

“A Little Green”

Genesis 6: 11 - 8: 11 passim

Makemie Presbyterian Church

November 22, 2009 Annual Meeting & Soup!

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth and behold it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way 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... Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch... For behold, I will bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life...

And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female... For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.” And Noah did all that the Lord had commanded him.

Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters came on the earth. And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood. Of clean animals, and of animals that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground, two and two, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God had commanded Noah. And after seven days the waters of the flood came on the earth.

In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth and the windows of the heavens were opened...

The flood continued forty days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. The waters swelled and increased greatly on the earth; and the ark floated on the face of the waters. The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered... fifteen cubits deep... Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark...

At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made ...Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set her foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand... and brought her into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in her beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf.

This ends the reading.

I have restrained myself from preaching on Noah & the Ark these last few months. But last week some of you couldn't even get to church because the bridge was closed on Route 12 from all the rain & I thought now's the time. I've heard people joking about building an ark or getting the animals together since the year began. Worcester County has won the award (not really given) of the most rainfall in Maryland in five of the last ten months & November well the Pocomoke was so swollen Byrd Park was underwater. So I've been thinking a lot about the ark, maybe God's trying to tell us something? I don't know.

The little green, which is the title of the sermon is about how green is the color of hope in this story. The dove comes back from her flight with a sprig of green from an olive tree which tells Noah that there is dry land. We talked about Noah & the Ark in Sunday school today. We looked for matching pairs, played out the raven & then the dove looking for a sign that the water had receded & talked about the rainbow, the promise God makes to us that the world will never be destroyed by flood again.

It's an ironic fact that this ancient legend about Noah survives in our age mainly as a children's story or as a way of talking about too much rain. When I was a child, I had a Noah's ark made of wood with a roof that came

off so you could take the animals out & put them in again; and we had a good time today in Sunday school talking about this story. Yet if we stop to look at it, this is really as dark a tale as there is in the Bible, which is full of dark tales. It's a tale of God's terrible despair over the human race & his decision to visit them with a great flood that would destroy them all except for this one old man, Noah, and his family. Now we give it to our children to read. It sort of makes me wonder why?

Maybe it's because we don't want to read it for what it really says, so we make it into a sort of fairy tale instead, so that we don't need to take it so seriously. You know the way we make jokes about disease & death so that we can laugh instead of weep; just the way we translate murder & lust into sixth-rate television dramas, which is a way of reducing them to a size that anybody can cope with; just the way we take the nightmares of our age, the sinister, brutal forces that dwell in the human heart threatening to overwhelm us & present them as the Addams family or the monster dolls that we give, again to children; or the Twilight books & movies. *Gulliver's Travels* is too bitter about human kind so we make it into an animated cartoon; *Moby Dick* is too bitter about God, so we make it into an adventure story; Noah's ark is too something-or-other-else, so it becomes a toy with a roof that comes off so you can take the little animals out.

So what truths are in this tale of Noah & his ark? How about we start with the moment God first speaks to Noah; what is that look on Noah's face? When somebody speaks to us, we turn our face to look in the direction that the voice comes from; but if the voices comes from no direction at all, or the voice comes from within & comes wordlessly; then in a sense we stop looking at anything. Our eyes become unseeing. If someone passes a hand in front of our eyes, we hardly notice the hand. Our face goes vacant because we're focused inwardly. Maybe this was so with Noah's face when he heard the words of God; that the earth was corrupt in God's sight, filled with violence & pain & un-love; that the earth was doomed.

Maybe Noah asked himself, is this God speaking or did I eat something that didn't agree with me? Perhaps a flicker of bewilderment passes across his vacant face – the lines between his eyes deepening, his mouth going loose, a little stupid.

But then comes the crux of the matter, because the voice that was either God's voice or an undigested matzoh ball shifts from the indicative of doom to the imperative of command. And it told Noah that although the world was doomed, he Noah, had a commission to perform that would have

much to do with the saving of the world. “Make yourself an ark of gopher wood,” the voice said, “and behold; I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life.”

So Noah had to decide & the decision was not just a theological one – yes it is God; no, it is not; but a practical one as well and Noah choose to obey God. Noah bets his entire life on a voice. And his feet a little dusty, slightly slew-footed, move toward the lumber yard. Maybe there’s no spring in his step, maybe dragging a little, but they move. There are so many things to say about Noah, whoever he was, if ever he was, the old landlubber with the watery eyes; but the one thing that’s certain is that he must have looked like an awful fool for a while; all those days when he knocked together the great & ponderous craft. Three hundred cubits long & fifty cubits wide & thirty cubits high, all three decks of it covered inside & out with pitch & he nothing to explain what he was doing – building a ship many miles from any port – because a voice had told him to, which was maybe God’s voice or maybe not. Only a fool would heed such a voice at all when every other voice for miles around could tell him, & probably did, that the proper business of a man is to keep busy: to work, to play, to make love, to watch out for his own interests as all men watch out for theirs & to leave the whole shadowy business of God to those who have a taste for

shadows. So Noah building his ark becomes the neighborhood joke as he pounds together his zany craft while the rest of the world laughs up its sleeve & there is not a cloud in the sky.

Maybe Noah's thoughts were of water & he wasn't surprised when the heavens opened & all the foundations of the deep burst forth so that the sea crept up over the earth where there had been dry land. The waters came scudding across forest & field, sliding in across kitchen floors & down cellar stairs, rising high above satellite dishes & church steeples & death was everywhere; people grasping for something solid & sure to keep themselves from drowning, sibling fighting sibling for the few remaining pieces of dry ground. Maybe the chaos was no greater than it has ever been. Only wetter.

The ark rises free from its moorings, cumbersome old tub creaking & pitching in the waves, with the two of everything down below & a clown for a captain that did not know his port from his starboard. But it stayed afloat, by God, this Toonerville trolley of vessels, clouted from side to side by the waves & staggering like a drunk. It was not much, God knows, but it was enough & it stayed afloat & granted it was noisy as hell & stank to heaven,

& the wolf lay down with the lamb & the lion ate straw like the ox & life lived on in the ark -- while all around there was only chaos & death.

Then finally after many days, Noah sent forth a dove from the ark to see if the waters had subsided from the earth & that evening she returned, and lo, in her mouth a freshly plucked olive leaf. Once again, the place to look, I think, is Noah's face. The dove stands there with her delicate, scarlet feet on the calluses of his upturned palm. His cheek just brushes her breast so that he can feel the tiny panic of her heart. His eyes are closed, the lashes wet. Only the old sailor no longer weeps with anguish but a wild & irrepressible hope. That isn't the end of the story in Genesis, but maybe that's the end of it for most of us – just a little green held up against the end of the world.

All of these old tales are about us of course. I suppose that's why we can never forget them. Maybe that's why we give them to children to read so that they will never be entirely lost, because then part of the truth about us would be lost, too. Aren't the turbulent waters of chaos & nightmares always threatening to burst forth & flood the earth? The tale of Noah tells us that in our own hearts chaos & nightmare have their days. But the story of Noah tells us other truths as well.

It tells about the ark for one, which somehow manages to ride out the storm. God knows the ark is not much – if not for the storm without, who could stand the stench within. But the ark was enough, is enough. Because the ark is where ever human beings come together as human beings in such a way that the differences between them stop being barriers – the way people meet at weddings say of someone they both love, all the differences of age between them, all the real & imagined differences of color, of wealth, of education, no longer divide them but become for each a source of strength & delight. And although we may go on looking at each other as very odd fish indeed, the oddness gladdens the heart; there is no shyness, no awkwardness or fear of each other. Sometimes even in a church we can look into each other's faces & see that, beneath the differences, we are all of us outward bound on a voyage for parts unknown.

The ark is where ever people come together because in this stormy world where nothing stays put for long among the crazy waves & where at the end of every voyage there is a burial at sea. The ark is where, just because it is such a world, we really need each other. We really do. The ark is wherever human beings come together because in our heart of hearts all of us – dream the same dream, which is a dream of peace, peace between the nations, between the races, between the people in our families

and is ultimately a dream of love. Love, not as an excuse for the mushy & innocuous, but love as a summons to battle against all that is unlovely & unloving in the world. The ark in other words is where we have each other & where we have a sprig of hope.

Noah looked like a fool in his faith, but he saved the world from drowning, and coming soon we remember the one Noah foreshadows & who also looked like a fool spread-eagled up there, cross-eyed with pain, but who also saved the world from drowning. We must remember him because he saves the world still & wherever the ark is, wherever we meet & touch in something like love, it is because he is there, brother & father of us all. So into his gracious & puzzling hands we must commend ourselves through all the days of our voyaging wherever it takes us. We must build our arks with love & ride out the storm with courage & know that the little sprig of green in the dove's mouth offers a reality beyond the storm more precious than we might imagine. We live into hope. All it takes is a little green. Amen.