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Sailing Home

Genesis 9:8-16

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Then 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 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."

Genesis 9:8-16

At a friend's baby shower, someone gives the baby-to-be a book—always a good gift—but the subject makes you wonder. The book is about Noah's ark. The cover promises "this peek through the window version of this favorite story will delight children—a perfect gift for every family."

You are a little thrown by the picture of a panda on the ark. Pandas are not indigenous to the Middle East. But your real question is, "How did the annihilation of most of the world's population—men, women and children dying—become 'a favorite story that will delight children—a perfect gift for every family'"?

Our church library includes *Noah's Ark: A Bible Story Pop-Up Book*. The book promises to bring the animals and characters to life, but there are no pop-up drowning people, heads bobbing up and down in the water – seemed like a missed opportunity.

Then there is *Here is Noah: A Where in the Bible Adventure Book*. The author has read the *Where's Waldo?* series. As children read the book, they are supposed to find Noah, Noah's sons, Noah's hammer, two monkeys, and a drowning elephant's nose.

The story of the great flood has been turned into a fairy tale for children. Noah's ark has been packaged as another *Golden Book* on the shelf beside *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *Snow White*.

Or it is made into a plastic toy: Noah's ark complete with Noah, his family, and two each of an assortment of animals. You can find it between Fisher-Price's barnyard set and the *SpongeBob Square Pants* collection.

Noah's story has provided material that makes the rounds on the internet. An anonymous Robert Fulghum-want-to-be wrote, "All I Need to Know I Learned from Noah's Ark."

1. Don't miss the boat.
2. Remember that we're all in the same boat.
3. Plan ahead. It wasn't raining when Noah built the ark.
4. Stay fit. When you're 600 years old someone may ask you to do something really big.
5. Don't listen to critics, just get on with the job that needs to be done.
6. Build your future on high ground.
7. Travel in pairs.
8. When you're stressed, float a while.
9. Remember the ark was built by amateurs, the Titanic by professionals.
10. No matter the storm, there's always a rainbow.

The flood has been a source for cartoonists. Dennis the Menace complains to his minister, "If you ask me, Noah could have left the two mosquitoes behind."

A host of animals grumble, "Well, it's about time" as two snails slowly crawl up the gangplank into the ark.

It is not surprising that most people do not understand what this story is about. It is not a children's story or a funny story. It is not a story concerned with history. The archaeologists who

search for gopher wood on every mountain in the Middle East are missing the point.

The editors of Genesis would be surprised by the silly questions: How did they fit that many animals in a space that is not big enough for that many animals? How could there be enough water to cover the whole world? How did the dogs and cats get along, or the mice and the elephants? Why didn't the lions eat the bunnies? Were the bunnies still creating other bunnies? Were the animals in a coma? After a month did Noah wish he was in a coma?

The question this story is concerned with is, "What is God like?" The main drama is not what happens on the ark, but what happens in God's heart. This story would be true even if it never happened.

The beginning is dark and ominous. Terrible things happen to God's good creation. Adam and Eve leave the garden. Cain murders Abel. The darkness spreads.

Genesis does not give all the gory details, but it says that the inclination of their hearts was evil and violence was everywhere. Violence was rampant in the inner cities, the suburbs, between nations. Terrorism was on the rise. War was considered a solution. Politicians refused to listen to their enemies. People did not think much about the elderly people who die when armies march. They let hungry children starve. They stopped seeing each other as God's children.

We understand their situation. We have had eight school shootings this year. We have gotten used to walking past the homeless. Innocent teenagers die in our prisons. We have been at war in Afghanistan for sixteen years. We do not even think about it anymore.

How is God going to react to their violence? How will God feel about their apathy? How will God deal with the brokenness of the world?

God responds not as an angry architect whose building has been ruined, but as a grieving parent whose heart has been broken. The depth of God's grief is unimaginable.

God sees the violence in the world and decides to turn away, to forget the whole experience, and walk away. The world was a mistake. God decides to return creation to the chaos from which God called creation. God will let the waters cover the earth.

But there is one person whom God cannot forget. God's love for Noah changes the plan. The story which up to now is all darkness takes a turn to the light. Humanity does not change in this story, but God does. The grieving God decides to save the world. God will stay with creation, notwithstanding the sorry state of humankind.

God says: "Because the earth is so violent, water will soon cover everything. But I've decided to make a new start with you. Start building a big floating crate. When it begins to rain, gather two each, male and female, of every animal."

Noah becomes the laughingstock of the neighborhood. The homeowners association complains that the monstrosity in Noah's front yard is ruining real estate values. They try to cancel his building permit.

No one takes the ark seriously. They continue to live with the same self-centeredness to which they have grown accustomed.

Even when the rains begin they are not concerned—not even when the sewers back up. Little by little the water rises, first down the street, then spreading in over the kitchen linoleum and trickling down the basement stairs. Eventually the water floats newspapers and peels wallpaper off walls until people are driven to the rooftops where they sit wrapped in blankets with their transistor radios looking for a break in the clouds and reassuring each other that the rain has to stop soon (Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979, 123-125).

But the rain pours for forty days. The water covers the earth and the hope of the world is a motley seasick collection with empty boxes of Dramamine.

The downpour finally stops. Noah sends a dove out to see if it can find dry land. His heart sinks when it flies back without finding anything. Noah waits a week. This time the dove comes

back with a sprig of olive. Soon they feel the boat scraping the ground, settling on Mount Ararat. They kneel knee deep in the mud and give thanks to God.

But even then, a thought tugs at the back of Noah's mind. If God would do it once, what would stop God from doing it again? Someday God might see more violence and apathy, and the drops would start pattering on the roof a second time.

So God points to the rainbow in the sky and promises: "I will never again curse my people because of their evil hearts. I will not forget my creation."

God vows to never give up on us. God's heart is filled with infinite patience, long-suffering love. God knows that we are inclined to violence and apathy, but God's word is grace.

The bow that is set in the sky refers to a weapon. God says, "I take my warrior's bow and restring it with the colors of creation."

The rainbow reminds God to be gracious. God promises to act only with mercy.

We still travel through waters that threaten to engulf us, but none of the suffering we know comes from God's displeasure. God is doing everything God can do to offer hope, end our heartaches, and bring us home.

Patrick Willson, a Presbyterian minister, asks us to imagine a little girl in a women's shelter playing with a toy Noah's ark. Every afternoon when the van brings her back from school she grabs the plastic cup of juice, stuffs the two allotted Oreos into the pocket of her jeans and quietly settles on to the floor in front of the wooden ark and its plastic animals.

She surveys the toys. Then she lines up her troops: first the large animals, then the monkeys, then small animals and birds, finally the things that slither. Pair by pair and time after time she marches them into the ark. You wonder if she knows anything at all about the biblical story of the ark and its cargo.

She and her mother were admitted to the shelter to get away from the abusive man they lived with. They do not seem like the kind of people who go to Sunday school. Her mother had

devotedly parented her drug habit. The only motivation for rehabilitation the staff has detected in her is the desire to escape the wrath of a dangerous man. The mother's treatment is not going well.

The child is silent except for the clicking of plastic hooves up the ramp of the ark. You consider telling her Noah's story, but think better of it. The drowning world of Genesis is too realistic, too frightening for a child.

Let her enjoy playing with the toy boat. Why would you tell a child about the horrible condition of the world? Why would you tell her about God's frustration when things were not going well? The story sounds like the violence she has lived with.

The animals are lining up once more to parade into the ark. You ask, "Where are the animals going?"

She looks at you as if no question could be more obvious: "They're going home!"

Of course. Home is where animals want to be. Home is where God's creatures long to be. Her emphatic tone makes something else clear as well; this place is not home. Though the shelter is clean, though the meals are prepared by a dietitian, though she has received new blue jeans and clean socks, though no one hurts her here, this is not home.

So where is home? The intake interview with her mother made home seem as elusive as the unicorn that missed the boat. Four months with this last man, two months living with an aunt, somewhere else before that, years lost in the haze of her mother's addiction—what kind of home has this child ever had? How can she hope for something she has never known except by its absence?

For that matter, how do any of us know home? Home is not the sum of shelter, food, and safety. Year by year we seek home by trying to make home for ourselves, but Home Depot sells only wood and metal and not home.

You say to the little girl: "You tell me the animals are going home. Where is their home?"

She is trying to concentrate on the procession. The camels have just gone up the ramp into the ark. Now the pair of rhinoceroses behind them are about to start.

Without lifting her eyes from her flock she answers, "God."

The rhinos teeter for a second at the top of the ramp, then clatter into the ark. A pair of warthogs come next, followed by a couple of antelope, until the whole double line of creatures rests safely in the ark. The ship is setting sail. It pulls away from the dock. Their destination is God. They are going home. God will be their home.

As we travel home, as the water rises around us, as we struggle with our brokenness, God will be our comfort. God will be our hope. God will be our peace. God will carry us to our final, true home, where there is nothing to harm us.

Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger

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