

Sermon on Gen. 6:9-7:5, p. 6

August 22, 2010

Prayer.

⁹ This is the account of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God. ¹⁰ Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

¹¹ Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. ¹² God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. ¹³ So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. ¹⁴ So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. ¹⁵ This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high. ¹⁶ Make a roof for it and finish the ark to within 18 inches of the top. Put a door in the side of the ark and make lower, middle, and upper decks.

¹⁷ I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish. ¹⁸ But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark — you and your sons, and your wife and your sons' wives with you. ¹⁹ You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you. ²⁰ Two of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal, and of every kind of creature that moves along the ground will come to you to be kept alive. ²¹ You are to take every kind of food that is to be eaten and store it away as food for you and for them." ²² Noah did everything just as God commanded him.

¹ The LORD then said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation. ² Take with you seven of every kind of clean animal, a male and its mate, and two of every kind of unclean animal, a male and its mate, ³ and also seven of every kind of bird, male and female, to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth. ⁴ Seven days from now I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and I will wipe from the face of the earth every

living creature I have made." ⁵ And Noah did all that the LORD commanded him. *This is the Word of the Lord.*

In 1963, a young comedian named Bill Cosby performed at a Greenwich Village nightclub where his work for the evening was recorded. The album that came from that night's show would later earn Cosby the first of his 6 Grammy awards, in part because it contained one of his most famous skits, one that is a trademark for his stand-up career. A few years ago my mother and I went to hear Bill Cosby at Hersheypark Arena, and even though over 30 years had passed, the audience instantly applauded when he began his 3-part skit about Noah titled "Right."

I couldn't find any resource to tell me what religious affiliation Bill Cosby has, but his skit about Noah shows a decent understanding of these chapters of Genesis. While his skit is of course intended for comedy and isn't a theological treatise or sermon, it succeeds in showing us the human face of Noah's experiences with the Lord. The skit starts with Noah sawing away in his rec room, since Cosby presumes he was a good carpenter. A deep, resounding voice comes from nowhere. **"Noah!" "Noah!"** "I want you to build an ark." *Right.... What's an ark?*

Now this part of Scripture is very clear that Noah was a righteous man. The language here means that Noah was very devout, he did right, he avoided sin, he genuinely cared for his neighbors – in other words, he had a very close, personal relationship with God, so close that we're told he walked with God. Only one other person in the entire Bible is given such an incredible designation – Noah's great-grandfather, Enoch. Genesis 5 tells us that Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God just took him away, apparently sparing him the experience of death. Noah continued his great-grandfather's heritage of faithfulness to the Lord. We aren't told about the character of Noah's wife and sons, but we do see here that they are blessed by God because of the godliness of Noah himself.

But even a person who loves God dearly could understandably be confused by God's instruction to build a huge boat. It would have been a fair and honest question to say, "What's an ark?" If we consider that Noah may have lived around 4000 BC, there are no boats this large described in any historical accounts or found in archaeological

sites until over 1500 years later. The details God gives to Noah order a boat that is 1½ football fields long, 25 yards wide, and 5 stories high. In contrast, boats of Noah’s era were made of skin and reeds like canoes, and were less than 10 feet in length. They were sailed or paddled along shorelines or in marshes, and used for fishing and hunting. Even the larger boats of later generations rarely left sight of shore, and it was centuries later until boats were built that could handle the rough waters of the Mediterranean. Noah would have been understandably amazed that God wanted him to build a boat at all, and especially a boat of such huge proportions.

As unusual as this gigantic boat was, that isn’t the point of this part of Noah’s story. The entire human race during Noah’s life was so corrupt that our majestic and loving Lord actually ran out of patience. In the midst of all that corruption and violence, all the exploitation and hatred that is implied in the Hebrew language here, Noah found favor with God. And in the midst of all that evil, Noah remained faithful and obedient to the Lord. He did everything God asked of him to a Tee. But what would that have meant for Noah, on a practical level?

Cosby’s skit and the recent movie *Evan Almighty*, which is a modern retelling of Noah’s ark, touch on a theme we should focus on today. Cosby says, “Here’s a guy going to work, 7 o’clock in the morning, Noah’s neighbor. He sees the ark. ‘Hey Noah! What is this?’ *It’s an ark.* ‘An ark? What’s an ark? Can you get it out of my driveway? What’s it for, anyway? ... God’s going to send a great flood? Yeah. Right.” Cosby’s Noah states, “The whole neighborhood is out there laughing at me. Even my best friend Larry. I said, Larry, I’ve been talking to the Lord. *Oh, really?* God told me to make an ark. *Oh really? What’s an ark?* And Larry walks away laughing. I’m the only guy around with an ark. People laughing, walking around with picket signs, saying I’m messing up the neighborhood. Animals walking around leaving messes, and all because of a flood. What’s a flood? This is too much for a 600 year old man.

While we may join Cosby in chuckling about the taunting Noah likely faced while building the ark, in the bigger picture Noah gives us an excellent example of being faithful and obedient despite malicious opposition and peer pressure. But Noah’s testimony on behalf of our Lord was not just through his obedient actions. 2 Peter 2 calls Noah a “preacher of righteousness.” Through his actions and words, Noah declared the

impending judgment of God against sin. All of the jeering and mocking gave Noah a chance to bear witness as a prophet, to tell people about God's hatred of sin, and the chance God gave him and his family to be delivered from the flood's destruction.

You and I probably won't be asked by God to build an ark, but the Word of God tells us to tell others about the love of God, and the chance they have to be delivered from eternal destruction. This is what Jesus Himself touches on in the passage I read earlier from Matthew 24. ³⁷As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹and they ignored what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man."

Like Noah, you and I are to be "preachers of righteousness," living out our obedience in actions and in words to make it clear to the people in our lives that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus will return, like a thief in the night. Apart from Him, there is no salvation, there is no hope, and there is no redemption. Like Noah's neighbors, the people we know who do not give their hearts to Christ will be swept away. Noah's neighbors probably didn't want to hear about sin and judgment, and neither do people today. But like Noah, it remains our privilege and our responsibility to tell them the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ, as well as the consequences of rejection God's Son. Jesus alone is the way, and the truth, and the life, and no one can be with the Father apart from Him. ///

So we know that God asked His faithful servant Noah to do something difficult, in the midst of a corrupt generation. But it wasn't difficult only because of the ridicule Noah probably encountered. Building a boat of this size would have been quite a challenge, and it didn't happen overnight. Noah's sons would have helped him to cut the wood, and slather the structure with pitch to make it watertight. They would have needed to help him lift the beams, and divide the boat into several levels. Noah needed help collecting enough food for his family and the animals, for 40 days. This was an arduous task for a 600 year old man, but 1 Peter 3 tells us that God waited patiently for the project to be complete before sending the waters.

Sometimes God asks us to do things for Him and for people He loves that are challenging, and even overwhelming. Sometimes we are in situations where the battles we face cannot be fought without the help of those we love, as we obey the Lord together. God provided all of the supplies Noah and his family needed, and God provided them with each other to take on the tasks He assigned them. God also provides us with all we need to face our challenges – but above all, God provides us with Himself. With every peg Noah nailed, each piece of lumber that was hewn, every stroke of pitch, and each kernel of grain that was collected, God was with Noah and his family. Even the ark itself was a gift God provided, and building it was Noah’s privilege. In the same way, God blesses us through the work that we do, for His glory. In the end, we are sanctified and strengthened in our faith when we seek to do what He asks of us, no matter how difficult, against all odds.

Another lesson we can learn from this passage is that God is in the business of re-creation. What humans ruin and destroy, God claims in order to rebuild and bring new life. Adam and his descendants took the same creation God had called “good,” and brought devastation upon it and each other. Out of the hopelessness and evil following Adam and Eve’s fall, God raised up faithful people who could carry on His mission in the world. Noah’s calling was a lonely one, and the task must have seemed gigantic. His heart must have been torn to see his neighbors reject God’s ways and face certain death in the flood. But Noah trusted God’s Word and His promises. I imagine that while Noah was building the ark, he worshipped God for showing him and his family mercy, and giving them the blessing of starting life on earth anew.

Our hearts also break when we consider that people we know also reject Christ. At the same time, we too worship God for showing us mercy, and giving us the priceless blessing of new life in Christ, and eternal hope in the age to come. We should be humbled to have the privilege of doing the work God has called us to do, whatever shape it may take. With our worship and humility, the next natural step is to pray for the souls of those we know who still need salvation through Christ. And we pray for ourselves to have the boldness and wisdom to share the Good News with them, so like Noah they can have the experience of walking with God.

Presbyterians are sometimes called the people of the covenant. Reformed theology emphasizes the string of covenants that are found throughout the Scriptures, ending in the eternal covenant established by Jesus Himself. But the first covenant between God and humanity is mentioned here, and this provides us with the final lesson from Noah for today. Through their close, personal relationship, God was in a covenant with Noah. Based on that bond, God promised to keep on loving and caring for Noah. It would have been nerve-wracking to anticipate living in a giant boat filled with loud, stinky animals for 40 days. Hopefully all of Noah's family members got along well enough to be in close quarters for 6 weeks. They may have been tempted to be fearful, since it had never rained before. But God speaks to calm them all, and promises Noah that He will deliver them all safely through the storm.

If you have a personal relationship with God, and have trusted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, then you have the exact same promise. Jesus will never leave you, nor forsake you. He is with us always, even to the end of the age. There is absolutely nothing that can separate you from His love and care. He will not test you beyond what you can bear, and He is steadfast and true. We have nothing to fear, and instead of bring anxious, Jesus urges us to cast all of our anxiety upon His strong shoulders, because He cares for us. His yoke is easy, and His burden is light. Like Noah, we walk closely with God through prayer, and take each step of our journey knowing that His strong right hand upholds us. We can do anything He asks of us through His strength, and the light of His Word perfectly guides our steps.

In 1609, Dutchman Peter Janssen built a model of the ark according to its proportions to see whether it would be seaworthy. The boat was so successful that numerous were made, but they had to be modified because God's directions to Noah did not include a sail or rudder. Why do you suppose that was?

The simple answer is that God guided and protected the boat. God is the author of the flood, He is in charge of the entire situation, He has told Noah precisely how to build this newfangled ship, and He will carry them through the ordeal. God's great care comes out even more clearly when we look closely at the Hebrew terms that are used. The word that is used for ark or boat is used only one other time in the Bible. In that case, it refers to the little basket Moses drifted in when his mother hid him from Pharaoh in Exodus 2.

The word used for “pitch” or tar for Noah’s ark is used only one other time, when Moses’ mother coated the basket she placed him in to make it waterproof. Noah and Moses’ mother made these boats, but God carried them along and guided them safely to the destination He had in mind for them.

Like Noah and Moses’ mother, you and I have our directions in the Word of God. The Lord speaks to us and teaches us; He cares for us, guides us, and He is our rudder and our sail, day in and day out. When we are obedient and faithful as Noah was, we trust in God and His promises, for He is the one who has promised to complete the good work He has begun in us. No matter the challenges we face, He will carry us, provide for us, and protect us. We may face turmoil, we may get seasick, and life may even stink sometimes, just as it did for Noah on the ark. But through the Holy Spirit, we can walk closely with the Lord, who is our anchor and our sanctuary. We can know His holy Word and trust it to navigate us every day. Like Noah, we can be obedient in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. And we can rejoice that when the Lord carries us across the River Jordan, we will be clothed in purity and righteousness, for evermore.

Let us pray.