

Sermon Series: Noah-A Faith Story Part 2: "Paying Attention"
Genesis 6: 14-19, 22; 7: 6, 12, 17, 21-24; Psalm 36:1-10; Matthew 8:23-27; I Peter 3:20-21
Salem United Methodist Church
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Rev. Sue Shorb-Sterling

We are in the middle of a sermon series about Noah. It is not just a great children's story, but a story about faith. Last Sunday we talked about the flood story occurring in many ancient Middle East cultures, but the biblical Noah story teaches us about God, who we are, and the relationship between God and humanity. We saw that it was the grief of God, not God's wrath that destroyed the earth. God was sorry to have created such a mess, but God searched for one who was not evil. That person was Noah. We also talked about not being concerned about the literal aspects of the scripture, such as the size of the ark, how long it took Noah to build it, and which animals went on the boat, but to focus on what this story teaches us today.

But to satisfy anyone's curiosity as to how much a cubit is. In biblical times there were no measurement standards so a cubit is the length of a man's arm from his elbow to his fingertips which is between 18 to 20 inches. Even with this information, there is a lot of inconsistencies floating about. So using 20 inches as a cubit, with the ark's length at 300 cubits, that is 500ft or 166 yards. A football field is 100 yards so the ark's length was about 1 2/3 football fields. The width at 50 cubits is 83 ft. A NBA basketball court is 94 ft wide, so the width of ark was a little smaller than the width of a basket court. The ark's height is 30 cubits which is 50 feet. A one story building is about 15 feet so that would make the ark about three stories high. In the Netherlands Johan Huibers decided to build a replica of Noah's Ark. His project was twenty years in the making. It is now a museum with both live and sculptured animals in it. We don't know how long it took Noah to build the ark. His tools would have been primitive. The scripture says he was 150 years, but Noah was not using the 12 month Gregorian calendar established in 1582 either. With even this brief discussion over the literal aspects of the story, we can see how easy it is to get caught up in the details. Now, to the meaning of the story.

Have you ever heard the voice of God? If you did, how did you react? Bill Cosby does this wonderful comedy routine on God talking with Noah. As God calls to Noah, he can't believe his ears. Everything God says to Noah such as "It's the Lord," or "I want you to build the ark," or the dimensions of the ark, Noah responds with a, "Right!" sarcastically. And when God tells him to get two animals of every kind, Noah asks, "Who is this, really?" Few of us have actually heard God's voice speaking to us. If we did, we might ask the same thing, "Who is this, really?" God does speak to us and is still speaking, probably not with a booming voice. The question becomes, "Are we listening when God does speak to us? Are we ever quiet enough to be aware of the nudges that God gives?" There is sooo much noise and activity in our lives, isn't it? We are bombarded with the pings, dings, tweets of our phones that seem to demand immediate attention. There are video games inviting us to get to the next level. TVs are blaring constantly. And MP3 songs that need to be heard. When are we quiet enough, focused enough to be aware of God's presence, God's nudges, God's voice? How can we pay attention to God in our daily lives?

Here's an example. Have you ever been so focused on what you needed to accomplish that you tried to ignore everything else around you? I have. I was in the grocery store this week buzzing up and down the aisles, when I stopped to look for an item. There was a lady standing there looking, too. I wanted to just sort of reach around her to retrieve my item and continue my shopping, but instead I sensed some anxiety coming from her. I said simply, "With all the items the store sells, it's hard to find the item we want." Her reply was, "I'm not sure what I am looking for. You see, my husband did all the shopping. I hate stores, but he died last week and I need groceries, but I don't know what to buy." Ok, that got my attention! I can't continue buzzing through the aisles now. So she talked and I listened. She shared about her husband, his dying, her loneliness. Then I said, "Can I pray for you?" She said, "I'm not religious, but I would appreciate it." So I reached out my hands, held hers, and prayed. Then I asked her about what would she like to take home to eat. She mentioned a few items and I helped her find them before I checked out and we parted ways. Was God speaking? I think so. God said, "I have someone who needs comforting and assistance. Would you give her some?" Even in the midst of my busy-ness, I paid attention and responded. How many times are we stuck in our own little world and miss out on a God moment? Miss out on a sunrise or some other moment in God's creation? Miss out on a message from God through a still small voice of a child, or a friend, or a stranger?

Even in Cosby's version of Noah, Noah is listening. And Noah obeys. In our scripture today we read, "Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him." These words are repeated twice in chapter 7 verses 5 and 9. Three times the scripture records, "Noah did all that God had commanded him." Noah becomes a model for us. Noah shows us what we are supposed to be and do. We are to pay attention to God and then obey God. We are to believe and follow. We are to come to church to grow in our faith. As we grow in faith, we become more aware of God's voice calling us to serve others with love. It may seem like God is asking us to do something impossible, but here Noah, too, shows us how with God, even building an ark when the sea is nowhere near, where trees do not grow abundantly, and using primitive tools, is

possible. There is a verse in Hebrews in the Hall of Faith chapter that states, “By faith, Noah warned by God about events unseen, respected the warning and built an ark...” (11:7). By being obedient to God, Noah grew in his faith. By being obedient to God, we grow in our faith.

But Noah’s experience with God went well beyond listening to God, building an ark, and getting all the animals. That was just the prep work for when God closed the door of the ark and the storm came. The flood rose. The ark was tossed about. I envision the animals screaming in fear as they are being tossed about in their compartments. Do animals get sea sick? I do. Noah had no idea how long they would have to survive on this floating zoo. When we take a cruise ship vacation, we have an itinerary. We know how many days we will be out at sea and how many times we will land for sightseeing. Not so with Noah and his family. It must have been frightening, even horrifying not to know the outcome as they were tossed about, stuck with this remnant of God’s creation. By the way, did you know that in the three chapters of Noah’s story, there are more verses about the animals, than there are about humans? Some biblical scholars say that this is indicative that God may care more about animals than us. We think we are so important in God’s eyes. God saved eight humans and two of every kind of animal. Remember Job when he confronts God on his plight? God responded with three chapters of “Where were you when I created...?” Humans are just a small part of God’s creation. This is a humbling fact for us. Back to Noah, verse 24 of chapter 7 states, “And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days.” That’s five months that Noah had no knowledge of what was going to happen or where he would land.

Our lives are filled with storms. Physical storms that change lives through their destruction and then there are life storms. The ones that bounce us around, toss us to and fro, the ones in which we ask, “How do I get out of this mess?” The ones in which we don’t know where we will land when it’s all over. Have you ever been through any storms in your life? Perhaps they have been physical storms in which your life changed after that. Perhaps they have been life storms such as a divorce, an addiction, the loss of a loved one, an illness, the loss of a job before retirement. You feel like your boat is being tossed every which way and you don’t know when things will calm down. It’s frightening! Adam Hamilton of the Church of the Resurrection states this, “God who shut Noah in the ark was still God in the middle of the storm. God would see Noah through.” All Noah had to do was trust in God. That’s faith. Believing that no matter what happens God is still God and we are still God’s. The disciples had a little trouble with this when a storm came up. Jesus was right there with them, but he is asleep. Still they were frightened. They wake Jesus up and he orders the waves and sea to be calm.

Paying attention and listening to God, obeying God and trusting God that God saves, these are the lessons Noah teaches us. Peter understood this as he wrote about the meaning of baptism. The same water that destroys also spiritually cleanses us. Peter states that it is a mark of good conscious or a mark of a good choice. When we choose baptism, we are choosing to follow God in Jesus Christ. And God marks us and claims us as one of God’s own. We begin this journey in a boat with God. Did you know that early on the church saw itself as a boat? The early church leaders saw the image of the boat as a vehicle of God’s salvation in the world. They saw the church as a place of safety. In fact, the vaulted roofs of cathedrals are shaped like the bottom of a ship. The part that the congregation sits in is called the “nave.” It comes from the same Latin word, *navis*, meaning ship. Words like navy or naval come from *navis*.

Frederick Buechner, a well known theologian wrote this about the church being an ark. Have you thought about church like this? “Just about everything imaginable is aboard, the clean and the unclean both. They are all piled in together helter-skelter, the predators and the prey, the wild and the tame, the sleek and beautiful ones and the ones that are ugly as sin. There are sly young foxes and impossible old cows. There are the catty and the piggish and the peacock-proud. There are hawks and there are doves. Some are wise as owls, some silly as geese; some meek as lambs and others fire-breathing dragons. There are times when they all cackle and grunt and roar and sing together, and there are times when you could hear a pin drop. Most of them have no clear idea just where they’re supposed to be heading or how they’re supposed to get there or what they’ll find if and when they finally do, but they figure the people in charge must know and in the meanwhile sit back on their haunches and try to enjoy the ride. It’s not all enjoyable. There’s backbiting just like everywhere else. There’s a pecking order. There’s jostling at the trough. There’s growling and grousing...and whining...It’s a regular menagerie in there, and sometimes it smells to high Heaven like one. But even at its worst, there’s at least one thing that makes it bearable within, and that is the storm without—the wild winds and terrible waves and in all the watery waste no help in sight. And at its best there is, if never clear sailing, shelter from the blast, a sense of somehow heading in the right direction in spite of everything, a ship to keep afloat, and, like a beacon in the dark, the hope of finding safe harbor at last.” Noah’s acts of faith teach us to pay attention to God, obey God, and ride out the storm with God and the church.

Reflection Questions: Ask yourself, am I paying attention to God? If I do, how do I pay attention to God? When I listen to God, do I trust and obey? How has the church been a saving ark for me? Who do I know that needs a safe place like a church in the midst of their storm?

Resources: “Noah’s Ark full-scale replica opens in Netherlands,” Dec 10, 2012, www.cbc.ca/news; Noah (3 skits) by Bill Cosby, <http://www.jr.co.il/humor/noah4.txt>; *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter’s Dictionary* by Fredrick Buechner; “The Ark, the Animals and the Floodwaters” sermon by Adam Hamilton, www.cor.org

