

DON'T MISS THE BOAT

SHERARD EDINGTON

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

You don't have to be a biblical scholar to know the story of Noah's ark—how God sent a great flood across the earth and how Noah build the massive ark to house all the animals until dry land reappeared. It is a story that raises a lot of questions—questions that I would like to pose to you now. Here's they are:

Q: How did Noah illuminate the ark?

A: He used flood lights.

Q: Who was Noah's wife?

A: Joan of Ark.

Q: Do you know what state is mentioned in this story?

A: Arkansas [Noah looked out of the "ark and saw".]

Q: Why didn't Noah do much fishing?

A: He only had two worms.

Q: According to the modern 5-year old, how many of each animal boarded the ark?

A: One mail and one e-mail.

Q: Was Noah the first one out of the ark?

A: No, he came fourth out of the ark.

Q: Where was Noah when the lights went out?

A: In d'ark.

Kidding aside, the story of the flood is a powerful part of our scripture as well as our culture. It easily captures our imaginations. But we tend to forget just how early this story appears in our Bible. It is essentially the fourth story in Genesis. The first story tells of creation. The second is the story of the garden where sin makes its inaugural appearance giving people the knowledge of *good and evil*. In the third story, this knowledge of evil metastasizes with the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. So we have creation, sin, and murder, and then we read that *The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth... And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.'*

As God surveyed the earth, God saw that the earth was consumed in corruption and violence. Realizing that the creation experiment was hopelessly defective God decides to wipe the slate clean and start over. God's plan is to flood the earth and destroy all flesh.

There was, however, one person who stood out from all the wickedness, and that was Noah. Noah is described as being *righteous* and *blameless*. So God approaches Noah and explains the plan to *make an end of all flesh*. God instructs Noah to build an ark. God tells Noah exactly how to build this vessel—the materials to use, the design, the dimensions. Noah is to fill the ark with two of each kind of all living things—male and female—birds, animals, and creeping things. Load the ark with food and put your family on the ark as well, God says to Noah.

Noah does as God commands and the earth is covered with water for 150 days. (Another place in the Bible says that the rains lasted 40 days.) Finally, God sends a wind to dry up the water. Then God says to Noah, *Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.* And Noah obeyed.

As I said, this is a powerful story that for thousands of years has captured the imagination of all who have heard it. And there is a great deal we can learn from this story. In fact, some years back, someone created a list titled “All I Really Need to Know About Life, I Learned from Noah's Ark.” The list includes such nuggets of wisdom as:

- Don't miss the boat.
- Plan ahead—it wasn't raining when Noah built the ark.
- Stay fit—when you're 600 years old someone might ask you to do something really big.
- When you're stressed, float awhile.
- No matter what the storm, when God is with you, there's a rainbow waiting.

Kids are probably more familiar with the story of the ark than us adults. It's a staple of the VBS repertoire with the wooden cruise ship filled with friendly animals, plus the rain, and the rainbow. But even kids can spot the logical holes in the story. How long did it take to build a boat that large? Could just Noah and his family manage it themselves? They couldn't really ask the neighbors to help and then lock them out when the flood came. How did the kangaroos get to Noah from Australia? Did the flood even cover Mt. Everest? A fact fascinated child can tell you that Mt. Everest is 29,000 feet high, and that is 5.5 miles. Was the earth covered in water 5.5 miles deep? Where did the all the water come from? Where did it go? These are all good questions.

Setting the facts aside, the kids (and adults) are always bothered by the most troubling question of all—why did God want to kill all the people of the world? Were they really that evil? Does God want to kill us, too?

As adults, we feel freer to question the plausibility of the flood story. We can ask, Did the story of Noah really happen like we read in the Bible?

I'm not going to answer that today. The value of the flood story does not rest with whether or not a 600-year-old man was instructed by God to build a barge big enough to hold two of all the species of animals for close to a year as the earth was flooded as punishment to a sinful people. If you do choose to insist that the story is factual then you're going to spend a lot of effort trying to make the details of the story resonate with the laws of nature.

But people do. Proving the flood is a minor industry. Folk have developed amazingly complex theories of the location of Mt. Ararat, the construction of the ark, the way Noah was able to house and feed the animals, etc. They have called into question any science that disagrees with their findings such as the age of the universe, carbon dating, the age of fossils, etc. At that replica ark up in Kentucky they display male and female dinosaurs aboard the ark next to the zebras and porcupines.

The story of the ark is part of scripture for a reason.

As I have pondered this story this week, I've seen two significant lessons emerge. The first lesson has to do with God's love for us. I know it is difficult to see, but it is there. In the middle of our reading, God makes this promise to Noah, *I shall establish my covenant with you*. This is the first time the word covenant is used in scripture. God's covenant is with Noah and his family—to save a remnant of the people. God doesn't intend to eradicate all flesh, but to wash away the corruption and violence that plagues the creation. To do so, God establishes this covenant with Noah and his family. In this covenant God promises not to flood the earth again. God also promises that Noah and his descendants will *be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth*. (9:1). God will further develop this covenant with Abraham and Sarah and then finalize it in Christ. The idea of a covenant is critical in our relation with our God. God cares for us so much that God is willing to enter into a contract with us.

The flood was not a result of God's anger; the flood was a result of God's grief. As I read earlier, God was grieved at the deplorable state of creation; it brought God sadness. This grief originates from God's love. After the flood, God promises never to do that again.

When our daughter was young and needed disciplining, we always made sure that after the time-out or whatever, we would tell her that we loved her. We wanted

her to know that the discipline did not come from anger but from compassion. What we learn from the flood and the covenant is how much God loves us.

A scripture assures us, God is *merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness* (Exodus 34:6).

The first lesson from the flood is that God loves us. The second lesson is more specific to us as individuals of faith. The second lesson begins with the question, "Why did God choose Noah?" The answer is simple and is provided at the start of our reading. *Noah was a righteous man. He was blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God.*

When God looked over the earth, all he saw was corruption and violence. Yet one person stood out from the rest—Noah. Noah had three things going in his favor. First, Noah was *righteous*. He understood who he was in relation to God. He had a right relation with the Lord. Noah did not see himself as equal to or better than God. He honored God.

Second, Noah was *blameless in his generation*. In other words, among the people of the earth, Noah was a good person. He was not corrupt or violent.

Third, and most significantly, Noah *walked with God*. When we want to talk to someone, sometimes we'll say, let's go for a walk. When we walk with someone we have to match their stride or we will get too far ahead or lag behind. When we walk with someone we have to be attentive to their presence. We have to watch; we have to listen. Noah listened. Noah listened to God when God spoke. Noah was able to listen because he was in relation with God. He was able to listen because he was blameless; he had nothing to hide from God. Noah was able to listen because he walked with God. And God was able to talk to Noah because Noah knew how to walk with and listen to God.

Have you ever known someone who didn't listen? It's not that they ignored you, it is just that they were so absorbed in their own lives that they were unable to hear anyone else. You may try to tell this person something about your life and immediately they start to tell you about their life. They don't listen. They are not walking on the same path with you. They are somewhere else.

Noah walked with God, so when God spoke Noah was receptive. The first lesson from this story is that God loves us; the second is that we should be like Noah and actively listen to God. We must open our lives and learn to walk with the Lord.

Too many of us don't listen to God. We need to train ourselves always to be attentive to God's word. God may not call us to build an ark but God calls us to do other wonderful things. But we won't know what they are if we don't listen. If we don't listen then we just might miss the boat. Amen.