

THE ARK  
21 June 2020  
Beaverkill Community Church  
Mary Hall

*Genesis 6: 9-22; 7:24; 8:14-19*

It's an irony that this ancient legend about Noah survives in our age mainly as a children's story, that many children have toys that are Noah's arcs with removable roofs with animals that you can take in and out of the arc. Yet if you look at this story, it is really an extremely dark tale. It's a tale of God's terrible despair over the human race and his decision to destroy them all with a great flood. Haven't many of us felt that way about some piece of work over which we have been laboring for ages? So God is going to destroy it all except for this one old man, Noah, and his family. But now we give this story to children to read... and why?

Not, I suspect, because children particularly want to read it, but more because their elders particularly do not want to read it, or at least do not want to read it for what it actually says and so make it instead into a fairy tale, which no one has to take seriously—just the way we make jokes about disease and death so that we can laugh instead of weep at them; just the way we translate murder into sixth-rate television melodramas, which is to reduce them to a size that anybody can cope with; just the way we take the nightmares of our age, the sinister, brutal forces that dwell in the human

heart threatening always to overwhelm us and present them as the Addams family or monster dolls, which we give, again, to children. This is one way of dealing with the harsher realities of our existence, and since we are facing a few of these harsh realities right now, let's talk about Noah and the Arc.

Let us start with the story itself more particularly let us start with the moment when God first spoke to Noah, more particularly let us start with Noah's face at that moment when God first spoke to him.

When somebody speaks to you, you turn your face to look in the direction the voice comes from; but if the voice comes from no direction at all, if the voice comes from within and comes wordlessly, and more powerfully for being wordless, then in a sense you stop looking at anything at all. Your face goes vacant because for the moment you have vacated it and are living somewhere beneath your face, wherever it is that the voice comes from. So it was maybe with Noah's face when he heard the words that he heard, or when he heard what he heard translated clumsily into words: that the earth was corrupt in God's sight, filled with violence and pain and unlove—that the earth was doomed.

It was presumably nothing that Noah had not known already, nothing that any of us who have ever lived on this earth with our eyes open have not known. Nothing that we do not fear now. But because it came upon him

sudden and strong, he had to face it more squarely than people usually do, and it rose up in him like a pain in his own belly. And then maybe, Noah asked whether it was God who was speaking or only the pain in his belly; whether it was a vision of the glory of the world as it first emerged from the hand of the Creator that led him to the knowledge of how far the world had fallen, or whether it was just his pathetic human longing for a glory that had never been and would never be. If that was his question, perhaps a flicker of bewilderment passed across his face—the lines between his eyes deepening, his mouth going loose.

But then came the crux of the thing because the voice that Noah heard shifted from the indicative of doom to the imperative of command and it told him that, although the world was doomed, he, Noah, had a commission to perform that would have much to do with the saving of the world.

“Now, if the voice proceeded not from the mystery of the human belly but from the mystery and depth of life itself, then Noah had to obey, and Noah knew it. And now this is the point to shift our gaze to the Arc. It was not much, God knows, but it was enough, and it stayed afloat, and granted that it was noisy as hell and stank to heaven, creatures took comfort from each other's creatureliness, and the wolf lay down with the lamb, and the lion ate

straw like the ox, and life lived on in the ark while all around there was only chaos and death.

Then finally, after many days, Noah sent forth a dove from the ark to see if the waters had subsided from the earth, and that evening she returned, and lo, in her mouth a freshly plucked olive leaf, and now, once again, for the last time, the place to look is Noah's face. The dove stands there with her delicate, scarlet feet on the calluses of his upturned palm. His cheek just touches her breast so that he can feel the tiny panic of her heart. His eyes are closed, the lashes watery wet. Only what he weeps with now, is no longer anguish, but wild and irrepressible hope. That is not the end of the story in Genesis, but maybe that is the end of it for most of us—just a little sprig of hope held up against the end of the world.

All these old tales are about us, of course, and I suppose that is why we can never altogether forget them; that is why, even if we do not read them anymore ourselves, we give them to children to read so that they will never be entirely lost, because if they were, part of the truth about us would be lost too. The truth, for instance, that, left to ourselves, as beings we are doomed—what else can we conclude? —doomed if only by our own insatiable lust for doom. Despair and destruction and death are the ancient enemies, and yet we are always so helplessly drawn to them that it is as if we are more than half in love with our enemies. (That is the way we are

doomed—doomed to be what we are, doomed to seek our own doom.?) And the turbulent waters of chaos and nightmare are always threatening to burst forth and flood the earth. We hardly need the tale of Noah to tell us that. All the news we hear now tells us that and our own hearts tell us well too, because chaos and nightmare have their little days there also. But the tale of Noah tells other truths as well.

It tells about the ark, for one, which somehow managed to ride out the storm. God knows the ark is not much and the old joke seems true that if it were not for the storm without, you could never stand the stench within. But the ark was enough, IS enough. Because the ark is wherever human beings come together as human beings in such a way that the differences between them stop being barriers—the way if people meet at the wedding, say, of someone they both love, all the differences of age between them, all the real and imagined differences of color, of wealth, of education, no longer divide them but become for each a source of strength and delight, and although they may go right on looking at each other as very odd fish indeed, it becomes an oddness to gladden the heart, and there is no shyness anymore, no awkwardness or fear of each other. Sometimes even in a church we can look into each other's faces and see that, beneath the differences, we are all of us outward bound on a voyage for parts unknown.

The ark is wherever people come together because this is a stormy world where nothing stays put for long among the crazy waves and where at the end of every voyage there is a burial at sea. The ark is where, just because it is such a world, we really need each other and know very well that we do. The ark is wherever human beings come together because in their heart of hearts all of them—white and black, believer and unbeliever, rich and poor—dream the same dream, which is a dream of peace—peace between the nations, between the races, between the brothers—and thus ultimately a dream of love. Love not as an excuse for the mushy and innocuous, but love as a summons to battle against all that is unlovely and unloving in the world. The ark, in other words, is where we have each other and where we have hope. \*

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\*Frederick Buechner, "A Sprig of Hope," from "The Hungering Dark"

Noah looked like a fool in his faith, but he saved the world from drowning, and we must not forget the one whom Noah foreshadows and who also looked like a fool spread-eagled up there, cross-eyed with pain, but who also saved the world from drowning. We must not forget him because he saves the world still, and wherever the ark is, wherever we meet and touch in something like love, it is because he also is there, brother and father of us all. So into his gracious and puzzling hands we must commend ourselves through all the days of our voyaging, wherever it takes us, and at the end of

all our voyages. We must build our arks with love and ride out the storm with courage and know that the little sprig of green in the dove's mouth betokens a reality beyond the storm more precious than the likes of us can imagine.