

***Sermon Series: Noah-A Faith Story Part 3: "A New Beginning"***

***Genesis 8:1-19; 9:1, 11-17; Psalm 13***

***Salem United Methodist Church***

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This is the last in our sermon series on Noah-A Faith Story. We have seen that it isn't just a children's story about animals, but it one that teaches adults about who God is, who we are, and the relationship between God and humanity. We have learned that God destroyed the earth out of grief not anger. God grieved over how humanity had become so violent and destructive, but God searched for one person who was doing what was right, Noah. In the second sermon, we saw that Noah paid attention to God, obeyed God's strange demand, and then trusted in God when the door of the ark closed. We also learned that the early Christians saw the ark as a symbol of salvation. Later churches were built in the shape of boats. We learned that the part where the congregation sits is called the nave from the Latin word for ship. The ark is also a symbol for the church which is a safe place from life's storms. We also saw how the early Christians equated the flood waters to the cleansing waters of baptism. Today we get off the ark and begin anew.

The floods swelled 150 days! That's five months. God speaks to Noah before the flood and after the flood, but not during the flood. Noah and his family are shut up on this floating zoo with smelly, unhappy caged animals. The waves are tossing them all over the place and God is silent. One week passed. God is silent. One month passed. God is silent. Two months, three months, God is silent. Noah and his family must have asked, "God, where are you? Have you forgotten us? When will this end?" Perhaps Noah's family interrogated him with, "Are you sure God didn't tell you how long this was going to be?" As much as we love our families, sometimes one weekend together or one week vacation is about all we can take of each other. Can you just imagine what life was like for Noah's family on the ark? Can you imagine the whining and complaining this family did? Who can blame them? Really?

They were going through a very difficult time. The flood can be a metaphor for the hard times in life, too. When these tough times come, they do not come with a map telling us where we will end up or how long it's going to take to get there. We have to live one day at a time and trust that even though God is silent, we are in God's care. Tornadoes and real floods, too, are one of these hard times in life. I remember helping to clean up homes after Hurricane Isabel. Everything below four feet had to be thrown out. People who live along the Mississippi River and its many tributaries in the last few years have experienced flooding over and over again. The recent tornadoes have annihilated entire neighborhoods. How does one recover from having everything you cherish in life is destroyed literally or metaphorically? Like the Psalmist, we cry out, "How long must I bear this pain and have sorrow in my heart?" Have you been there? Or perhaps, you are there now? Perhaps it is a chronic illness, a loved one dying, a betrayal, an addiction, a bankruptcy, a divorce, or perhaps it's something else. We cry out, "Where are you, God?" And the silence is deafening. God's absence is very noticeable. Not only do the Psalms help us put words to our feelings, but so does the Book of Lamentations which was written by the exiled Hebrews. One verse states, "For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me." (Lamentations 1:16a). The Psalmist and Lamentations also teach us to trust in God even when God is silent because we cannot equate silence with abandonment. God does not forget us.

Genesis 8:1 states, "God remembered Noah and the animals." This isn't like God putting something in the oven and then forgetting about it. But here the word, "remember" means that God is ready to act. It is the right time. God remembered Rachel who couldn't have a child and gave her Joseph. God remembered the Israelites as Egyptian slaves and freed them. The time had come for action. However, we live in a culture of immediacy. We are an impatient people. We want it now! We don't like to wait in line or be put on hold. We live in a world where seconds count. Something happens anywhere in the world and we know it within seconds. We don't want to wait minutes, much less months or years. We want God to act now! Or better yet, yesterday. Yet, patience is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5: 22). It is a character of Christian discipleship. Why? Because God works in our lives during these silent times between the event and our deliverance. The most important lessons in life and spiritual growth happens during the "in between" times. We learn something about ourselves, about our families, about our communities. We learn that we can endure. We learn that others care. We learn

that we can come out on the other side. God is always at work even when we can't see what will happen next. The question becomes, "Can we be patient? Can we trust that God is working?"

Noah does. He trusts that life will come back after the flood. So he sends out the raven first and then the dove. Can you imagine the celebration when the dove brought back the olive branch? It meant new life, a new beginning. The worst is over! The olive branch represented life for the Hebrew people. The olive trees were highly valued. They were an important resource of food and oil. When we think of the olive branch, we think of it as a symbol of peace. We can thank Pablo Picasso for this image. He drew a simple line image of a dove with an olive branch for the World Peace Conference of 1949. After a horrific World War in which 60 million people died, what symbol would represent a new beginning, a new world? Picasso goes back to Noah's story for the dove and the olive branch symbolizing humanity's new beginning.

This new beginning was a long time coming for residents of the Ark. They spent about a year on the Ark from the time of the first rain to the waters receded for them to get off. Did you notice when they got off? When God told them to go out. Why did God tell Noah to get off the ark? Couldn't he see that it was now ok to get off? Wouldn't you think the residents of the Ark after all their whining and complaining would have been more than happy to jump ship? Here is a lesson for us. In the midst of the floods of life, we can get comfortable with the stress level, the loneliness, the resentment, the fears, the grief, the anger. And we are afraid of letting go of it, of stepping off the boat, of looking at the new beginning that God is creating for us, taking that first step into a new world. The Ark didn't land back on Noah's home turf, but on the Ararat Mountains. Noah had no idea where they were. He knew what to expect on the boat. What lay outside was the unknown. Have you been there? Perhaps you are there now. It's more comfortable living with the pain, then stepping into God's new creation for us. What if Jesus would have said to God, "No, thank you! It's more comfortable being dead in this dark tomb than living again." God tells us to "Get off your...ark! I have a new life for you."

What do we do when we take that first step into our new life? Notice what Noah did. The first thing he did was give thanks to God in his tradition by building an altar and sacrificing the animals that he had cared for. Here's another lesson for us. When the flood waters of life recede and we begin to step into the new life, do we stop to give thanks to God for bringing us through? Or do we blame God for causing the flood? God really did pick the right man for the job. Even in the midst of the flood, Noah did not forget who got him safely through the flood. The same Psalmist, who cries out, "How long?" also praises God with a song because God is generous. One of my favorite verses in the Bible comes out of the Book of Lamentations. In the middle of all this lamenting, there is one verse that offers hope and promise, "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." (Lam. 3:22-32).

That hope and promise is echoed in the rainbow. Scientifically we see a rainbow when we are looking into the rain with the sun at our backs. The raindrops refract the sunlight into a spectacular multilayer of color. God promised that the rainbow was a reminder that God would never destroy the earth with rain. Why this promise? Adam Hamilton, pastor of Church of the Resurrection, states that Noah and his family needed to know that every time it rained, it would not flood again. The rainbow becomes a way to alleviate any post traumatic stress Noah and his family might have had. For us, though, the bow can represent a way to send our pain to God, like arrows into heaven, knowing God will take on our pain, if we release it.

Yes, we all have encountered, are encountering, and will encounter floods in our life. But God never forgets us. God will act in God's time. We have to be willing to get off the Ark when God opens the door to begin the new life God is offering us. And remember the rainbow is a beautiful reminder that God's steadfast love never ceases, a reminder of God's new beginnings in our lives.

The writer of this great hymn of the church states God's relationship with us so beautifully, "When through the deep waters I call thee to go, the rivers of woe shall not thee overflow; for I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless, and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress." God will make our deepest distress to be a holy one, a new beginning.

**Reflection Questions:** What floods of life have you been through? How did God get you through? If you have recently come through a flood, have you gotten off the ark yet? If you have taken that first step, how is God blessing you in your new beginning? How are you blessing God?

**Resources:** "Biography Pablo Picasso," <http://www.biographyonline.net/artists/pablo-picasso.html>; "After the Flood" sermon by Adam Hamilton, May 18, 2014, [www.cor.org](http://www.cor.org); "How Firm A Foundation," United Methodist Hymnal

