

“Beyond the Ark: What the Story of Noah and the Flood Can Teach Us Today”

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Based upon Genesis 6-9:13

The story of Noah’s Ark is having a moment. Have you noticed? It’s always been a popular story in American culture among the religious and non-religious alike, inspiring everything from children’s toys, to home decor, to Irish pub sing-a-longs. But in the last few years especially, the ark seems to be popping up in unexpected places too. In 2012, a man in the Netherlands made the news after he was inspired by a nightmare about a flood to build a huge ark in his neighborhood.¹ His ark isn’t seaworthy, but it serves well now as a zoo. Then in 2014, Russell Crow took to the big screen to play a less-than-saintlike Noah in the epic Darren Aronofsky film by the same name, which most Christians hated but many Jews loved.² Then in May, THE WASHINGTON POST reported that a man named Ken Ham has built a biblical-scale boat in Williamstown, Kentucky.³ It took 700 workers seven years and \$120 million dollars to build Ham’s dream, a creationist museum called “Ark Encounter,” advertised as a fun and educational biblical experience for the whole family. For \$40 for adults and \$28 for kids, you can tour Ham’s ark, which is bigger than a football field and taller than a four-story building. After an animatronic talking Noah invites you aboard, you can tour stalls filled with artificial animals, including dinosaurs, which Ham says Noah most assuredly included on the ark. The museum also includes a Tower of Babel, an amusement park ride through the 10 plagues of Egypt, and more. “Why not build an attraction that will draw people in like Disneyland or the Smithsonian?” Ham mused in the article.⁴

Now I am all in favor of sharing the Gospel in creative and contemporary ways. It is part of our calling as disciples to do so. But as a pastor, former lawyer, and science-devotee, I still would love to give Ham at least a half a dozen reasons why not to do what he is doing. Since I cannot speak to him, however, I’m going to speak to you instead. The story of Noah’s Ark is as good a place as any to start a summer series on biblical stories that we all should know, and notwithstanding the fact that I believe Ham’s project is problematic on multiple levels, I also believe that we all should know the story of the flood that is recorded in *Genesis* chapters 6 through 9. But if we are going to remember and learn from the story, then I think we must do so as the post-modern, post-Enlightenment Presbyterians that we are. There is no need to reject all that we know about science, history, and Biblical exegesis in order to appreciate the story’s lessons, and

¹ See “Man builds real-life Noah’s Ark in Netherlands” video news report, TODAY SHOW, at <http://www.today.com/video/today/54805259>

² See e.g. Gershom, Yonassan, “Aronofsky’s ‘Noah’: A modern Jewish midrash”, blog, Notes from a Jewish Thoreau, posted Aug. 12, 2014, retrieved June 5, 2017 from <http://rooster613.blogspot.com/2014/08/aronofskys-noah-modern-jewish-midrash/>; and Greydanus, Steven D., “The ‘Noah’ Movie Controversies: Questions and Answers: The Register’s film critic offers perspective on the arguments and allegations around the new movie about the story of the flood”, NATIONAL CATHOLIC REGISTER, posted Mar. 27, 2014, retrieved June 5, 2017 from <http://www.ncregister.com/site/print/40816>.

³ Heller, Karen, “A giant ark is just the start. These creationists have a bigger plan for recruiting new believers,” THE WASHINGTON POST, Style Section, May 24, 2017, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/a-giant-ark-is-just-the-start-these-creationists-have-a-bigger-plan-for-recruiting-new-believers/2017/05/24/b497bd14-2920-11e7-be51-b3fc6ff7faee_story.html?utm_term=.5f4d775ec61f

⁴ *Ibid* at p. 2 of online version. See also <https://creationmuseum.org>.

any attraction which suggests that doing so is necessary to embrace the truth, is not really sharing the Gospel. The Holy Spirit is more than able to teach us the Gospel in a way that speaks to modern understandings; we just celebrated that truth on Pentecost. Moreover, as I'll explain in a few minutes, when it comes to the Noah story, knowing what we do about the state of the world today only makes the story more powerful.

So let's start with what we know. For most of us, the story of Noah's Ark is a story we first learned as children, either from a toy filled with animals like one of the ones here in the chancel or from the catchy camp song "The Lord said to Noah, there's gonna be a floody-floody." Children enjoy thinking about all the animals that might have gone marching two-by-two into the ark and painting the rainbow which proclaimed God's love in the end of the story. These are appropriate ways for them to begin to know the story. But Noah's story is not really a children's story if you think about it. The Bible says that God got so mad about the wickedness of humankind that God destroyed all but a family's worth of humanity and 99% of all the creatures on earth in a massive flood. Gee, nothing says family-friendly amusement park like the story of an old man who had to be mocked for seventy years while he built a boat in the desert, endure an apocalypse in which humanity was all but destroyed, process survivor's guilt and questions about God while caring for hundreds of thousands of captive animals, and then try to repopulate the human species from the top of a mountain at age 601! It's kind of like the pre-Disney, original Grimm brothers' version of Cinderella, in which one of the ugly step sisters cuts off her toes to be able to wedge her foot in the glass slipper, and the prince only recognizes that he's picked the wrong girl because her shoes fill up with blood. The story of Noah and the flood is not a cute children's story. It has been sanitized to be cute. But it is really a scary story, a cautionary tale primarily targeted to adults.

The flood story is also a story which exists in a variety of forms outside of the Bible and across cultures. Thus scholars have had a fun time comparing the *Genesis* version to the Epic of Gilgamesh, an ancient Mesopotamian myth that was well-known in Babylon in the 6th Century B.C.E., when the Jews were exiled there and writing down the first eleven "pre-history" chapters of *Genesis*. Scholars have also compared the Noah story to the Greek myth of Deucalion, the Australian Aborigine myth of the flood and the great frog Tiddalick, and many others. The idea that there was a cataclysmic flood which gave birth in some way to a hero and a fresh new beginning for the world is so ubiquitous that Carl Jung considered it a universal archetype, part of the collective unconscious of the human species.⁵ Jung could not say whether the archetype was grounded in the ancient memory of an actual flood that happened, or if it was born out an attempt to explain the presence of shells on mountain tops before plate tectonics were understood, or if the human survival instinct somehow hardwired us all to fear water.

The ubiquity of the image points to the reality of the event for many Christians, including Creationists. But archeologists and geologists have never been able to find evidence of a

⁵ See "The Flood: Archetypes and Archetypal Settings in World Literature", Power Point presentation, teachers.summersd.org/shs/msorg/documents/download/the_flood.ppt?id=54342

worldwide flood. This does not mean that it did not happen. But it does make it less likely that it happened exactly like *Genesis* says it did. Scientists also say that it would not have been feasible for a five hundred year old man to find 400,000 trees in the desert, spend 70 years building a boat larger than a football field, and fit one of every species of creature on the boat, (let alone seven pairs plus food). So although it is possible that a number of regional floods inspired all the stories, we are still left with the reality that the flood story in *Genesis* is neither an historical account in the way we understand that term today, nor a scientific record of an actual, global disaster.

But that is OK because as I have said before, especially when it comes to the first eleven chapters of *Genesis*, the authors were not trying to write history or science. They were not biblical literalists at all back then and would have been bewildered and probably alarmed by how people today take the texts that way. The Jews, who first passed down the Noah story through oral tradition, then wrote it down during the Divided Kingdom period, and then edited two different versions of the story together during the Exile, did so because they believed that stories are good ways to convey and know truth. These are theology lessons, stories which share important truths that the Jews had learned by the time of the exile about God, humankind, Creation, and how they all are supposed to fit together.

When we recognize this, then instead of having to spend all our time trying to figure out where Noah got his gopher wood or how big a cubit was, with the help of the Spirit we can spend our time discovering what our ancestors in the faith were trying to warn us about with this story. There are important features of the Noah story which make it distinct from all of the other flood stories of other cultures, so even if the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh gave the Jews the idea for the story, they changed it substantially in order to teach us about our God, Yahweh.

The first distinctive feature of the *Genesis* version of the story is that human wickedness caused the flood. This isn't a story about a fickle god, a quirky giant frog, or a storybook hero who sets out trying to become immortal. It is a story about the morality of human civilization, or rather, the lack thereof. In the beginning chapters of *Genesis*, God has a dream for humankind, a dream of a world of peace, beauty, and abundance in which human beings live in a close, loving relationship with God and the rest of Creation. But Adam and Eve have their own plans, eat the forbidden fruit, and the dream begins to crack almost as soon as it began. Then Cain kills Abel, and it cracks some more. By the time we get to the Noah story, Cain's way of violence has become humanity's way, not God's ways of peace. Everyone is wicked except for Noah and his family. They are the most righteous "for their generation," (but according to Jewish tradition, that wasn't saying much.) God feels so frustrated by their rejection of the divine way that God is ready for a do-over. "This prototype clearly doesn't work right," God basically says. "I've had enough of this corrupted version. I'm going to start over."

Even though we live post-Resurrection, and therefore celebrate that God forgives our sins in Christ, we still need the warning about human sinfulness that is implicit in this text because it reminds us of the power of human sinfulness to destroy what God gives us. The Jews learned this

the hard way through the Babylonian exile. God had given them the Promised Land but they blew it. They became greedy and self-absorbed, which made them inequitable in the way they used resources, which led to injustice and then to violence.

Humanity's inclination toward destructiveness is not limited to the destruction of political and economic systems or nations however. As the Noah story illustrates, human sinfulness can lead to the destruction of animals, forests, flowers, and more. This is something to keep in mind as debate about climate change continues at the same time that the 6th Great Extinction of living creatures also continues, a mass extinction primarily caused by humankind. The Bible, science, and history all agree that human sinfulness can cause cataclysmic damage to our world. Are we working hard enough to preserve what is good in us and in our world? I, for one, don't think so.

While we are thinking about Creation and the animals in this story, it is worth noting another interesting and unique feature of this story, which is how specific the text is about the animals. It's not clear how many animals Noah saved because one version of the story says the animals came two-by-two, and another says Noah gathered seven pairs of each species. But the story does clearly, and anachronistically state that Noah included both clean and unclean animals on the ark. Clean and unclean had not been defined when Noah lived because *Genesis* says he lived ages before God gave the law to Moses. This tells us that centuries later, when someone wrote down the story about God rebooting the world, he felt that it was important to add that God chose to save all creatures, not just the creatures that could serve humankind as food. In other words, Creation's purpose is not simply to meet humanity's needs. Clean and unclean mingled together in the ark because all of the animals were valuable to God.

We may not care any longer about whether the food we eat is clean or unclean. But we do still make distinctions between the animals we are willing to spend money on and protect, like cats and dogs, and the animals that we don't care about or care to protect. Why are squirrels cute and rats horrible? Why are eagles majestic and turkey vultures creepy? Naked mole rats may have the potential to teach us how to cure cancer, and turkey vultures rid our world of waste laden with horrible bacteria every day. But even if they did not help us, the point is that all creatures are valuable to God. God made us all, and made us interconnected whether we like it or not. So as we care for Creation, we must not do so in selective, selfish fashion. The Noah story affirms that we should love and care for all God's creatures and all of Creation too.

The last and most important distinctive feature of the story, which benefits both animals and human beings, is the covenant God makes at the end. After the flood, God unilaterally and unconditionally covenants with Noah's family and with all living things on earth that God will never destroy them again by flood. No matter how out of line humanity gets, and it doesn't really take long—the Tower of Babel story follows this one—God promises not to wash us all away. The rainbow is a sign of God's covenant promise. “I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.” We know that God made other covenant promises with subsequent generations of humanity, with Abraham, Moses, and David, and with all of us through Christ, and

we celebrate in baptism how God cleanses us now in a redemptive, non-destructive way. Noah's story marks the moment when God's strategy, if not God's heart changed. Before Noah, God's reacted to human sinfulness with punishment. After Noah, God accepts the imperfection of human beings and opts to parent by leading us into a better way, rather than punishing us or replacing us again and again like last year's technology. Whether God really changed at some point early in humanity's relationship with God, or only the Jews' understanding of God changed, we can't know. But it is a critical lesson for us all to retain regardless.

Even though the God in the beginning of the Noah story seems unrecognizable to us because God is wrathful and destructive instead of merciful like Christ, the lesson of the flood is not that discipleship is about appeasing a mean God. It is that God still has a dream for us and is going to stick with us for as long as it takes for that dream to come true. If it takes a long time, it won't be because of God's wrath, it will be because of our own. As long as we choose wickedness instead of righteousness, as long as we choose destructiveness instead of preservation, we are endangering ourselves. There could not be a timelier message. But it is a message that will be lost if all we do is focus on the ark. Too bad no one is building a climate change museum, or giant human heart that you can tour, which compares chambers filled with images of human greed, malice, and pollution with chambers filled with images of human generosity, love, and conservation.

Years ago, Rabbi Joshua of Kutna pointed out that the rainbow in the Noah story was a half circle. He assumed that meant we have the power to do only half of what we wish in the world, that our free will was limited. But Rabbi David Wolpe has argued that perhaps the half circle represents something else. Perhaps it represents God's promise to us—"I will not destroy you." The other half of the circle is supposed to be our promise to God—"We will not destroy ourselves."⁶ I am not sure we all have truly made this promise yet. But I hope and pray that we will, for God's sake, our sake, and the sake of all living things on earth. Amen.

⁶ "2014: Year of the Ark", Homiletics Online, Jan. 12, 2014, retrieved from <https://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber> citing Wolpe, David, "Off the Pulpit" e-newsletter, Nov. 2005, http://sinaitemple.org/learning_with_the_rabbis/writings/2005/111805HalfARainbow.pdf. Retrieved July 30, 2013.