

"Telling a Better Story"  
Genesis 9:8-17

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United Church of Christ  
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I.

Good Morning. Since we started our Fall program, I've been worshiping with some of our young people in the Chapel during the sermon time. The last couple of weeks we have had nearly 20 young people in Children's Worship, taking off their shoes to be on holy ground, singing, praying together, and sharing Communion- so if you are a person who has been going to the Chapel, I welcome you into this space. This sermon is for you too, we are talking about the flood and the ark. If you are in our church's Our Whole Lives comprehensive sexuality class, you can listen for the word "stereotype" and see if you think I'm using it correctly. And I invite everyone to listen for the ways that the flood and the ark story might be life-giving to you.

Maybe you already know this, but we are known around Sebastopol as the Noah's Ark church because of the Patrick Amiot sculpture on our front lawn. A few years ago our church marched in the Apple Blossom Parade, and we had a wooden ark on wheels with people dressed as animals. And when people call the church to ask for directions to get here, I have heard our Office Manager say, "you'll see the Noah's Ark out front." Maybe you've thought this too, and I bet there are people in this room who know about the architecture design of our church, but I've always thought that the inside of this sanctuary looks like a boat hull somehow.

So Community Church of Sebastopol is like a symbol in our town, of a place where "we're all in the same boat" together as a community, and we communicate that as a campus, as a place-and as we go out to "be the church" in the world. But the story for today got me wondering afresh-what is the theology of the flood and the ark? What I mean by that is, What do we think the Noah's Ark story says about God? And how does it shape us (at Community Church of Sebastopol), how does it exemplify who we are or who we strive to be in the world? What can the flood and the ark story teach us, and what does it mean to think about it on World Communion Sunday?

It turns out that flood stories are very common all around the world. We will talk about modern floods in a few moments, but there are some ancient flood stories that

have been told for thousands of years. Legends of a flood exist among the Native peoples of North America, the Aborigines of Australia, the Islanders of Central and South Pacific, and in parts of Asia. But the versions of a flood story that used to be told in ancient Mesopotamia (now Iraq) come closest to the story we read in the Bible. In the ancient Mesopotamian story, a gang of gods send a flood to destroy life on earth because they are annoyed by how noisy the people and animals had gotten. If you've been following our all-church read in Brian Maclaren's book, We Make the Road by Walking, you know that ancient Jewish storytellers would have found that story repulsive, they would have been offended by the idea that our Creator God would be so fickle as to destroy creation out of annoyance. So they adapted it, changing the "gang of gods" to one God— a Creator God who sends a flood to cleanse the earth of human violence and unjust systems. There is then a righteous purpose of the floodwaters— to stop injustice.

This is how ancient stories evolved over time— they were retold through generations, and were tweaked here and there by storytellers, until they were written down. Brian Maclaren points out that in a sense, writing stories down ends their evolution. So the flood and the ark story that appears in our Bible is like a snapshot— a picture of how this story was presented in a certain time and place, when it was put to paper. So what happens when we extrapolate the story into our time and place? Is there room for us to move the story forward?

## II.

I ask this because we may have some "issues" with the story. It may feel disingenuous to read a scripture that says God will spare the earth from death-dealing floods— when we live in a time when it seems that flood-bearing storms bring their wild rage around the globe. Also, it can be disconcerting to hear this story passed off as a sweet children's story, when a closer look shows that the story of the flood and the ark is not all rainbows and unicorns. (okay, maybe it's rainbows). Actually I think that there's an assumption that the story needs to be over-simplified for children—it presumes that children don't have an experience of injustice, and that children can only handle the "easy" stuff. I think we can give our young people more credit than that—they for sure know when something isn't fair. Another issue modern readers may have with this story is that it reinforces a male heterosexual cisgender stereotype where the earth is replenished through the joining of male and female bodies, without any consideration for other genders and sexual expressions. And if you look closely, none of the women in the text are given names, and there's no discussion of their experiences of how God is working through them, too. In ancient times, chaos and the waters of the deep were identified as being female, and order and structure were identified as male. So the story of the flood and the ark supports

the stereotype of male dominance and victory over the feminine. Those are a few problems we might have with this story, but probably the biggest one is this idea that God sends the flood because people and animals are morally bad. I think we should look closer at that, because unfortunately, that has become the way most people hear this story.

There are some loud voices proclaiming themselves to be a Noah's Ark theology. In light of the recent hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods around the world, I have heard someone say, "Well, everything happens for a reason." If you happen to have ever watched the show "Growing Pains" in the late 1980's, you might remember the actor Kirk Cameron. He recently took to Facebook to declare that God sent the incredibly destructive Hurricanes Harvey and Irma as divine punishment for our collective sins and to teach us "humility." Conservative pundit Ann Coulter said that Houston was hit by Hurricane Harvey because they elected a lesbian mayor. On the other side of the political spectrum, a professor was fired for joking on twitter that the storms came to Texas and Florida to punish Republicans for supporting the election of our president. From a more new-age perspective, this week I also heard someone say that the storms are part of our karmic destiny, that they're just something to be worked through in this lifetime, because of actions in a previous lifetime. But what do all of these examples mean for describing the character of God? They're describing a God who sits in judgment, causing natural disasters to happen as a consequence for what they see as moral depravity. That is just not how I think most people experience God, as taking sides or laying in wait to take revenge. So-what does it mean that our sacred text, the Bible, seems to offer up a story about God doing that very thing-sending a destructive flood as punishment?

### III.

If you make an outline of the flood and the ark story, it forms what is called a chiasm-I brought my trusty hourglass from home, a chiasm is like this: The beginning and ending of the story kind of match up with each other, the middle parts narrow at the same time, and then you get to the center of the story. The most important message in a chiasm is at the center of the story. In the very center of the flood and the ark are these words: God remembers Noah. God remembers us too. When we feel in over our heads with the deluge of world problems and political horrors and fears we cannot manage- God remembers us. When we feel disoriented by grief and our own poor efforts at self-preservation-God remembers us. When we find ourselves barely floating above a sea of unrest- God remembers us. This is the true heart of the flood and the ark story- God remembers us.

The truth is that hurricanes bring floodwaters to low-lying areas. Earthquakes are amplified when they occur in certain kinds of rock– the Mexico City earthquake a few weeks ago was especially damaging because that city is built on a dry lake bed. Because our oceans are warming, they are producing fiercer storms with stronger winds. Waters don't recede easily in cities like Houston where the land is below sea level, and not very permeable–the water just sits on top of the ground and won't seep down. What we should really be talking about is how to stop our oceans from warming, and how to reduce disparities based on race and class– Tampa and Miami have some of the lowest median incomes in the country, and it's the sick and elderly who were not able to evacuate in Texas and Florida. Puerto Ricans are still without power and fresh water, and there are no assurances they'll receive the aid they need after Hurricane Maria. A flood and the ark theology says, hey we are all in this boat together, and we need to take care of each other. It means dismantling systems of violence and oppression that support the rich at the expense of the poor. It means working together to stop our oceans from warming, even if that means changing our habits and rebuilding our infrastructure in ways that are safer and more sustainable in the long run. That's what our church stands for when we identify ourselves as a church of the flood and the ark: God remembers us; We remember each other.

#### IV.

Just like the Noah's Ark story evolved over time, we too are evolving– I wonder if instead of the "Noah's Ark Church" we might describe ourselves better as the "Rainbow Church?" If you look above the Noah's Ark sculpture on our front lawn, you will see a rainbow banner that says, "Be the Church." We are the church with the rainbow flag, the church with the rainbow banners, the church where children make rainbow bread. The flood and the ark tells the story of a God who does not let injustice have the last word. It's a story of new life, where God breaks open violent systems, unhealthy relationships, even us, and makes a promise for healing. "The living God doesn't uphold the status quo...but repeatedly disrupts it and breaks it open so that something better can emerge and evolve" (Maclaren). The clouds part and in the misty sunshine, a rainbow forms– that in the remembering there can be a new beginning.

And when we break open bread at Communion, we re-member. Pope John Paul II once said Communion is always celebrated "on the altar of the world." When we celebrate the bread of life, broken for all, we remember the healing stories in our midst: stories of youth and adults doing mission to help others, stories of grief and lamentation lifted up in the safety of this sanctuary, stories of a child who describes Logos as a Spirit present in Communion. This sanctuary is a place of refuge as storms rage around (or within) us, waters rising. But it's also a boat we disembark, having

touched brokenness, to bring more love to a suffering world. Because in the remembering, the Table forms us as Christians and makes of us a people who go into the world to set the table for everyone. Amen.