

sermon-6/1/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“A Rock in the Midst of Chaos”
Gen. 6:9-22; 7:24; 8:4-19 and Matt. 7:21-29

The story of Noah’s ark is one of the most well known stories in all of the Bible. If you grew up in the Church you most likely heard this story many times. There are even songs about Noah and his ark we loved to sing at vacation church school.

When we encounter this story as adults, we begin to see how it is almost impossible to believe it literally. How could an ark contain two of every known animal, bird, and creepy crawly bug on the earth? Wouldn’t some of the animals eat the others? How could there be a flood that covered the whole earth, deep enough to cover even mountains?

Those kind of questions don’t even get at the real troublesome part of this story. Think of the picture of God this story paints. Here we have a God with such a bad temper that this divine being is willing to destroy every living thing on the earth in judgmental anger. At one point in chapter seven the author of Genesis writes that anything with nostrils was at risk! Do we really believe that the God we know in Jesus would do such a thing? Do we want to teach that kind of lesson to our children?

So why do we continue to tell the story of Noah’s ark? Why is it so beloved? What about it captures our imaginations and speaks to our hearts? I suspect human beings have always been terrified of natural disasters. In the ancient world there were floods that killed many people. Consequently, many ancient cultures had flood stories. The Babylonians had one called the Gilgamesh Epic that many scholars feel influenced this flood story in Genesis.

Even in our modern day we know the devastation natural disasters can cause. This past few years we have seen whole cities destroyed by floods, cyclones, and tsunamis. No matter how sophisticated we are, we are still vulnerable to Mother Nature. And when we think about things beyond nature, a flood becomes a wonderful metaphor for so many other things out of our control.

We know water was a symbol of chaos in biblical times. Genesis talks about the world being covered by the waters of chaos at the beginning of creation. God subdued the chaos, separated the waters, and created dry land as a place for humans to dwell.

In the New Testament Jesus is not overcome by storms at sea. He even walks on the waters of chaos and is not drowned. The storms at sea obey his command! Such stories have great metaphorical power even if some can’t believe them literally.

This notion of chaos, symbolized by the waters of a flood, or the deep, mysterious ocean, is one that resonates with each one of us. We know about inner chaos that strikes us from time to time when tragedies intrude, when things spin out of control. It can feel like we are drowning in such chaos. It is terrifying.

Finding an ark to ride so as to not drown in chaos is another nice metaphor. Perhaps some of you may know of the l'Arche community started by Jean Vanier. These are communities where those with mental and physical handicaps are treasured and live side by side with those who are able-bodied.

Vanier writes, "The community of l'Arche wants to provide a refuge for people with mental handicaps, who can so quickly be drowned in the waters of our competitive society." I suspect it is not only the mentally handicapped who are in danger of drowning in our competitive culture.

I heard one preacher talk about the Church being an ark in the midst of chaos. When you think about it, it is a great image. After all, many of our churches are filled with people who don't necessarily get along with each other. Church fights can be very messy.

And, think about how smelly Noah's ark must have been, if you take it literally. Months on a little boat at sea with all those animals. I would have hated to be the one dealing with all that poop! But, once again, doesn't that remind you of the church? As that preacher said, even if the ark was a stinky place, full of natural predators, it was the only thing floating! As imperfect as most of our churches are, they are still a refuge from the chaos life can throw at us.

But, even beyond the metaphors of the waters of chaos, and the ark of refuge, this story in Genesis has one more powerful message that has grabbed our attention. As one commentator said, this story says that sin threatens to destroy God's creation, but God ultimately acts to save creation, not utterly destroy it in judgment.

Noah and his family, that little remnant, along with all the animals, represent God's grace having the last word. There may be judgment at the end of our days. God knows we have all messed up pretty bad from time to time. But, God does not give up on humanity. Grace, represented by that remnant on the ark in the Noah story, always speaks louder than judgment.

The gospel of Matthew gets at this from a little different angle. Jesus talks about the metaphor of building a house. You can build a house on sand or you can build it on a rock. When life's storms come, and they always seem to come, it makes a huge difference where you build your house.

Wil Willimon says that Jesus is not talking about building a house. He is talking about building a life. Jesus says we must be very careful what foundation we build our lives on. The ultimate foundation, of course, is Christ. Christ is the rock that will see us through many storms.

So, whether we are talking about the waters of chaos in a flood, or the chaos of a storm, the choice is ever before us. Will we get in the ark we call the Church, as imperfect as most churches are? Will we build our lives on our commitment to the God we know in

Jesus? Those who choose the Church so they might build their lives on being a disciple of Christ can speak to how that choice has saved them when life gets ugly. Amen