

3 Pentecost
Sermon for June 1, 2008
Raymond Raney

Genesis 6:9-22;7:24;8:14-19
Psalm 46
Romans 1:16-17;3:22b-31
Matthew 7:21-29

When I read the Genesis passages today, two images flashed in my mind: the first was the lines from *the Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

Water, water, every where,
And all the boards did shrink ;
Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink.

The other image was from the end of the movie *Moby Dick* when we see the character Ishmael, floating on the casket of his friend Queequeg, the only survivor of all his shipmates, all lost to the white whale. And we hear Ishmael's voice paraphrasing Job: "And I alone am left to tell the tale."

Growing up, the story of Noah's Ark always invoked images of cartoon characters dancing up the gangway singing songs as Noah and his family keep records of all those creatures who join their merry band.

We heard some of the story today. Among the details left out were that seven of the clean animals were brought on board. And at the end, Noah sends out the dove that returns with the olive branch. And when the last survivors of the human race exit the boat, God puts the war bow into the clouds as a reminder that the world must not be destroyed by water again.

This is not a happy story. We are told that the world has become corrupt and beyond redemption, and that only Noah is righteous. So God decides to destroy all flesh, and to save Noah and a sampling of creation. And Noah did as he was told.

What must it have been like when the rain began?

I was sitting in this sanctuary a couple of weeks ago when a major storm came through. I heard the wind begin to roar, so I went out the side door and I could feel the increased humidity as I breathed in the fresher air, and then I could smell the rain coming. I watched a translucent light gray wall advancing on the building. The sound of the rain moved closer like approaching traffic, then the drops fell here: a few drops at first, and then a gradual increase in the drumbeat of rain and then hail on our metal roof. And then the storm unleashed and the rainfall became a roar.

I heard the wind whip and beat the rain against the walls, and I felt afraid that it might be more than just rain and wind, and maybe the walls would not hold. But they did.

The rain continued to fall in roaring waves for nearly an hour before the snare drum of rain slowed and I could again distinguish individual drops. And then the rain ended, but what if it had not stopped?

I remember a video project that took me to Gloucester, Virginia. The first day the rain began around dinner time and didn't stop till breakfast. The weather report said that 17 inches of rain had fallen in one night. That's more rain than we get in an entire year. When we get major storms, the flash flood warnings abound because the desert cannot absorb a lot of water.

Where you build your home matters. Anyone who has ever built or bought a home knows: the process involves finding out if you're in the floodplain. If you look at floodplain topography, the lines will mark the areas that are flood prone according to how often flooding occurs. Then there are always the 100-year floodplains. What that doesn't tell you: sometimes 100-year floods happen more often than once a century. That's why the government urges everyone who is near a floodplain to buy flood insurance – just in case the water rushes in faster than sandbags can be filled.

Judy Tucker asked in Bible Study Wednesday whether the flood actually happened or was it just a story, a myth? If it didn't happen, what are we supposed to learn from the story?

I don't know. There are Bible archaeologists who claim to have found thick layers of mud in excavations in the middle east. Others claim that the remnants of the Ark are on the top of Mt. Ararat. I don't know. I was raised by parents and a church that took the Bible literally.

I remember sitting with my parents a few years ago on the porch of our family farm. We were enjoying the breeze of the evening, listening to the babbling of the creek. My mother turned to my father and I and said: "How did Noah save the fish?" My father looked quizzical, and she continued: "How did Noah save the fish? Did he have aquariums in the Ark?" My father let out an exasperated gasp, and said: "for crying out loud, Maxine. He didn't have to save the fish. They just stayed in the water."

Well, though I was at first as flummoxed as my father by my mother's question, I wasn't going to allow him to ridicule her inquiry. "Oh, Dad, it's a good question. If it was a world wide flood, the fresh water fish would have died in salt water. So how did Noah save the fish?" As I recall, he grumbled and went back to reading his book.

Jesus knew the story of Noah's Ark, and I wonder if that was what he was thinking of in the Gospel today. It's a harsh lesson: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."

Wait a minute. We prophesied in your name. We cast out demons in your name. We did deeds of power in your name. And you say “I never knew you” And how can you call us evil doers?

It’s harsh. What happened to all those “blessed ares.” What about that “have faith” and “just believe.” What about “don’t worry” and “don’t be anxious.”

The passages of the Gospel we heard today are the punctuation mark for three chapters of teachings by Jesus that began with the Beatitudes. Three chapters of teachings that provide the bedrock on which to build a faith. Three chapters of teachings about what we are to do in this world as servants of the most high God. This admonition by Jesus seems to me to be the bucket of cold water that says “pay attention.” And by invoking the message of water washing away the home, the building block of Jewish culture, Jesus is saying, remember, remember. Righteousness comes not by being who you are but by doing the will of the Father who sent him. And you cannot judge whether you are right with God, only the Father can make that judgment.

Jesus raises the ante here at the end of his teachings in Matthew. It’s important to pay attention. But the lesson is harsh: almost as harsh as God wiping out nearly every living thing with the flood.

I asked myself: What kind of a God is it that could do such a thing? What kind of a God would drown the world created and pronounced “good.”

And then I asked myself: What kind of a Father would send his son into this world? What kind of a Father would stand by and watch his son die on a cross? What kind of Father would sacrifice his only son to save the people who killed him?

There is a scene in the Mel Gibson film, “The Passion of the Christ.” At the death of Jesus on the Cross, the camera takes a “God’s eye view” of the scene and follows a single raindrop as it falls to the ground. The implication is that raindrop is actually a teardrop falling from the eye of the Father whose heart is broken with grief.

Did the world drown in the tears of a loving God?

After all the travails of the ancient mariner, the poem expresses the anguish and joy of revelation that he has sinned and been redeemed:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small ;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

Amen.