

## The Ark—a Type of Stewardship

Genesis 6: 9-22, 7: 24, 8: 14-19

What do you know about the story of Noah's ark? If you read the narrative in chapters six through eight of Genesis, you know that it's a pretty long story. The beginning of Genesis: 6, from the Message translation, sets the scene pretty clearly:

This is the story of Noah: Noah was a good man, a man of integrity in his community. Noah walked with God. Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

As far as God was concerned, the Earth had become a sewer; there was violence everywhere. God took one look and saw how bad it was, everyone corrupt and corrupting—life itself corrupt to the core. 13 God said to Noah, "It's all over. It's the end of the human race. The violence is everywhere; I'm making a clean sweep. Build yourself a ship."

The rest, as they say, is history – or possibly not history. The famed flood in the story of Noah was certainly a disaster of biblical proportions. The known world was destroyed including all human life except Noah, his wife, their three sons, and their wives. Most people seem to take one of three perspectives regarding this story. Some believe that it is historical reality and that the remains of the ark may still rest on Mt. Ararat in modern Turkey. Others believe this is a composite historical reality reflecting the memory of several cataclysmic floods that devastated several different civilizations – and that these strands of remembered history have been combined in the biblical story of Noah's Ark. Finally, some totally doubt the historicity and see this as a mythic story of fall and redemption. There are several such stories in the first eleven chapters of Genesis.

What you think about the story depends totally on how you perceive the nature of God and God's interaction with life on earth. I suggest that it does not matter what you think of the story – how historical or how mythical it may be. It certainly describes a God who judges and punishes. It also describes a God who is merciful and offers hope. It describes a relationship between God and Noah that is intimate, honest, and poignant. Ultimately, it is a story of death, new birth, and God's covenant promise to Noah never again to destroy the world by flood.

What can you tell me about the ark? What is an ark? Maybe you remember how long it was or how tall. May you remember the kind of wood used in its construction or how it was made waterproof. Did it have a roof? How many windows? How many doors? Did it have a means of propulsion? Did it include a mechanism for steering? What was the purpose of Noah's ark?

Pretty much all of you are familiar with the story of Noah's Ark. With a little research, you are probably pretty familiar with information about the ark itself. With all the symbolism present in this narrative, it is the Ark itself that prompts my attention. It was the ship that kept Noah, his families, and all the animals afloat and alive that I want to highlight.

Above all, the ark is a symbol. You might even say it is an ark-a-ty-e. A few years ago, I used the image of an ark in a sermon to describe the nature of this congregation – Crossroads Church – in the early days of its existence. Crossroads formed out of a church split when a large number of people walked out of a contentious business meeting and formed a new church. This new church functioned much like the legendary ark. It served as a vehicle for people to stay afloat in the midst of a flood. It kept a lot of people from, in effect, *drowning* in the storm of strong feelings after the split. It gave people who didn't necessarily know where to go or what to do, a place to be – a community of which to be a part.

The story of Noah and the ark is problematic in many ways, not the least of which is the presumption of a God who would cause such widespread destruction. It is a powerful story without a clear and simple moral. The story is filled with meaningful symbolism. The ark is an image symbolizing God's providence toward Noah and his family.

There are some features of an ark that are appropriate to survive a flood, but which make an ark an impractical vessel for the long term. Arks just float. They go with the flow of the flood without any mode of propulsion – no motors, sails, or even oars on an ark! Also, arks don't have rudders. You can't steer them – only drift with the shifting tides until, one day, you run aground. Once the flood recedes and the ground dries out, arks aren't much good. You just have to leave the ark and find another means of transportation.

Ten years ago the ark symbolized Crossroads Church. A lot of people came on board. As the years have passed, some of them have gotten off and resumed their journey in a different direction. Others have come to join us, but not to board an ark. So, if this congregation is no longer an ark, what image reflects how we are living now? One very effective way to find that image is to ask those who have joined with us recently what they have seen.

What do we want to be? Where do we want to go? What do we want to do? Of course, the image of what kind of vessel we want to be is figurative language. Crossroads Church is moving forward and needs to keep moving forward. We need to realize the potential this congregation has to effect the world.

God calls us to be a solid partner with the Spirit in the transformation of the world according to the values and teachings of Jesus. We have to decide if we will step up to the call. Though the question can often seem self-serving and *me oriented*, the most challenging and important question we have to answer from God is “what do we really want?” Seeking God's will is not a matter of trying to discover some divine secret about what we are supposed to do with our lives. That approach too easily lends itself to conveying responsibility for our lives to God rather than accepting the mantle of responsibility ourselves.

I want to recommend to you the kind of weird and unorthodox idea that God actually seeks to know from each of us what we want? This is much more than God being polite

or pandering. This is the way to move forward with life. As we grow in relationship with the Holy in our lives, the direction of our desires, our wants, grows more in sync with who God is. Our wants emerge and become clear in our relationship with God. At the same time, they are our wants and we need to own them as such.

The book of Job reaches its climax when God finally speaks to Job telling him to stand up like a man, to stand up and be a man. Then God describes all the wonders of creation, all pointing back to the greatest feat of God's creation – the human being. The implication is that Job needed to stand up and be fully human – not submissive to the challenges of life. How easily we can be less than fully human and blame it on God's will. It is up to us to stand up and determine what we really want. Once we are able to answer that question, all other questions become much clearer.

What I see this congregation deciding to be – how I see it deciding to be church – is in faithful expression of the free church Christian tradition. This means we choose to hold fast to historic Baptist and other free-church distinctives. There is autonomy of the local congregation. Regardless of denominational and other ecclesiological connections Crossroads Church makes, we retain the right and responsibility to determine our own beliefs, our own direction, and our own community life. There is the priesthood of believers in which we each represent the face of Jesus to each other. There is no need of a priestly intercessor. Each one of you interprets God to me and we do this for each other. There are the twin ideas of soul liberty and soul competency by which the individual person is free, responsible, and capable when it comes to interpreting scripture and determining belief. The community of faith exists to provide support and accountability, but not to undermine that basic freedom of the individual.

I see Crossroads determined to keep moving in the direction that the Apostle Paul pointed when he wrote the Galatian Christians and told them: “For freedom Christ has made us free.” (Galatians 5:1) The invitation on this day that Crossroads members have renewed their commitment to membership is for more to join with us on the journey this congregation is making. There was a time the ark was drifting without clear direction, but this congregation is no longer drifting or seeking safety first. We are on a mission to change the world by transforming people in partnership with the Holy Spirit. Anyone who is seeking to clarify “what do I really want?” and all who seek to part of a mission to change the world into a place of God's love, justice, and peace, are welcome to come aboard!

O God our dance,  
in whom we live and move and have our being;  
so direct our strength  
and inspire our weakness  
that we may enter with power  
into the movement of your whole creation,  
through our partner Jesus Christ. Amen.  
(Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*)

