

Sermon on Gen. 9:1-17

August 29, 2010

As you may have heard on the news, catastrophic flooding in Pakistan has now covered 1/3 of that country, according to the United Nations. To put that in perspective, flooding now covers about 50,000 square miles, which is the size of New Jersey and Pennsylvania combined. Thousands have died, 20 million have been displaced, and countless people are now at risk for starvation and disease. Many are in such remote areas that aid workers have difficulty reaching them, even to do food drops. Many of these people are the poorest of the poor, so even a small donation from us can make a huge impact. I encourage you to make a donation for Pakistan to your favorite aid group, to minister to these people and show them that they are not forgotten.

As you also may have heard, this week also marks the 5th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina and the disastrous flooding in Louisiana and Mississippi that occurred in her wake. Just as with Pakistan or Haiti or any region that suffers a catastrophe of that magnitude, we cannot really fathom the extent of the upheaval upon people's lives unless we live through it with them. Even if we go afterward on mission and aid trips to help with recovery, the damage is too overwhelming for us as visitors to comprehend experiencing that devastation firsthand, day in and day out.

A year and a half after Katrina, I joined a mission group from Pittsburgh to travel to New Orleans and help with gutting houses. The organization we worked with was called "RHINO," which stands for Rebuilding Hope in New Orleans. This group is based at the St. Charles Ave. Presbyterian Church, just a few blocks from Tulane University. RHINO was recognized for their outstanding ministry at the most recent General Assembly. The ministry focuses on gutting houses for people who received FEMA funding and are committed to staying in New Orleans, but can't afford to pay a company for the gutting. It was hot, dirty, and sometimes disgusting work, but for those who live there, it was an invaluable blessing.

As we have thought about Noah, my mind has taken me back to that week in New Orleans several times. Even though we were there a year and a half after the hurricane, there were still countless homes that were either abandoned or condemned. After Katrina

rescue workers spray painted every house with information about whether there were human or animal victims to be removed, whether there were gas leaks or toxic materials present, and whether the building was condemned. After a year and a half, those markings still gave witness to the lives that were lost, the hearts that were broken, and the hopes that were uprooted or dashed. During our travels in New Orleans we saw the Superdome and the highway bridges where people fled because they were the only spot high enough to get away from the water. We also saw the pilings beneath those bridges where people set up small settlements after the water receded. I still wish I could forget some of the things I saw and smelled and felt, and I was only there for a week.

As we turn to think about Noah, I think it's crucial to put ourselves as much as we can in his shoes. Though he and his family lived thousands of years ago, understanding his experiences can certainly speak to us today, and help us to have compassion on others whose lives have been overwhelmed by one disaster or another. So with that in mind, let's turn to Gen. 9:1-17. In this section, the flood has already happened, and God speaks to Noah in the aftermath.

¹ Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. ² The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. ³ Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.

⁴ "But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. ⁵ And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.

⁶ "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man. ⁷ As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it."

⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: ⁹ "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you ¹⁰ and with every living creature that was

with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

¹² And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: ¹³ I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. ¹⁶ Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth." ¹⁷ So God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth."

This is the Word of the Lord.

One of the most common but incorrect assumptions people make about Noah and the ark is that he and his family stayed on the ark for 40 days and 40 nights, but that's not so. Chapters 7-8 of Genesis record a great deal of detail about the timing of the flood. When we read carefully, we learn that it did rain for 40 days and nights, but Noah and his family were in the ark for between 361 and 370 days, depending on which ancient calendar they might have used. Last week I described the dimensions of the ark, and yet I suspect that such a large boat felt smaller and smaller to Noah's group as the days, and weeks, and months passed. Let's consider what daily life might have been like for them.

First, obviously they are with a lot of animals. They would have to feed and water them, presumably collecting rainwater. Some of the animals would have needed to be washed or groomed, and their stalls shoveled. Sick creatures would have required care, because it was imperative that Noah keep every one of them alive for posterity's sake. Animals may have been born on the ark, requiring even more husbandry efforts.

Noah's clan probably had full-time work either caring for the animals, or caring for themselves. They may have been the first humans to experience seasickness. They would have had little privacy, and needed to get used to sleeping on a constantly moving vessel.

They could have washed themselves, but probably not bathed. Their food variety would have been limited to the grains that had been stored, with no fresh fruit or vegetables. They would understandably have been frightened, at least at first, not knowing what was occurring outside the ark's walls. Based on the Scriptures, God may not have told Noah how long they would be in the boat, so they may naturally have grown anxious or frustrated when there seemed to be no end in sight to their ordeal. And I suspect on top of all this, they would have grieved for the friends and neighbors who perished in the floodwaters.

Noah and his clan would have experienced all of this while striving to cling to God's promises and trust in the Lord day in and day out, with every clap of thunder and every crest of a wave. And I suspect, too, that prayer and worship were an integral part of their lives. We can guess this first of all because we are told plainly that Noah was a righteous man. But we also know that God's people, especially in tough times, have no better course than to bow before Him and entrust their lives to Him. When I meet Noah in heaven, I won't be surprised to hear that the months of building the ark, and the year of living in it, were the most spiritually prosperous times of his life.

Perhaps you can look back upon your own times of trial and agree with Noah. The times when you had to cling to the Lord and rely upon Him, the times when you sought to understand Him with complete focus, were the times you have grown most in your faith. Maybe there have been situations where life left you seasick, or it seemed your ordeal would never end. Even though you knew God was with you, the rain still came and you still found yourself drifting on open sea. God was your sail and your rudder, but the waters were still rough, and your resources limited. Even with the people you loved most by your side, your life was in upheaval, and all you could do was cling to Jesus.

This kind of common experience among God's people explains part of the power of today's passage. God shows humanity unfathomable mercy by saving Noah. The Lord's words to Noah reflect God's desire to start anew, to have a fresh beginning where Noah and his family were to obey and fulfill the Lord's command to Adam and Eve. They were to go forth and multiply, and fill the earth with goodness and holiness. They were to abide by the Lord's directive here for justice and discipline. Noah and his family bore the great responsibility to continue human generations so that one day, a child would be born

to deliver us from our sinfulness, permanently. Jesus not only gets us through our storms, He ushers us into a Kingdom that will be consummated in perfect heavenly glory. In other words, through Noah and His descendant Jesus, we have true, precious, abiding hope.

This account of Noah is so valuable for hope that several of its themes have been noted around the world for thousands of years. The ark itself symbolizes a haven full of life today, and new life in the future. The dove bearing an olive branch is a universal sign for peace, new life, and blessed beginnings.

And of course the rainbow is a rich symbol of vitality and hope. We have all seen rainbows either in person or in photos, but think about how they happen. The troubles of the storm are still there, but are dissipating. Light breaks through the darkness of the stormy clouds. When the light is refracted through the mist, it bursts into its array of mysterious and fleeting color. The colors themselves represent the artistic array of beauty in creation. Through the seemingly endless downpour, light invades to bring us hope that the storm will soon pass. The rainbow is God's gift to remind us that there are better days ahead. But above all, God reminds us that He has not forgotten you, and me. Life may be grim and grey for now, but God is still there, and promises us the splendor of a new day that will emerge according to His wise timing. ///

From time to time there are news items mentioning that such and such an archaeological team has found Noah's ark. Up to now, no one has been able to date any of the wood that's been discovered in these digs to the time of Noah, around 4,000 BC. Aside from this, the Scriptures tell us that the ark came to rest in the mountains of Ararat, not on Mt. Ararat itself. These mountains extend from Turkey through Armenia and into western Asia, so searching for the ark there would be like looking for a needle in a haystack – especially confounding since the ark may have disintegrated thousands of years ago. Most practically, the ark may have been disassembled by Noah and his family for wood to build fires and structures. People of this region commonly reuse building materials, so in later times the ark's wood may have been dispersed for use by other communities.

But all of this focus upon the ark itself really distracts us from the lessons the Lord has for us. I think if Noah could speak to those who spend time and money searching for

the ark, he might direct them to spend that time and money serving the Lord in a different way. Instead of focusing on a pile of old wood, why not care for the people of Turkey and Armenia who have never heard of Jesus, who don't have enough to eat, who suffer from Islamic oppression, and who are kept from having a basic education by their own leaders.

Like those archaeologists, we can get caught up in and even trapped by the "stuff" of our lives. Churchly "things" can become more valuable and important than church "people." Some churches are so focused on making a good impression and being trendy and appealing that they neglect to instill their ministries with Gospel substance. Other churches emphasize having the best facilities, but neglect caring for those who might use those facilities. Noah didn't have the luxury of keeping a lot of stuff, and when we face trials, we also tend to focus on what's important in life. Stuff is usually far down on the list of what's really important. So like Noah, we must stay focused on the Lord and His ways, no matter what our circumstances. When our priorities match the Lord's, we are well on our way to being the kind of obedient and faithful servant Noah was.

Noah's experience also reminds us of just how loving and faithful God is. During those long, stuffy, uncertain months of living in the ark, Noah had to cling to God's promise that He would not forget about them. He had provided the ark to save them, provided the food they needed, and the Lord would not leave them hanging and drifting all over the place. The Lord always knew when the waters would recede enough for them to leave the ark, but Noah may not have. Maybe Noah's clan grew worried that they might run out of food. With God's promises to base their lives upon, their worries would have been understandable, but not faithful. Noah reminds us that God never forgets us, always provides for us, and is always with us, even when things look bleak and hopeless especially when our trials drag on and on. This is why Noah is commended for his faith in Hebrews 11. This is why Paul tells us and the Corinthians to live by faith, and not by sight.

There is one last lesson from Noah I want to mention before I close. When I was in college some of my classmates really struggled with the doctrine of election, and perhaps some of you do as well. The doctrine of election is based on passages of Scripture which teach that God chooses to redeem some people, and chooses not to redeem other people. The grounds for God choosing certain people is not based on their being good and

earning His favor, because none of us is good and we can't earn our salvation. One of my classmates actually became distraught one day when we were talking about this in the Student Union. She thought it was incredibly cruel for people to affirm this doctrine, because she couldn't bear to think that her non-Christian mother would suffer eternal punishment.

There is no doubt that election is one of the most challenging ideas we find in Scripture. It's distressing for me to think that some of my relatives may not join me with the Lord in heaven. What we can take from the account of the flood is that for some reason, God chose Noah, his wife, his sons, and their wives. Only eight people out of tens of thousands. Why? Scripture doesn't tell us. Like many other things in the Bible, and many things in our lives, we simply don't know why things happen the way they do. Noah's clan may have asked themselves the same thing that survivors of terrible plane crashes ask, the same thing that people asked when they stayed home from work at the World Trade Center on 9/11: Why am I alive, when others perished?

Noah teaches us that it takes tremendous courage to obey the Lord when we don't know "why." To say this another way, not knowing "why" things happen should never be a reason for us to turn away from the Lord. I chose to become an atheist because I foolishly demanded that God tell me "why" my brother died, and then I was infuriated when the Lord did not answer me. Faithful people like Noah don't have blind faith. They have faith that sees the promises of God fulfilled in our lives, and His promises are answer enough. Vibrant, growing faith allows us to trust the Lord especially when we don't understand "why." Like Noah, the Lord desires that we rest in Him, and base our lives upon the rock-solid promises we see abundantly in His Word. Vibrant faith may still wonder "why," and that's okay. But after we wonder "why," we are to trust that the Lord will provide all we need, day by day, so we can glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Let us pray.