

Series: Joy in the Journey

Today: Noah—The God of Second Chances

Text: Genesis 6:11-22

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

Sunday, September 27, 2009

First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

If you were not with us last Sunday, we began a series of sermons which will continue through the program year entitled *Joy in the Journey*. Each Sunday during the year we will be examining the journeys of faith of important characters in the Bible whose stories are our stories as a people of faith. Last week we began that series with the journey of Abraham; not because his is the first story. Rather, his is the most important story because he is the father of faith in three religious traditions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. As Christians, we trace the beginning of our story with the faith of Abraham. If you fast forward to the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1, you will see that the link is made from Abraham to Jesus. The story of Jesus does not make sense for Matthew unless there is the story of Abraham which supports it.

This morning we are going to back track to a Biblical figure that came before Abraham: Noah. If I were to play a word association game with you and said the name Noah, what would be your response? What is the first word that comes to your mind? Let's try it. If I were to say peanut butter, what would be the first word that came to your mind? (*Jelly*) If I say the name Noah, what would you say? (*Ark*) That's about as far as most of us might go, but there is more to the story of Noah than his building of the Ark. What do we know about Noah?

Noah was the great grandson of Adam seven times removed. His grandfather was Methuselah, the oldest man in the Bible. However, because the ages of people in the Bible before Noah don't align with anything that is familiar to us, it is hard to place his birth date. We

don't have records of people living to be 600-900 years old, but most scholars place it sometime before 2500 B.C.

The story of Noah is one of the stories in the Bible where we catch a glimpse into the character of God. However, most people get caught up in what appears to be a scientific inaccuracy, so rather than look for the character of God, they dismiss the story as a fable or a fairy tale and miss what is most important. If you get caught up in the scientific details of Noah's journey, you may find it to be too difficult to believe and dismiss it out of hand.

Was There A Flood?

Scientists need to see evidence of a flood in order to believe, and scientists have been laboring for years to come up with evidence to either prove there was a flood or the story is a religious fantasy. Their answer is that there was not only one flood, but there were many floods in the area where civilization began in the place we know as modern day Iraq. For example, they have found an eight foot layer of silt in the city of Ur, but there wasn't similar silt in neighboring cities. Other scientists have found evidence that there was a flood about 5500 B.C. in the Black Sea region, and underwater explorations confirm freshwater shells along the edge of the shore. (Source: Who's Who and Where's Where in the Bible, by Stephen Miller, published by Barbour Books, 2004, p. 290)

Was there a flood? The answer is yes. Was it a flood which covered the whole earth? The answer is probably not the world as we know it. We have to remember that the story of Noah comes from several different traditions (J,E,D,P), and when Moses put those traditions together into one story, parts are true, and other parts are narrative to support the message which he wants people of faith to take from this story. Moreover, we have to get into the mind of the author and understand that people didn't travel very far in the days of Noah, so their frame of

reference was probably only as far as they had traveled on foot. That was the extent of their knowledge of the world. They didn't know there were other continents or even other countries. So a flood which covered the lands as far as Noah could see was probably thought to be a flood which covered the whole earth.

Any good scientist would simply say that the author of Genesis simply did not have enough data to make the claim that there was a flood which covered the whole earth. But the writer is not interested in science. The writer is interested in telling a story of how God dealt with the human condition.

While we were at the shore this summer, my soon to be 8 year old granddaughter was full of questions. I think it is the nature of 7 year olds to be full of questions, and our 7 year old is on the far end of the scale when it comes to that particular characteristic. As we stood at the edge of shore, she wanted to know the size of the Atlantic Ocean; how far would she have to go before she saw land again. When I told her about 5,000 miles, she asked me how I knew. I told her I had been to the other side of this Ocean. Then she asked about the depth of the ocean; and how many different kinds of fish there were in the ocean; and were there other Oceans and if there were, where were these oceans and how big were they and were they all salt water...and on and on she went.

Finally, I said to her, *“Emma, you are going to make a good scientist some day, but I need to tell you that I don't have the answers to all your questions. Even scientists can't find the answers to all the questions. What I do know is this: this is a big ocean; bigger than anything that you or I can possibly imagine. What I do believe is that before God created people, God created the ocean and called it good. And I believe that God created it so you and I could enjoy it. So what do you say we just enjoy it for today, and we'll look up the answers to your questions*

when we get back to the house.” And you know what, that was the end of her questions. For her, at that moment, all she needed to know is that God’s hand was in it, and that it was there for us to enjoy.

The author of Genesis wants us to know that God’s hand is in this flood. The details he will leave to the scientists.

Why the Story?

What then is the message in the story of Noah? I want to suggest two things this morning: 1) God Gets Angry at Our Violence; 2) God is the God of Second Chances.

God Gets Angry at Our Violence

The biggest surprise for me in going back to the story of Noah was realizing that this is a story about an angry God. This is a god who is fed up; a god who has reached the end of the road with humanity. This is not a simple pout. This is a God who is enraged at what God sees, and intends to do something about it.

We don’t often think of God that way, do we? I certainly haven’t led you to believe that the God we worship is an angry God, but you cannot avoid God’s anger or God’s judgment if you read this scripture. Look at v. 11-13: *Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. 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.”*

God is angry. But what is God angry at? God is not angry at a single human being. God is angry with all human beings because of the way we treat one another. Is it not the violence that he sees human beings doing to one another? How often have you heard that someone was

disillusioned by the church because of the image of an angry and punishing God who is out to catch us in our sins and punish us? However, the God who is speaking to Noah is not out on a personal vendetta. God's anger is at what human beings have done to each other and the world in which we live. This is what God intends to correct with the flood. It is a do over. It is a chance to begin afresh.

N.T. Wright, a respected theologian and the Bishop of Durham, England says this about God's anger: *The word judgment carries negative overtones for a good many people in our liberal and postliberal world. We need to remind ourselves that throughout the Bible God's coming judgment is a good thing, something to be celebrated, longed for, yearned over. It causes people to shout for joy and the trees of the field to clap their hands. In a world of systematic injustice, bullying, violence, arrogance, and oppression, the thought that there might come a day when the wicked are firmly put in their place and the poor and weak are given their due is the best news there can be. Faced with a world in rebellion, a world full of exploitation and wickedness, a good God must be a God of judgment.* [Source: N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (HarperOne, 2008), p. 137]

A few months ago I nearly got into a fist fight in the YMCA locker room. Now I haven't been in a fist fight since I was in Jr. High. Even though I am a big man, I am not a fighter. However, this particular day the language of one of the fellows in the locker room really got to me. He regularly has something negative to say about a variety of racial ethnic groups, and when he speaks about them he doesn't use politically correct language. When he talks about African Americans, he demeans them by calling them "niggers." When he talks about Hispanics, he does the same thing. He calls them "spics." When he refers to gay and lesbian people, they are all "fags." Now all of us know this about Joe, and for the most part we do our

best to ignore him. But this particular day he was particularly expressive of his views negative on African Americans, Hispanics, and for good measure he threw in a tirade about gay and lesbian people. I remained quiet for a long while going about the business of getting cleaned up, but since my family includes an African American granddaughter, and a daughter in a loving and supportive same-sex partnership for over a decade, I asked him to stop because his language was offensive to me. Within moments this man was in my face challenging me to fight, and if my other YMCA friends hadn't stepped in, who knows where it would have gone.

When both of us had cooled off, I went to Joe and told him why I had spoken up; why his language was so offensive to me. First I apologized for nearly coming to blows with him, and then I asked him, *“Joe, I would really appreciate it when you're around me if you wouldn't use that kind of language. Because when you talk put down African American people like you do, as if they are all the same, you are talking about my granddaughter because she is African American. And when you talk about gay and lesbian people the way you do, you are talking about my daughter who is a lesbian and has lived in a committed relationship with another woman for ten years; which is longer than most marriages last these days.”* I showed him pictures of my granddaughter and my daughter and her partner. I knew that he was active in his church, and I let him know that language which degrades others on the basis of their skin color or their sexual orientation was unacceptable for me as a Christian. Much to my surprise, he responded, *“I didn't know that about your family.”*

To be honest, I don't think that this was a transformational moment for Joe. He hasn't changed his language all that much, and we are still not the best of friends. However, he is less vocal about his opinions in the locker room when I am around, and that is a blessing for all of us.

The story of Noah reminds us that the God we worship is angry with the way we treat each other and the way we treat the earth that has been entrusted into our care. And it seems to me that if God can get angry at injustice, maybe we should be able to get angry, too. When we hear someone being demeaned because of the color of their skin; when we hear someone passing on a piece of gossip; when we see someone fouling the environment; maybe we need to get angry to and be willing do something about it.

God is the God of Second Chances

The other message in the story of Noah is that while God was angry at the injustice in the world, God still provided humanity with a second chance. God could have destroyed everything. Instead, he finds favor with Noah and his family. He saves them, and through them, God saves humanity. Moreover, God makes the promise that He will never again destroy the earth with a flood. The God we worship is the God of the second chance.

This is the story we read again and again in the Bible. God wants a relationship with us and is willing to do just about anything to achieve that relationship. God offers second chances, twenty-first chances, one-hundred-twenty-first chances to draw us back into the relationship he longs to have with us. God's ultimate invitation is in the person of Jesus Christ where God takes on the things that keep us separate in that relationship and pays the ultimate price: the death of his son on the cross so that we may always have a way to find our way back to God.

In the 1929 Rose Bowl game between Georgia Tech and UCLA, a young man named Roy Riegels recovered a fumble for UCLA. Picking up the loose ball, he lost his direction and ran sixty-five yards toward the wrong goal line. One of his teammates ran him down and tackled him just before he scored for the opposing team. Several plays later, the Bruins had to punt. Tech blocked the kick and scored a safety, demoralizing the UCLA team.

The strange play came in the first half. At half-time the UCLA players filed off the field and into the dressing room. As others sat down on the benches and the floor, Riegels put a blanket around his shoulders, sat down in a corner, and put his face in his hands.

A football coach usually has a great deal to say to his team during halftime. That day the coach was quiet. No doubt he was trying to decide what to do with Riegels. When the timekeeper came in and announced that there were three minutes before playing time, Coach Price looked at the team and said, *"Men, the same team that played the first half will start the second."*

The players got up and started out, all but Riegels. He didn't budge. The coach looked back and called to him. Riegels didn't move. Coach Price went over to where Riegels sat and said, "Roy, didn't you hear me? The same team that played the first half will start the second."

Roy Riegels looked up, his cheeks wet with tears. "Coach," he said, *"I can't do it. I've ruined you. I've ruined the university's reputation. I've ruined myself. I can't face that crowd out there."*

Coach Price reached out, put his hand on Riegels's shoulder, and said, *"Roy, get up and go on back. The game is only half over."*

The story of Noah and his ark is this: All of us have run a long way in the wrong direction, but this is not the end of the story. Because of God's mercy wherever we are in life the game is only half over. The God we worship is a God of second chances.