
**Church of the Beatitudes United
Church of Christ**

Waters that Heal

Genesis 6:9-22; 7:24; 8:14-19

A Sermon by

Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer

June 1, 2008

Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ
555 West Glendale Avenue • Phoenix, Arizona 85021
602-264-1221 • info@beatitudeschurch.org
www.beatitudeschurch.org

♯ God is still speaking,

"Noah!"
"Who is that?"
"It's the Lord, Noah."
"Right!"

"Noah, I want you to build an Ark."
"Right! What's an Ark?"

"Noah, get some wood and build it 300 cubits by 80 cubits by 40 cubits."
"Right!" What's a cubit?"¹

Perhaps like you, I grew up on the humor of Bill Cosby. Cosby's old routine leaves us with still more unanswered questions:

- If Noah built the Ark in his basement, how did he get it out?
- Why did Noah bring two mosquitoes on board the Ark?
- And, "Am I on Candid Camera?" a reality show long before Lost and Survivor.

As to the rest of our questions about Noah and the Ark:

- A cubit is this far, from one's elbow to fingertips, about 18 inches, so 300 cubits in length is about one and a half football fields long.
- No one has ever found the Ark, not even Indiana Jones. Yet flood stories appear in hundreds of cultures from every continent. According to an inscribed clay tablet discovered in Nippur, Iraq, by an American archeological expedition 1883-1886, a man and his family survived a catastrophic flood by receiving advanced warning from God, probably before 1800 BC, before our Bible was written.
- It is written in Leviticus that every church camper must sing multiple verses of The Lord said to Noah, including the verses "floodie, muddie, arky, barky, twosies, twosies, elephants and kangaroosies, oosies, children of the Lord."²

The story of Noah is one we teach to our children from an early age. We invite them to color in the Ark, the dove, and the rainbow. Do we realize that we are teaching them a story of the destruction of the world, where the only people who survive are Noah, Mrs. Noah, and Mr. and Mrs. Shem, Ham and Japheth?

What went so wrong? Just four chapters ago God created and pronounced everything 'good'. What went so wrong that God sees the whole of creation as corrupt, and God is sorry that God created the human race? One translation says, "It broke God's heart."

I do not take the Bible literally, but I do take it seriously. I take it seriously enough to realize that like the two creation stories in Genesis, there are two Noah stories.

¹ <http://www.jr.co.il/humor/noah4.txt>

² http://www.dltk-bible.com/genesis/noah_song3.htm

One tells us that the flood is caused because God regrets making the human race; the other says the earth is corrupt and filled with lawlessness. One says it rained for forty days and forty nights. The other says the primordial waters are broken by cosmic upheaval and the waters rage for 150 days. One says after the rain stops, Noah sends out a dove three times, a week apart, and when the dove does not come back, Noah leaves the boat. This account says the flood event lasted one month and 27 days. The other says the boat came to rest on a mountaintop until the waters receded. Noah sends out a raven. After almost a year, the earth is finally dry. Noah comes out of the Ark on New Year's Day. One says Noah sacrifices to Yahweh, God, who promises a regular seasonal cycle. Noah plants a vineyard; the curse of the ground has been consoled. Perennial agriculture is now possible. The other says Noah is commanded to be fertile and multiply. Animals may be killed for their flesh to be eaten. Humans may not be killed. There is a covenant with all living creatures not to destroy the earth again with flood.³

The oldest of the two stories is that of the Yahwist, maybe written in the time of Solomon or King David. The tribes of Israel, once nomads, are now a settled people, a nation. The other source is from the Priestly story remember-er, from 5th-4th century BC, after the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah to Nebuchadnezzar and the people of Israel have been taken into Babylonian captivity.⁴ It is the story of the priests calling the people back to covenant with God, back to a partnership with God to live in a holy and righteous way, like the one good man, Noah.

What is the story of Noah to us in our times? Few of us see floods and other disasters as punishments from God. What is God's word of hope for us in our times?

Different times call us to new understandings. In the Jewish perception of time, one rabbi writes, "Time is not a straight line. Nor is time a circle going endlessly nowhere. Time is a spiral, going backward in order to go forward."⁵

We go backward and read the ancient stories of creation, death, floods and rebirth, so that we can go forward as we live through our floods. Sometimes we need to be reminded that floods come into our lives in all kinds of forms. Some seem to last for forty days and forty nights; some seem to leave us stranded on top of a mountain with waters raging all around us for what seems like years. There shall be dry land once again.

We go backward to read of wisdom from an ancient scroll so that we can go forward remembering that God enters into human history over and over again, shattering our old forms and calling us to birth new ones. "Noah walked with God," the ancient text says. Noah didn't walk ahead of God. Noah didn't lag behind God. We too walk with God. After all, we say "God is still speaking" and you have to be next to God, walking, in order to hear God speaking.

³ <http://moses.creighton.edu/simkins/203/lectures/lecture7.html>

⁴ <http://www.stormfront.org/forum/showthread.php?t=155139>

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We go backward listening and remembering the best of our past so that we can go forward bringing that best into our future. Noah was, it says, a 'righteous' man. The Hebrew word is tzedek, a word used for God. God is righteousness. God seeks integrity, equity, and justice. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Recall that Beatitude that we are that calls all of us to get up, go ahead, do something, move. When we are seeking God's justice, we are a righteous people.

We go backward to Mr. and Mrs. Noah to remember two people who saved the whole world from destruction⁶ so that we can go forward and dream that we too can be a part of saving, and not destroying, the world. If we believe like the text says that God's heart was broken, that God had given up on the human race a long time ago, we can remember that God chose Mr. and Mrs. Noah to save the world from destruction once, and now has chosen us by our baptisms, to save the world again. "Me, save the world?" you ask. "If not you, then who?"

Whether the flood was forty days and forty nights or a over a year, the story ends with two great endings. In one, Noah builds an altar. After all he has been through, Noah thanks God for the journey, smelly animals, mosquitoes and all.

In the other ending, Noah plants, a vineyard, no less, a symbol of new life and hope. Water: creation, flood, baptism, new life. God is in the water. Amen.

⁶ Rabbi Plotkin, clergy gathering, May 20, 2008 quote.

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