

Two By Two

^{NRS} Gen 6:11 Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence.¹² And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth.¹³ And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.¹⁴ Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch.

^{NRS} Gen 7:5 And Noah did all that the LORD had commanded him.⁶ Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters came on the earth.⁷ And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood.⁸ Of clean animals, and of animals that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground,⁹ two and two, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God had commanded Noah.¹⁰ And after seven days the waters of the flood came on the earth.

^{NRS} Gen 8:1 But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided;² the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained,³ and the waters gradually receded from the earth. At the end of one hundred fifty days the waters had abated;⁴ and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat.

^{NRS} Gen 9:8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him,⁹ "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you,¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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."¹² 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:¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

Noah's ark. It's got to be the most popular Bible story for children. I mean have you been in a toy store recently- you can't walk through a toy store without running into toy arks with friendly, smiling Noah's and happy looking lions eyeing equally happy looking zebras, which I've never really understood. I mean I can understand why the

lions would be happy with all that meat hanging around, but why are the other animals so happy, too?

Of course Noah's brand power extends past actual arks. You can find Noah's ark coat racks for children, and Noah's ark folding chairs for kids. By far the most disturbing thing I saw this week- Target has something they call a Noah's Ark Melamine feeding set for sale. Now Melamine is a main ingredient in plastic- but it's also what's been tainting the milk and formula in China right now. Now, I'm not a marketer, but I'm thinkin' if I'm selling something to children, I'm not using the phrase Melamine feeding set. I would just call it a Noah's ark plastic dishes, rather than Noah's ark melamine feeding set...there's just no part of "Melamine feeding set" that sounds good, you know?

So, Noah's ark- such a popular story for children. And yet this has always struck me as kind of odd, because it's not really a story *for* children, is it? I mean when you actually read it. Yeah, it's got those animals and the big boat- they're all there. But then there's that little flood business with God wiping out nearly all of creation. Yeah, it's actually a pretty frightening story when you actually read it, isn't it?

And you know the story doesn't even start off very nice. It starts off on a pretty dark note. "*Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence...And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them."* See what I'm saying about this not being rated G?

Now there are a lot of ways to think about what God is like here. I remember back in Austin Melis and I heard this student from the seminary preach on this text. And let's just say he was a nice guy but as we might say in Texas he was a few enchiladas short of the combo platter. He said he knew why God sent the flood. Since God is love, he said, it must have been a kind of accident- that God didn't really mean to do it, or didn't really know what God was doing. And he wound up equating God wiping out the entire planet with him stubbing his toe one night. It was something that hurt. It was something you didn't want. And it was something you didn't really mean to do, but hey, these things happen. So to this guy God was like a cosmic Gerald Ford. You're fine, as long as you're out the way.

Now to other folks this text is a much more serious problem. To them it sounds like God is endorsing genocide, and they'd say this is exactly what's wrong with the Bible- especially the Old Testament. They say in the Bible God is fickle and seems more like a petulant two year old than a respectable deity. And if God is supposed to be love than honestly what is loving about destroying the earth?

Now in my view this second perspective is better than the first. I don't think there's anything accidental about this flood in the story. But I also don't think it's right to see God as being mean or petulant, either.

First off why is God upset in the story? Because the earth is filled with violence. Because the earth is filled with violence. God created the earth and all that is in it good- God created it for love. And in just a few short generations after Adam and Eve people can't get enough of hurting one another and causing one another pain.

And the word the Bible uses for God's emotion about this is really important, too- see, God is not angry. When you think about someone destroying something, you think of them being angry- in a rage. But when God is looking at all this, at how everything has gone so wrong, at how violence became the way of the world- God is not filled with wrath. No, the author of Genesis says God is grieved. And the word for grief is *atsav*- a very specific word. *Atsav* is the word for the pain a woman experiences in childbirth. So when God is looking out and seeing humankind hurt and kill one another, God is looking through the eyes of a mother, a mother watching her kids going down wrong path after wrong path. And it's one thing when they're just hurting themselves- but when they begin to hurt the people and the world around them. Well, it's got to stop. And it's got to stop not because God is mad, but because God is grieved. So God isn't Gerald Ford, but neither is God Rambo either. In this story God is a mother trying to figure out how to stop the cycle of violence that seems impossible to quell.

So in the story God decides on a flood. Now here's the interesting thing- some of you may know this. Genesis is not the only book in the ancient Middle East to talk about an enormous flood. At least a thousand years before Genesis was written the Babylonians told the Epic of Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh was the great king of the strong walled city of Uruk. And once upon a time he came upon a wild man named Enkidu. They fought and fought, neither man being able to gain the upper hand, until they were both exhausted, agreed to call it a draw, and became the best of friends. They went on adventures- even defeating the great giant of the cedar forest Humbaba. But then tragedy strikes when the goddess Ishtar is offended by Gilgamesh and sends the great bull of

heaven after him. Gilgamesh survives, but Enkidu receives a mortal wound. And Gilgamesh, never before knowing death like this, goes on a final quest for immortality. And he ends up meeting Utnapishtim, one of the only survivors of a great flood the Babylonians say destroyed life as they knew it.

Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh how he was warned a flood was coming and was told to build a great boat. The epic gives the details for the boat- nearly exactly the same as Noah. And both Utnapishtim and Noah sent doves out to find dry land when the rain ceased. And both of them came to land on mountains- Noah landing on Mt. Ararat and Utnapishtim coming to ground on Mt. Nisir, both close to one another with Ararat being in far eastern Turkey and Nisir being just on the other side of the border in Iraqi Kurdistan.

But there are two main differences in the stories- first off in the epic of Gilgamesh the gods really did destroy everything. Even though Utnapishtim survived they turned him into a kind of god. So they actually created all of life over again. In Genesis it isn't a total makeover, is it? God doesn't wipe everything out but saves Noah and this weird floating zoo. And this zoo is the other main difference. Utnapishtim took animals onto his boat, but only useful animals, farm animals, and he only takes a few of them. Noah, on the other hand, is ordered to take animals of every kind: farm animals and wild animals; flying animals, and creeping animals- and two by two they go.

And this tells you so much about God, I think. Because even when God's heart is grieved, and God can't stand all the violence going on and decides to send the flood and start over with a clean slate- God can't quite do it, can't quite clean the slate entirely.

First there's Noah, who God sees isn't participating in the violence. And while it probably would have been smarter to just start over from scratch- this just isn't the way God is. So God warns Noah. And God even allows Noah's family to tag along. But that's it, right? No one else. Oh, but what about all those animals? God seems to be like I am when it comes to cleaning out old clothes. Melis will ask me if I'm ready to part with some of my old clothes, and intellectually, of course I'm ready. My drawers are too full. It's time to let some of these go. But then it comes to the actual items. Like I've got this one t-shirt from my undergraduate Humanities program with a big red H on it. And when I see it I think of all these people I used to know and the work we did together. And I kind of scrunch up my face. And Melis points out that it has holes in it- a lot of holes. And I say yeah, but it's really special. What else. And at the end of this my 'to go' pile really isn't lookin' all that impressive. In my mind I'm ready to give things up, but in practice- I can always make an argument for keeping things. And God seems to be like that. Yes, yes, everything needs to go. This is ridiculous. This is NOT what I was intending. But then there are those zebras with those stripes- that was pretty good. You can't get rid of those. And the giraffes? Who would have thought an animal could even have a neck like that? That's crazy- you have to keep the giraffes. And so on. See, the amazing thing about God in the Biblical account of the flood when you compare it to with the other Middle eastern versions isn't how much God destroys, but how much God saves and is unwilling to let go.

And we don't even like this I've noticed. People always say what about the mosquitoes- why did God allow the mosquitoes? Some friends and I went down to a Presbytery meeting down in K-falls this summer. And we decided there's no point in

going to K-falls unless we stop on the way and see something great, right? So we stopped at Crater Lake and we even went a few days early and hiked up ol' Mt. Thielsen. Well, what I didn't plan on is the snow melt was so late this year, there were pools of standing water all over the place. Friends, I was using 100% deet, like I will probably grow two more heads out of my neck in the next 10 years. And I was still surrounded by this cloud of mosquitoes. When we would stop, which wasn't often, we looked like Pig Pen from the Peanuts- with this evil cloud of mosquitoes swirling around us. Why on EARTH did Noah keep the mosquitoes?

Here's why. When the early church read the Noah story, they saw the ark as a symbol for the church. And I think they were so right to do this. What is the church, what are our families if aren't like a strange kind of zoo? The ark is full of not just the nice animals- the ones we would choose. The Koala bears and the puppies. But it's full of the mosquitoes and the hyenas, too. And are churches and are families are the same way, too. Church means living with folks we don't always like. Church means living with people we don't always care for and doing things you don't always want to do but the things other people want to do. There's been so much written about how we as a culture are isolating ourselves from people who disagree with us- we live in different zip codes, we watch different news channels. Churches are one of the last public places left where people of different feathers still flock together. And this isn't a problem- it's a calling. We are called to be arks with lions, tigers, bears, and, oh my, the occasional baboon thrown in for entertainment. I'll let you decide which animal you are.

But I'll tell you what, there's enormous pressure on us not to be this way. When I was in Austin working to build a new congregation, pretty much every expert in church

development will tell you that if you want to build a growing congregation you have to do what they call Maximize Homogeneity. They tell us, and certainly they know what they're talking about, that if you want to develop a large organization you need a group of likeminded people who agree on almost everything and think in the same ways at least when it comes to the faith. Disagreement creates conflict. And conflict can create tension. And this won't help you grow.

And they are totally right about this. If the only thing you care about is making something grow, then kicking the people who don't totally fit will help. The problem is- if you do this, if you get rid of the animals you don't like so much, well...you aren't much of a church anymore, at least not one like an ark. You become more like yacht than an ark. And God didn't call Noah to build a yacht. God called for an ark.

I don't know if any of you are aware of this but this last week was a big one for the church in America. The Washington Post broke the story that 33 pastors last Sunday officially broke a 1954 tax law that requires non-profit organizations to refrain from endorsing candidates. These pastors with the full support of their congregations believe churches should be places that not only tell you about the love of God but they should be places that tell you how to vote, too. They want churches to be places where God says only elephants or only donkeys are allowed. And I tell you we'd better have something more powerful bringing us together than that. We'd better have something more powerful and more meaningful binding us one to another than some politician or some political party.

Back in Austin I was a member of Mission Presbytery. I saw there something I will never forget. Normally at big meetings like hundreds of people attend. And because of this we had to be a little more thoughtful about order than we are even at our little congregational meetings. So whenever a motion is made there is always time for folks to speak for or against them. And there are mics set up. And a person then would walk to the mic, state their name, their church, and then speak for or against the motion. And everyone did this- except for two older women. Every meeting I attended I always noticed these two women. They sat together, often holding hands, often praying together. And when they wanted to speak on the floor, they wouldn't speak individually- no, like animals marching two by two into the ark, they went arm in arm. Now, you might think this was because they were in such close agreement they acted like this. But it was absolutely the opposite. List every major social issue you can think of, whether it was the roles of gays and lesbians in the church, the authority of scripture, abortion, what have you- these two women were on passionately opposite sides of the fence. They walked up there together not because they agreed- but precisely because they disagreed. And they wanted to show us all how to do that better.

Once, after a particularly painful gathering at which these two ladies offered their differing opinions, I was sitting close enough to them to over hear someone ask them a question. He was being incredibly rude. They were obviously in prayer. Their heads were down. They were holding hands. But he leaned over and interrupted them and, and I think he was trying to make a joke, but he said, "Well, you may not agree on the issues- but you seem to agree on giving a good show." And he laughed.

They did not laugh. Without missing a beat one of them stared him in the eyes and said, “Young man, it’s true we don’t agree on much when it comes to the church, but we both have grandchildren.” And with that she went back to praying with her friend.

Now, I’m not entirely sure what she meant. But I think she meant that she and her friend found something so much more important, so much more vital, than the votes that come our way- in their case it was their grandchildren, it was the fact they wanted to pass on to them a church that was big enough for both of them.

Beloved, may we be blessed to be an ark kind of church- full of every kind of animal. And may we be an ark kind of people this week- people who know there’s always room for two more. The waters rising, folks. And without sounding too dramatic, I believe our world needs us right now. **Amen.**