

The World As Ark
Denise Cumbee Long

Genesis 6:9-22; 7:11-12
Genesis 8:1-3, 15-19; 9:8-17

June 1, 2008
Binkley Baptist Church

One of the most interesting weddings I can remember was one which took place on a boat in Lake Erie. My husband and I were officiating at the wedding of friends and church members from Oberlin, Ohio. The bride and groom had chartered a large boat to take the wedding party and about 100 guests out onto Lake Erie. The original plan involved a leisurely sail around a couple of islands and then a quiet passage back to port at sunset. The wedding vows would take place on board and then there would be music, toasts, and dancing as the boat headed home.

Unfortunately, after the boat left the dock, the wind picked up and the weather turned stormy. Instead of a calm ride out to the islands, the ship began to pitch to and fro on the waves. The wedding cake slid back and forth on the refreshment table. Some guests were turning green and hanging miserably over the side. The musicians gripped their instruments anxiously and tried to play loud enough to be heard over the wind. I had to hold on to the rail on deck with one hand and hold my wedding homily in the other, while I struggled to keep my footing during the ceremony. And instead of a peaceful sunset, we headed back to port under dark and stormy skies, hardly able to see more than black waves and white foam.

Still, good humor prevailed, at least among those of us who were not seasick, and I remember a sense of intimacy and celebration. The boat with its lighted windows, filled with happy guests, was a fragile container in the darkness for life and new beginnings. It carried precious cargo over destructive waters. I was reminded of the ark floating over the flooded world toward safety and a fresh start.

Stories of a great primeval flood which covers and destroys everything in the world are found in many cultures. In the Greek version, the gods destroy a wicked humanity, but a man of prudence and piety is allowed to escape on an ark with his family and all species of animals. A Welsh myth tells of a lake bursting its boundaries and flooding the world. One couple survive on a mastless ship, accompanied by all kind of animals.

In Assyrian and Babylonian stories, the gods are distressed by human overpopulation, and send a flood to destroy the earth, but one family is warned of the coming deluge and escapes on an ark with animals, sending out a dove and a raven as the waters recede to see if there is any dry land. The Masai and people of southwest Tanzania in Africa have flood myths which involve arks and animals, and Siberian folktales tell of people and animals saving themselves by climbing on floating logs and rafters. When the waters recede, they come aground on a mountain, disembark and repopulate the world. (<http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/flood-myths.html>)

I don't always use the lectionary when deciding on sermon topics, but the scripture for today in the liturgical calendar is none other than the story of Noah and the Ark, and I have always been intrigued by this ancient account. It is part of the pre-history in the beginning chapters of Genesis, like the story of the Tower of Babel we heard last week. This story is one of both destruction and creation, or rather re-creation, and it has some uncanny similarities to other myths in the ancient world.

Scholars have puzzled over the reasons for this. Andrew Greeley, priest and professor, writes that perhaps there is an archetypal memory of a massive flood from the earliest times of human history when all of humankind lived on the grasslands of Africa. Perhaps such a devastating flood or series of floods occurred in human pre-history, even before the migration of peoples to other continents around the world. An interesting idea, but Greeley believes that what is the more likely explanation for common myths of a great flood is the universal human experience of the destructiveness of water. This would be particularly true for agricultural peoples. The

world would be wiped out for a time by water, and then, after the flood receded, life would begin again. (Greeley and Neusner, *Common Ground*, Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1996, p. 86.)

I think about Thailand and Indonesia following the tsunami in December of 2004, or the current devastation in Myanmar after the cyclone and storm surge washed away homes, fields, animals, and people in the coastal farming delta. In our contemporary thinking, when natural disasters of these proportions occur, we consider questions of science: What were the natural causes, and how could we have better warned people or kept them from building in hazardous areas? Or we ask questions of theodicy: Why does a good God permit such things to happen?

But the story of Noah is one which does not ask these kinds of questions. In fact, it is disturbing to our modern sensibilities: God is portrayed as regretting that humans were ever made, and God seeks to wipe out humankind. But, there is a clue that humanity had actually been involved in self-destruction all along. The text literally says “Now the earth had destroyed itself in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth had destroyed itself, that all flesh had destroyed its way on the earth (Gen. 6:11-12)”.

We see that some form of violence was a primary cause for the self-destruction of life on earth. As Tom Mann, a writer, Old Testament scholar and pastor of Parkway UCC in Winston-Salem, puts it, life on earth had “somehow stepped beyond natural limits in a way that was suicidal, ruining the elegant balance and symmetry of the creation that God pronounced as “very beautiful” (Genesis 1:31). (Mann, *Acts of Faith, Year B, Part 1*, North Carolina Council of Churches, 2005, p. 30.)

The story of the flood in Genesis should not be read for theological sophistication or historical accuracy. Indeed, the Genesis account is primarily concerned about the question of whether God would finally allow evil to overcome what is good, allow destruction to completely outbalance what is being created, allow death to eclipse life.

If we cast the question in a more contemporary light and see our own role in the calamity that occurs, we might ask today whether human beings will continue on our current path of self-destruction, one where our political, environmental, and economic policies will eventually devastate the planet and everything that lives on it.

And now, the time has come to also talk of ships. In Tweedledee’s poem for Alice, the Walrus says, “The time has come to talk of many things: of shoes- and ships- and sealing wax- of cabbages and kings, and why the sea is boiling hot- and whether pigs have wings.” (Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966, p.240, quoted in Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community Earth Ethics*, New York: Orbis Books, 1996, p.353.) Although we can talk of boiling seas in the context of global warming, shoes and sealing wax as symbols for industry and commerce, and perhaps cabbages and kings in light of the power of global corporations and trade, perhaps the best focus of conversation for people of faith is ships. Or, maybe arks.

Larry Rasmussen, professor of Social Ethics at Union Seminary in New York, believes that the ship is an image for the earth today. He writes:

It could be the little boat of the Children’s Defense Fund, with the child’s plea: “Dear Lord, be good to me. The sea is so wide, and my boat is so small.” Or...It could also be earth as Noah’s Ark, the ark of life alone in the waters of deep space...In any case, the subject is the same: earth’s carrying capacity, its powers for sustaining present and future generations, the ability of natural and social systems to live together indefinitely. ..Getting from here (unsustainability) to there (sustainability) is the preoccupation. (Rasmussen, p.24)

And so perhaps we would do well to take the Walrus’s advice and talk of ships. We need to find ways to have more conversation about the ship that now carries us, the ark of life alone in the waters of deep space. And as people of faith, we should be particularly concerned about this ship’s carrying capacity, for it is indeed our

vocation, like Noah's, to help ferry a precious cargo to a place of safety where waters recede and life begins again.

As people of faith, we also need God's sign of how we get from here to there, how we sail from unsustainability to sustainability. The rainbow that appeared to Noah has ecological significance. The scripture reads that "all flesh", humankind and animal, had somehow been involved in doing violence to the earth which caused their self-destruction. Now "all flesh", human and animal, also become partners in the covenant of re-creation that God makes not only with humans, but with every living creature on earth after the flood. We are all part of the new rainbow community, one which stresses interdependence and balance. (Gen. 9:10,12,15,16,17).

Sometimes, we forget that the rainbow reminds us of our partnership with other living creatures. As the poet Mary Oliver says, "We are all one family but we love ourselves best." (*Oliver, "Clamming", Dream Work, New York: Atlantic, 1986*).

Our ship might be the one pictured on the World Council of Churches logo. Its name is *oikoumene*, the Greek word for "household", and the root of our word, "ecumenical". If our ark is the interdependent household of all living beings sailing through the empty reaches of space, then we need to figure out what should be done to keep that little ark sailing in a sustainable way. We all know in our heads that current practices and policies are unsustainable. The world will become increasingly polluted and overpopulated, species will continue to rapidly become extinct, the quality of life for all creatures will go down. We know this in our heads, and we feel the need to do something about it, but our hearts are often not quite there yet. What matters most are actions, not words, but we can feel a world weariness, a paralyzing sadness when looking at the immensity of the task at hand.

In this season of Pentecost, this post-Easter liturgical time when we have lifted up symbols of resurrection, wind, and water, we need to add the rainbow to our signs of hope. As Rasmussen says, "World-weariness is combated by a surprising force found amidst earth and its distress. Creation carries its own hidden powers. It supports the confidence... that a steadfast order exists that bends in the direction of life and gives it meaning." (Rasmussen, p. 352).

When we are feeling paralyzed and saddened by the flood waters around our fragile ark, then we can look to the surprising powers of resurrection that bend in the direction of life, powers that are carried in creation itself, like tiny green shoots that break through slabs of concrete. Dorothy Solle says she believes in resurrection because it has already happened. (*Solle, "Faith Theology and Liberation", Christianity and Crisis 36, no. 10, June 7, 1976, 141.*) Stories of resurrection and renewal, stories of arks finding solid ground, stories of starting again, of "life defending itself against the death of life", these are stories that need to be told. Rasmussen says these are tales of spiritual power, and he quotes Joe Wood who says, "The heart, after all, is raised on a mess of stories. Then it writes its own." (*Rasmussen, p. 352*).

We need to raise our hearts on a mess of stories, looking around us to see what some sailors are doing to protect the life inside the ark, how they are preserving what is precious and life-giving.

I look, for example, to the story of the Deccan Development Society of Andhra Pradesh, India. The Society organizes communities of women in villages that work toward gender equity, establish credit programs, cultivate medicinal herbs, plant trees, and incorporate organic gardening techniques and multiple cropping into traditional agricultural practices. (*Aaron Sachs, Eco-Justice: Linking Human Rights and the Environment (Washington, DC: Worldwatch Institute: 1995, p. 31-33)*).

In Denmark, there is the story of a coal-fired power plant, an oil refinery, a pharmaceutical company, a sheetrock plant, a fish farm, greenhouses, local farms and other enterprises, who all discovered mutually beneficial ways to trade waste. Waste heat from the power plant goes in the form of steam to the refinery and

the pharmaceutical company. The steam also provides heat to greenhouses, a fish farm and town residents. The refinery in turn produces surplus gas which is sold to the sheetrock factory. The pharmaceutical company pumps nitrogen-rich waste slurry to local farmers who use it as fertilizer. So the Danes have set up an ingenious closed system in which waste from one business becomes industrial “food” for another. They offer a great example of how life can be harmonious and sustainable on the world ark. (*Rasmussen, p. 322-323*).

We raise our hearts on a mess of stories, and there are stories everywhere. I look at the work of Binkley’s own Frances Seymour, Bob and Pearl’s daughter, and Director General of the Center for International Forestry Research, a global nongovernmental organization based in Indonesia. Frances and the others at the Center, or CIFOR, work to protect both the world’s tropical forests and also the people who depend on them.

And, I also think about PROCREL, the Peruvian conservation group in the Amazon where my daughter is working this year. With rainforest destruction always on her mind, Jessica had a quick response when I was chatting online with her last night and told her my sermon topic was the world as an ark. She quickly typed back, “Yes, and we are ‘harvesting’ the wood off the bottom floor of the ark to make fires for ourselves meanwhile causing our ship to sink!”

She told me recently of another boat story, one which I will use as an ending to this sermon about arks and ships. A couple of weeks ago, Jessica was on what she calls a “fast boat”, traveling down the Amazon from the city of Iquitos to one of the rural villages downstream. The Amazon is like a super-highway in a world where roads are poor or nonexistent and transportation is done most efficiently by water. And as is the case on other highways, the slow are most vulnerable to accidents on the river.

Jessica told us of coming upon a family in a dugout canoe whose canoe had been swamped by the wake of a large boat filled with tourists that had passed them without slowing down or giving them a respectful distance. As Jessica’s boat approached, she could see a man and woman clinging to the canoe, the woman crying hysterically, until they found their daughter, a little girl, clinging to a tree downstream. All of the goods they had been taking to market to sell were lost, and the little motor on their boat had also broken off and sunk, a motor that would be very expensive to replace.

Jessica and the crew in their boat helped the family aboard, and then attempted to chase down the boat of tourists who had been responsible. However, the tourists had no interest in helping the family or seeing themselves in any way at fault. They proceeded down the river in their air-conditioned luxury, intentionally insulating themselves from the misery that was the result of their full-steam ahead, use and abuse, bull-dozer mentality. Their ship was no ark. It destroyed, rather than preserved, what was most precious.

I am struck by those contrasting images: an overturned dugout canoe in the wake of an expensive ship of fools. I wonder about human nature and the ark of life, the boat that we all travel on together. God’s rainbow is for everyone, for all living creatures. We must not forget.

As we sail on together, may we treat each other with grace, keeping safe all that is life-giving and beautiful. May we tell each other a mess of stories that move our hearts to action. And when we are sad and world-weary, may we remember that the powers of creation bend in the direction of life. We can believe in resurrection.

AMEN.