses, we will see more of how God reaches to us with saving power, supremely through Jesus Christ.

Secondly, get on the boat. Noah and his family and the animals took the crucial step of getting on the ark. Today, in light of the New Testament, we can say that the boat for all of us has arrived in Jesus Christ-- we are invited to step on faith, to journey together as disciples of Christ. At the close of our traditional services, we will be singing an old spiritual that lifts up this theme—the “Old Ship of Zion”—where the words are “’Tis the old ship of Zion . . . it will take us all to heaven . . . get on board, get on board.”

Finally, we need to persevere in faith, even when no destination is in view. As we look over the stormy seas of our time, we may not see much progress for the good, but like Noah, we can keep on in faith, so that we are a part of what God yet will do.