



First United Church of Oak Park

A Shelter From the Storm

Genesis 6:9-22

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“It was like one minute there was a little bit of water, the next minute it’s up to your waist, and you can’t get out the door. We couldn’t move, we tried. We did try to escape, but we couldn’t.” On July 27th, 2022, Carolyn Short climbed into her attic as a last effort to survive the deadly flash flooding emergency that tore through her community in Perry County, Kentucky, destroying thousands of homes. The flooding came overnight when many were asleep. And over four days, the sky opened up. “We waited, and we waited, and we waited, and every moment seemed like it was going to be the last,” she said. When the rain was finally over, 16 inches had fallen, turning peaceful creeks into raging rivers, sending water so fast and intense it swept homes off foundations and carried away cars. More than 40 people died in the flooding, and thousands of homes were destroyed, leaving people like Carolyn starting from scratch. As the water receded, Carolyn said reality set in. Bridges were gone, cars tossed around like toys, and family photos were scattered among muddy debris.

Since then, floods worldwide have kept coming and coming, wiping away houses and creating lakes where there weren’t any before. Since the tragic flood in Kentucky, we’ve been inundated by reports of further flooding in Pakistan, Libya, Britain, Brazil, and my native South Africa.

Ancient narratives of Flood stories exist among many nations and cultures. Here in Northern America, indigenous people, including the Lakota, Cherokee, Pawnee, and Navajo, have these stories with several themes also present in the Biblical flood. This one is from the Cherokee people in the Great Lakes and eastern Tennessee. It says:

“Day after day, a dog stood at the river bank and howled piteously. Rebuked by his master, the dog said a flood was coming, and he must build and provision a boat. Furthermore, the dog said he must throw him (the dog) into the water. For a sign that he spoke the truth, the dog showed the back of his neck, which was raw and bare, with flesh and bone showing. The man followed directions, and he and his family survived; from them, the present population is descended”

Like Noah's story, this one speaks of a warning: floods are coming. The warning is to ready oneself, to make preparations, to survive.

Another, from the Lakota people, ended as follows: "After the flood, the Creating Power made the rainbow as a sign that there would be no more great flood, but warned that he had destroyed the first world by fire because it was bad, and the second world by flood, and he would destroy this world too if people make it bad and ugly."

These narratives, the ones from the Bible and the more recent ones, feel uncomfortable for many reasons. It is hard to relate to this image of a cruel and vengeful God who wished to wipe away what was created, a punitive starting over, discarding what existed before. Yet, it is perhaps not dissimilar from the God who emerges in other areas in the Hebrew Bible, who is very human-like, jealous at times, and easily angered. But amidst the dissonance, we have to see the grace. In the Hebrew Bible, strong-flowing waters represent chaos. The Biblical authors likely wanted to portray God as controlling that chaos, that no power was above God. To do so, however, they are left with a God so different from the one we learn about through the life of Jesus. A loving God who wishes to be close to us, one filled with grace, whom Jesus calls Abba. The idea that God deliberately destroys humans is a worldview that is confronted by the revelation of Jesus Christ, who revealed a God who does not kill people in judgment.

So we may consider this story a warning, perhaps not leaving us scot-free from having a role in the dire situation, not individually, but collectively as humanity. As humans, we can't wash our hands completely of what has become bad and ugly in this world. Our world is in turmoil; there's no denying it. Wars and rumors of war. And our world is reeling under the impact of climate change, with rising temperatures, melting ice caps, devastating storms, and changing weather patterns. But God isn't done with us.

In this great time of turmoil, may we be open to the call to all of us coming from the story of Noah. With reports of flooding, warnings of future flooding, alarming climate change predictions, and hollow calls from climate change deniers, God is asking each of us, each individually and as a congregation here this morning, to build an ark. Can you hear the call? God is asking us to build an ark. What comes next is not a detailed description of what the physical dimensions must be and which wood should be collected for this purpose. No, dear siblings in faith. God is asking us to consider seriously what we need to do to weather the storms that are here and those that are coming.

We are called upon to build our own arks of hope. Each one of us is tasked with the responsibility to create a refuge, not just for ourselves, but for our neighbors. So, how do we go about building our arks? The story of Noah provides us with some important insights.

We are told that Noah walked with God. For me, this brings up an image of a toddler, slowly walking, carefully, step after step, a hand reached out to their parent, the hand of their parent, assisting in a way that, if missing, will stop the toddler's walking in its tracks. It's more than just accompanying; it's complete reliance. It's also a prayerful walking with, the kind of walking that engenders cohabitation. With this kind of relationship, we can actually hear the warnings and the subsequent guidance. Just as the loving parent will look ahead to see what hurdles may befall their toddler's path and gently guide them to safety, so God wishes to hold us in close embrace. We merely must reach our hands out in utter dependence.

The Benedictine monk Brother David Steindl-Rast talks about prayer, and I quote, "as waking up to the presence of God no matter where we are or what we are doing. When we are fully alert to whatever or whoever is right in front of us, when we are electrically aware of the tremendous gift of being alive, when we are able to give ourselves wholly to the moment we are in, then we are in prayer." End quote. Such awareness, such openness to the sacredness of every moment, takes practice. And there are many distractions in our way. What kind of concrete actions do you need to take to work towards the ability to walk with God? We all start from different places and may need to take small steps or larger ones to catch up or recommit. But we must commit.

Noah didn't sit idly, waiting for the flood to come. He took action. In the same vein, we must act with determination and diligence. Each small action, when multiplied across a community, can create a significant impact.

Amid our busy lives, it is crucial to take moments of stillness, perhaps to pray, perhaps to compel gratitude, perhaps to meditate. These practices not only connect us to God but also provide the clarity and strength needed to face challenges. Through these practices, we can find the guidance and resolve necessary to build our arks of refuge.

Noah's faith sustained him through the long and arduous process of building the ark. Similarly, in the face of uncertainty, we must hold onto faith—to God, of course, but also in

ourselves, in our capacity to make a difference. Hope becomes our anchor, reminding us that even in the darkest times, there is a flicker of light guiding us toward a better future.

Noah's sensitivity to God's guidance and warnings left him not only with a desire to save his own family; he opened the ark's doors to other creatures in need, thinking ahead to include a vision of the future and of mother earth. In all that we face, we must cultivate compassion for all living beings and work together as a community. Our congregation is going through a period of transition and introspection. May we continue to commit to this church and these people, knowing that our goal is intimate fellowship amidst our shared faith. When we stand together, we amplify our collective strength and resilience.

In the New Testament, the Book of Hebrews lists the great exemplars of faith. Noah was mentioned among them, and it is said that Noah was warned by God about events yet unseen, and by faith respected the warning and built an ark to save his household.

What do we really see reflected back to us when we stare into the depths of the story of Noah? An occasion for hope, grounds for despair, a tale of destruction, or a promise of rebirth, a story of heroism, a challenge to do things the same or do things differently? The story surprises me with all of the above and also leaves me with an aching desire: For our arks of light and love and unwavering faith to be filled with hope and compassion. And may they withstand the storms and inspire others to build their own arks so that together, we can navigate the challenges of our time faithfully.