



Catalog No. 1587

Genesis 6:9-22

25th Message

Bernard Bell

August 15, 2010

NOAH AND HIS ARK

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

One of the most popular images drawn from the Bible is that of Noah and his ark. It is a popular motif in society, both Christian and secular, and is used for a wide range of activities:

1. Noah's ark is a favorite image for children. It's a common name for pre-schools and day care. We have our own Noah's Place, the day care for our women's Bible studies on Wednesday mornings. Most kids, somewhere along the way, learn the *Arky Arky Song*: "the animals, the animals, they come in by twosies, twosies...the elephants and the kangaroosies, roosies."

2. Noah's Ark is a common name for many animal rescue shelters, both for household pets such as cats and dogs, and for more exotic animals such as lions and tigers and bears, oh my.

3. The Millennium Seed Bank operated by Kew Gardens, London, and the Svalbard Global Seed Vault on the Norwegian island of Spitzbergen are each referred to as a Noah's Ark for seeds, a place for keeping alive the planet's biodiversity in the midst of ever-increasing destruction.

4. The motif is used for water sports in general. In Colorado there's a white water rafting outfit called Noah's Ark. Noah's Ark Waterpark in Wisconsin is America's largest.

Some people think that Noah's ark still exists. Expeditions are regularly mounted to Mount Ararat in Turkey, close to the border with Armenia and Iran. Periodically there are reports that the ark has been found in the ice high up on the mountain. But they're looking in the wrong place: we know that the ark is here in the Santa Cruz Mountains, just over the hill at Redwood Christian Park!

The image of Noah's Ark captures the public imagination. In our journey through the early chapters of Genesis, our story of origins, we come to the original account which has generated this imagery.

This is the account of Noah and his family. (Gen 6:9a TNIV)

This is the third of the five accounts of Genesis I-II. It runs through the end of chapter 9. Noah's account comprises two stories: the Flood Narrative (6:9-9:17) and Noah the vintner (9:18-27). The story of the Flood is covered in great detail: more than three chapters spanning only a year.

Introduction (6:9-12)

The narrative begins with some background information about Noah.

Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God. Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth. (6:9b-10)

To understand the subsequent narrative there are two things we need to know about Noah: his character and that he had three sons. The previous section (6:1-8) had contrasted the Nephilim and Noah. The Nephilim were the mighty men, the men of renown, the heroes to whom the ancient world looked. But Noah found favor in the

eyes of the Lord. Now we are told three things about Noah: he was a righteous man, he was blameless in his generations, and he walked with God.

Noah was a righteous man: this means that he behaved rightly, appropriately in his relationships. He was a blameless man: this doesn't mean he never did anything wrong, but that he acted with integrity, with wholeness. The addition of "in his generations" suggests that he was the only one to do so, not only in his generation, but going further back. Finally, he walked with God. The Hebrew text is quite emphatic here: it was with God that he walked. This suggests that it was not with God that everyone else was walking. Noah was just like Enoch, his great grandfather, who walked with God in both life and death (5:22-24).

How did Noah know to live life this way? Presumably the same way that Abel knew to bring an offering to the Lord, that Shem and his line knew to call on the name of the Lord, that Enoch knew to walk with the Lord. Such behavior is built into the structure of the universe. This is the way humans, created in the image of God, should relate to their God. Any failure to do so is a refusal to acknowledge one's creator and to live life accordingly. Were these people trying to earn their standing with God? No, their behavior flowed out of recognizing their standing. Since it was the appropriate behavior for that relationship it was considered righteous behavior. This is why the Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, why he took Enoch, and why Noah found favor in his eyes.

But not everyone was behaving this way, living his life with reference to God. In his generation Noah was alone. The rest of the world had been living a completely different way, as we're told in the next two verses:

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. (6:11-12)

The verb "corrupt" is used three times in these two verses. The earth was ruined because humanity had ruined itself. God looked out on the world that he had made, which he had seven times pronounced good, and now he saw a ruined earth. He had told the humans, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth" (1:28), but what they had filled the earth with was violence: self-centered behavior motivated by greed, lust, thirst for power; behavior devoid of ethics, of integrity, of righteousness. Humanity had ruined itself and as a result the earth was ruined too.

In our Scripture reading last week (Jer 18:1-10), the Lord told Jeremiah to go down to the potter's house. Here he saw that the pot which the potter was making was ruined—the same word as here. Humanity had ruined itself and the earth. They no longer served the purpose for which God had created them. Therefore God changed his mind about humanity on the earth, as we saw last week. He

would no longer allow the earth and humanity to frustrate the purposes for which he had made them. What will God do?

God's Plan (6:13-21)

Remarkably, God takes Noah into his confidence. In a lengthy speech he unfolds to Noah his plan, alternating twice between what he will do and what Noah is to do:

- a1: God's general plan: destroy the earth and humanity (13)
- b1: Command to Noah: make an ark (14-16)
- a2: God's specific plan: send the Flood, but establish his covenant with Noah (17-20)
- b2: Command to Noah: provision the ark with food (21)

Firstly, God tells Noah his general plan:

So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth." (6:13)

God informs Noah that he will destroy both the earth and humanity because of human sin. His justice is fair: the word translated "destroy" is the same as "corrupt" in vv 11-12. Because humanity has ruined itself and the earth, God will ruin them both.

This is not the only story of divine judgment back in the mists of time. The Mesopotamians had their own flood stories, the most famous being the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, whose ancestor Utnapishtim survived the flood. There are many similarities between these stories and the Biblical account, but also very profound differences. Just as for the creation stories, these differences are far more important than the similarities. In the Mesopotamian stories the gods send a flood because there are too many humans and they are too noisy—like a frat party downstairs that's gotten out of control. The gods' intent is to wipe out all humans, but one of the gods breaks rank and tips off one man, advising him to build a boat. The survival of this one man is thus not the will of the gods. How different is the Genesis account. There is only one God. The problem he finds on earth is not overpopulation nor excessive noise; it is human sin. He tells his plans to Noah, because he looks upon Noah with favor; Noah is in relationship with him, and so he takes Noah into his confidence. Read against the background of the Mesopotamian stories, that simple statement, "So God said to Noah," speaks volumes.

In light of his general plan, God issues a command to Noah:

"So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide and thirty cubits high. Make a roof for it, leaving below the roof an opening one cubit high all around. Put a door in the side of the ark and make lower, middle and upper decks." (6:14-16)

God tells Noah, "Build yourself an ark." What's an ark? Who can forget Bill Cosby's monologue about God and Noah, which became one of his signature routines! God gives Noah a few directions, but this is not a detailed blueprint; we're not told enough to know exactly what the ark looked like. We're further hampered by the fact that several of the words are rare, even unique to these verses; we don't know what some of them mean. No one had built an ark before; no one has built a real one since.

Noah is first given general directions. He is to make for himself an ark of gopher wood. TNIV translates it as cypress, but no one really knows what gopher wood is. "Gopher" is simply a transliteration of

the Hebrew word, which is used only this once. Noah is to make "rooms" in the ark. The word is usually understood as the plural of a word that elsewhere is used only in the singular and always means a bird's nest. Here it is taken to refer to compartments or rooms for the animals, like ancient condominiums. I find it rather comical to picture a hippo sitting on a bird's nest. Furthermore, this doesn't fit the context, sandwiched between two building materials: wood and pitch. So some interpret the word as meaning reeds (the consonants are the same), which fits the context much better. Finally, Noah is to coat the inside and outside with pitch, making a waterproof seal.

Next Noah is given some specific directions: "This is how you are to make it." He is given the dimensions of the ark: 300 cubits long by 50 wide by 30 high. That's 450 feet by 75 by 45. That's huge! 450 feet is the distance from the door of the Fellowship Hall to the back of the parking lot.

Noah is next given four specific directives, but again our understanding is hindered by the obscurity of some words or phrases. He is to make a *zohar* for the ark, but what's a *zohar*? This is another unique word, used only this once. The translations assume either a roof on the one hand, or a window, skylight or hatch on the other. But this word is not used for subsequent references to the window or the roof. Later Noah will open the window to send forth the raven (8:6). He will remove the "covering," which seems to be a roof, so he can look out upon the dried up earth (8:13). Neither of these seems to be the *zohar*. We don't really know what it is. Next Noah is to finish "it" to a cubit, but what is "it"? Is it the roof/window or is it the ark? And how is it to be finished to a cubit? No one really knows, but most assume that Noah is to leave a gap of a cubit (18 inches) below the roof. Thirdly, he is to make a door in the side of the ark. Finally, he is to make the ark with three decks. Why is Noah given these details? Not so we can understand the subsequent narrative: of the four specific features only the doorway seems to be important; the entrance into the ark is a major theme.

Many preachers have made much ado about these features, interpreting them typologically as pointing forward to Christ. The ark is of gopher wood because something living has to die, and because it points forward to another tree. The ark has rooms, places of security and rest, pointing to Jesus who bids all come to him and find rest. The ark is sealed with pitch; the root word for both verb and noun means "cover" and is later used for atonement, as in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when Israel's sins were covered. So, the ark is made waterproof with atonement, pointing to Christ's atonement through which we are "waterproofed" against God's judgment. Augustine noted that the dimensions are those of a man, that is, their proportions are those of an adult man; this points forward to Jesus the second Man, who is our ark of safety. The ark has a skylight, so Noah could only look upwards to God, just as Jesus looked upwards to his Father, whose will he delighted to do. The ark has only one door, pointing to Jesus the Door, who is the only one way of salvation. The three decks suggest the humanity of Jesus: body, soul and spirit. I kid you not! This is a popular line of interpretation, but it's all fanciful. The ark does point forward to Christ, as we'll see next week, but not these individual features.

Artists have used these details to portray the ark; they all assume it's a large boat. Others have gone further, building replicas. Since 1974 a pastor in Maryland has been trying to build a full-size ark to house his church. A full-size ark has been built in Hong Kong. A man in the Netherlands has built a small-scale ark and is now at

work building a full-scale replica. Like the artists, these reconstructions assume that the ark is like a boat.

But there are certain things that the ark lacks. It has neither sail nor rudder. It lacks any means of propulsion and any means of steering. Contrary to modern reconstructions and artists' depictions, the ark is not a boat. It is merely a box. Our English word "ark" is from the Latin *arca*, used in the Vulgate; it means a chest or coffer, a box in which things are kept safe. That Latin word is also used for the ark of the covenant, though it represents a different Hebrew word. In fact, the Hebrew word *tebah* is used for only two things: Noah's ark and Moses's basket. That basket was also made of reeds sealed with pitch (Exod 2:3). Though these two objects are vastly different in size, they are similar in function. Both lack propulsion and steering; they are cast adrift at the mercy of God. Both are watertight containers in which the occupant is preserved alive amidst waters of destruction. Both occupants emerge from their containers to lead people into a new beginning: Noah for all humanity, Moses for God's people Israel.

Here is another contrast with the Mesopotamian flood stories. Utnapishtim built a boat and he hired an oarsman to both propel and steer the boat. But Noah can neither propel nor steer his ark.

Noah has not yet been told why he needs to build such an enormous box for himself. God now tells him his specific plan:

"I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you. You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you. Two of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal and of every kind of creature that moves along the ground will come to you to be kept alive." (6:17-20)

God will do two things. He is about to bring the Flood. This will be no ordinary flood: a unique Hebrew word is used for this. Because no other like event has occurred before or since, it is further described as "waters over the earth." The Septuagint (Greek) translates this as *kataklysmos*, a cataclysm; the Vulgate (Latin) as *diluvium*, from which we get our word deluge. Both words mean a washing away, and hence a massive flood. This Deluge will be the means by which God destroys both the earth and humanity, as he announced in v 13. Again this word "destroy" (6:17, cf. 6:13) is the same as "corrupt" used three times in 6:11-12. The earth and humanity have ruined themselves, so God will ruin them using the waters of the Flood. Now has come the time to destroy the destroyers of the earth. The same judgment is announced in Revelation (11:18). We'll look more closely at the Flood next week.

But what about God's unchanging purposes for the world and for humanity? Those purposes remain, and they will be continued through Noah. The second part of God's plan is that he will establish his covenant with Noah. This doesn't mean that God is going to make a new covenant: a different verb is used for that. No, God is going to continue an existing covenant through Noah. In the beginning he blessed humanity, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth" (1:28), implying a covenant relationship. He will now continue this relationship through Noah, implying that he must keep Noah alive through the waters of destruction.

Now Noah finds out why he is to build the ark. His part in this covenant is simply to enter the ark, together with his family and

representatives of all living creatures, two of each kind, male and female. Though Noah is to bring the animals into the ark, he doesn't have to go out to catch them; they will come to him. They will come and he is to bring them in "to be kept alive," stated twice. This is the purpose of the ark: it is a box in which God's creatures, both humans and animals, are kept alive amidst the waters of judgment.

In light of this, God gives Noah a second command:

"You are to take every kind of food that is to be eaten and store it away as food for you and for them." (6:21)

Noah is to provision the ark with enough food for himself, his family and the animals. That's a lot of food!

Noah's Obedience (6:22)

Finally, we're told Noah's response:

Noah did everything just as God commanded him. (6:22)

In the entire Flood Narrative Noah never speaks a word. He simply acts. Specifically, he does everything God commands him to do. It is surely not accidental that the verb "do" or "make" is used exactly seven times in this passage: five times in God's directions to Noah, and twice in Noah's response. What a vast amount of activity is covered by that statement, "Noah did everything"! We want to know how he did it. But that's not important. What is important is that he "did everything just as God commanded him." This is why we were given details about the ark: so that it could said, "Noah did everything just as God commanded him." He made the ark of wood, reeds and pitch. He made its *zohar* and door, he made its three levels, and he minded the gap.

This obedience will be reinforced three times in the next chapter, that Noah did just as the Lord commanded him (7:5, 9, 16). Such obedience is a vivid illustration of Noah's walk with God. Did he do all this to earn his standing with God? No, he did all this because he was already in relationship with God. It was with God that he walked. He lived his life differently from the rest of the world. While they were sinking into violence he did everything God commanded him.

There is a striking parallel between Noah and Moses. In the Torah (Pentateuch) the tabernacle is the only other structure whose specifications, including dimensions, are given. When he erected the tabernacle, "Moses did everything just as the Lord commanded him" (Exod 40:16). Then he set up the furniture "as the Lord commanded him"—exactly seven times (40:19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 32). Both Noah and Moses lived their lives in faithful obedience to the Lord. They were men of faith.

Our Scripture reading was drawn from the opening verses of the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11.

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. (Heb 11:1-3)

What is faith? It is not some vague, uncertain feeling about something that may or may not be true. It is not wishful thinking. Faith means being sure and certain of things. There are two realms: the seen and the unseen, the visible and the invisible, the "here and now" and the transcendent, the beyond. One realm we see with our eyes, the other we can see only with the eyes of faith. It is relatively easy to

live in the realm of the visible, the realm of the seen. There is no need for faith; one lives merely by sight. What you see is what you get. But that's not the ultimate reality. There is a realm beyond, behind: the realm of the not seen. In the beginning God didn't make the visible world out of visible stuff. There was a time when there was no visible stuff. How do we know this? We understand it by faith, faith in God's word and character. Noah lived his life by faith, paying attention to things not yet seen:

By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith. (Heb 11:7)

Noah was warned about things not yet seen. No one had ever heard of a Flood, let alone seen one. Could anyone imagine the removal of all life from earth? I'm sure all Noah's contemporaries thought that the world would continue on just as ever. They would carry on living life as they had always done. But Noah responded differently. He responded in faith, taking God seriously when he told him of things he had never yet seen. He responded in holy fear: not in abject terror but in reverence. He was reverent because it was with God he was walking. And so he built an ark, even though all his contemporaries must have thought him completely crazy. But he wasn't paying attention to his contemporaries; he was paying attention to God. By his faith he condemned the world. He showed that it was possible to live life differently, to live life in such a way that the Lord looked on him with favor, just as he had looked favorably on Abel. Therefore all his contemporaries were without excuse.

Several times the New Testament uses this contrast between Noah and his contemporaries to warn of the dangers of ignoring the things not yet seen. In his Olivet Discourse, Jesus noted that in the days of Noah people were busy eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, unawares of impending disaster; he warned that the same thing will happen at his return (Matt 24:36-39). All except Noah were busy getting on with their lives in the seen world, paying no attention to the things not yet seen. Peter described Noah as a preacher or herald of righteousness (2 Pet 2:5). His whole lifestyle proclaimed that there was a different way of living life.

I find that many preachers highlight this theme of Noah as a preacher of righteousness, condemning the world. Christians, they say, are to live life differently so as to leave the world without excuse. Our behavior is to be a rebuke to the world. But I am uncomfortable with this emphasis. God does call us to live life differently, to walk with him, to walk to the beat of a different drum. Yes, such behavior will ultimately condemn the world. But in the meantime God has another purpose in our behavior. He wants us to be attractive to the world. Paul writes,

But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? (2 Cor 2:14-16)

Who is equal to such a task? Certainly not us. But Paul goes on to show that our sufficiency is in God (4:7). In Christ we are a new creation (5:17), living life as the new humanity. We are ambassadors for Christ (5:20). Ambassadors are to be attractive. Our lives are to be attractive. How do we be attractive to the world? Not by being like the world, but by being different, radically different. As we walk to the beat of a different drum, like Noah, like Enoch, like Abel, God is at work. People are watching us. Some ignore our behavior, some find it offensive, some find it foolish, but others find it attractive as God opens their eyes.

The major point about this piece of the story of Noah is not to give us detailed information about the ark, but to highlight the lifestyle of Noah. This section opens by noting that Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generations and it was with God that he walked. It closes by showing what that looked like: Noah did everything just as God commanded him. Noah lived life in a completely different manner in his generation, because he walked with God, paying attention to God.

God has called us to himself in Christ and has put his Spirit in us to enable us to live life differently. Such a lifestyle will eventually condemn the world, but in the meantime God will use our behavior to draw the world to himself. May we live in such a way that our lives are a fragrant aroma and that we are attractive ambassadors of Christ.

May the mind of Christ, my Savior,
Live in me from day to day,
By His love and power controlling
All I do and say.

May His beauty rest upon me,
As I seek the lost to win,
And may they forget the channel,
Seeing only Him.

— Kate B. Wilkinson, 1925

© 2010 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino