

Sermon, February 21, 2021

Good morning! Welcome to stay at home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, MD. I am Pastor Scott Robinson and today we welcome back Jenny and Nathan Wilson, who are our very good friends and we are among their biggest fans. This morning they will provide special music for our worship. Hopefully before long we will be able to worship in person again. If you would like to help support our ministries and keep our benevolence commitments in the meantime, you can donate through our web site or Facebook page. Now for today's stupid joke. It has been a tough year to be a pastor. I asked one of my clergy friends who is especially struggling if she is planning a Lenten personal sacrifice, like giving up chocolate or Facebook. She said, "Yes. This year for Lent, I'm just giving up."

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Lord God, you led your ancient people through the wilderness and brought them to the promised land. Guide now the people of your Church, that following our Savior, we may walk through the wilderness of this world toward the glory of the world to come; through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

A reading from Genesis, the ninth chapter.

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 (that is, rainbow) 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."

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Mark, the first chapter.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

The Gospel of the Lord

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, and just so you know, this year in honor of Lent, I plan to give up snow shoveling, snow blowing and windshield-scraping. Wish me luck.

Once again our gospel reading takes us back to Jesus' Baptism, and believe it or not, I have nothing else to say on that subject. The Baptism of Jesus and / or John the Baptist were featured in our gospel readings on the second, third and fourth Sundays of Advent, as well as the first and third Sundays after the Epiphany. And believe it or not, The Baptizer will show up in our readings again in July. So today, if you don't mind, please let's talk about something else.

I really like the First Readings in Lent this year, which are mostly about covenants. Today we read of God's covenant with Noah from the book of Genesis. That's the one written on the rainbow. Next week it's God's covenant with Abraham, which was written in the stars. After that we move on to Exodus and the Sinai covenant which was written on stone tablets.

We'll take a short break for an odd story about Moses and poisonous snakes. But then it's back to covenants with a look at the covenant promised to Jeremiah, which will NOT be written on a rainbow, OR in the stars OR on stone tablets. It's the covenant God promises to write on human hearts.

Our first reading today is the end of the Noah flood story. Or I should say it's the end of the Noah flood stories, because there are actually two of them cleverly, though not seamlessly, woven together in Genesis chapters six through nine.

In Hebrew, one story refers to God as Elohim. The other as Yah or Yahweh. One says ONE pair of each kind of animal was taken onto the

Ark. The other says SEVEN pairs of the so-called “clean” animals were on board. Which is funny because the distinction between clean and unclean animals wouldn’t be made until ten generations later, when Moses climbed Mount Sinai.

One story explains that those seven pairs of clean animals were necessary so that Noah would have a good supply of meat for sacrificial meals. But according to the other one, humans were vegetarian until after the flood. One story says the flood lasted forty days. The other says a hundred and fifty.

But as confusing and contradictory as those two tales may be, Noah’s Ark remains perhaps THE most beloved story of the Hebrew Bible, especially among young children. I’ve mentioned before that Laura has a Godson named Noah who is all grown up now; but thanks to Laura and his grandparents, as a child little Noah had Noah everything.

He had Noah pajamas, Noah sweat suits, Noah jackets, hats and a toothbrush. Noah had two-by-two pairs of plastic, wooden and stuffed animals and there were rainbows and wooden boats all over the house.

When you think about it, it’s odd that kids love the Noah story so much. Because don’t tell them, but for every cute pair of animals saved in the boat there must have been thousands that were mercilessly drowned. And while Noah’s wife, sons and daughters-in-law survived the flood, no other human being did, be they man, woman or child.

In fact, if you do the math, the way Genesis tells it, Noah’s own grandfather drowned in the flood.

His name was Methuselah, and he was the oldest person in the Hebrew Bible, said to have lived some 969 years. Noah himself only made it to 950. Probably too many trans-fats and a lack of exercise.

I’ll spare you the details, but if you chart the numbers and ages and who begat whom when in the long lists of “generations” or in Hebrew

“toledot” of Genesis, Methuselah died when the flood came. That piece of biblical trivia upset the Rabbis of the Talmud so much that they made up a nice story about him gently lying down and passing quietly in his sleep just as the first raindrops fell.

Genesis says Noah was only 600 years old when he built the ark. (Back then apparently 600 was the new 40.) So I suppose Noah was the first recorded man in history to get a boat in response to a mid-life crisis. (And...He wasn't the last.)

While we call Noah's boat, “An Ark,” the Bible calls it ha-tevah in Hebrew. That's a different word from “Ark” as in Ark of the Covenant, which the Bible calls ha-aron. The word tevah is used only one other place in the Hebrew Bible. It's the name given that little basket that kept baby Moses dry and afloat when he was hidden in the rushes along the Nile. Both vessels were made of wood and waterproofed and caulked with bitumen.

Both saved God's chosen from drowning. How clever. By the way, you probably know the word Teva as a brand of footwear, especially famous for their water shoes and water-proof shoes. I called the company this week and guess what? Yeah, they took their name from the Hebrew word for the biblical ark and the basket. Cool.

You might think the story of Noah and the flood is unique among the world's ancient religions. But you'd be wrong. Because nearly all ancient cultures and religious traditions carry some sort of catastrophic flood story in their collective memories.

In fact, scholars suspect Israel borrowed the creation and flood stories of Genesis during the Babylonian Captivity. That's when they would have heard the more ancient epic Akkadian tales of Atrahasis and Utnapishtim, both of whom are said to have saved the world's animals from drowning in a massive flood by building a big boat.

Scholars suspect Noah is actually a retelling of those other stories, in a way carefully edited and viewed through the lens of Israel's radical monotheism—that is--their unique belief among the ancients that there *IS* only one God.

Ancient flood stories certainly weren't limited to the Near East. They are prevalent in the pre-history legends and mythologies of other lands like China, India, Africa, Polynesia and Aboriginal Australia. Native Hawaiians pass-down the tale of the legendary Nu'u, who is said to have built a big boat to save animals from a catastrophic flood. Calamitous floods are also a part of sacred origin stories told in the tribal folklore of many Native Americans.

Still cultural anthropologists insist myths in the ancient world usually had **SOME** contact points with history. They say that most people would and should collectively recall tales of devastating floods in their early history. Without deep wells or public water supplies ancient civilizations by necessity located close to streams and rivers, all of which periodically flooded, sometimes catastrophically.

In 1998 William Ryan and Walter Pittman, two geologists from Columbia University, claimed they had uncovered the **REAL** story behind the great flood recalled in the folklore and religious traditions of the Middle East and Asia Minor. They found evidence that the Black Sea was once a much smaller Black Lake. It was apparently flooded by a widespread meltdown of glaciers during a prolonged period of global warming about seven thousand years ago.

They found evidence that the swelling Mediterranean Sea suddenly spilled through a loose ledge of rock at the Bosphorus Strait. Those waters catastrophically flooded the Black Lake and wiped out pretty much the entire known world of the many people living in small lakeside villages. They think those events were probably the “facts” underlying the fantastic tales of Atrahasis, Utnapishtim and of course Noah. Well, maybe.

But I have never really cared that much about the facts behind stories like Noah. His story still remains among my favorites, regardless. Because to me, Noah is a timeless tale of a person trying hard to do the right thing while living in a largely unrighteous world.

And I can especially relate to Noah, because if he DID really exist, he was here before there was even a Bible, so he didn't have a holy book to tell him the right way to think and the right thing to do in every possible circumstance. But then again, neither do we.

As I have said many times before, the Bible is not a history book or a science text. It doesn't work well as and was never meant to be either. The Bible is instead the written record of the experience and understanding of God by people of faith, through many, many toledot over thousands of years.

And of course, over time our worldview, knowledge and circumstances have changed. Even the complex collection of commandments in Torah doesn't provide answers to all of our questions or spell out the right thing to do in every circumstance. There really is no simple timeless black and white code for daily living, because most of our lives are lived in grey areas.

The Bible doesn't tell us exactly what being righteous looks like. Especially when it comes to issues like gun control or the equal rights of those with mental illness. The Bible doesn't address solar or wind energy, hydro-fracking or DACA or provide survival strategies for a collapsing economy or an out-of-control deadly world-wide pandemic.

It mentions nothing about global warming or whether or not we contribute to it; or what, if anything, we should do about it. But even when the Bible is silent on exactly WHAT to do or think, it still teaches us a WAY to think. And by thinking and acting in good

faith, hopefully God helps us to figure out even the most complicated things.

This morning we read the story of God's first covenant with humanity. And as we'll see over the next few weeks, it's not the last. The details continue to evolve over time. As do we. In our Christian Covenant, God promises new life and an end to death. And our end of the bargain is merely to try to love and honor God in all we do, welcome strangers and treat our neighbors as well as we treat ourselves. Sure, that sounds simple enough, but God knows it isn't.

Today our neighbors include people who, quite frankly, can be tough to love. Folks who don't look or act or think or vote like us; who don't talk or even pray the way we do. Truth is, in human history neither God nor natural disasters have been responsible for the world's worst catastrophes. Instead it's been our own innate fears, suspicion and distrust of all people and things who act and appear so "other."

So every now and then I like to think back on the timeless message of the sometimes confusing and often contradictory stories of Noah. Stories that point out that all human beings ARE children of the same God. A God who loves us and forgives our shortcomings (which are many.)

Who asks that we take care of this beautiful planet, and be kind to each other and all of God's creatures. Because much like Noah and all those animals, in the end we really ARE...all in the same boat.

Amen
