

Noah Built An Ark Before He Had Water

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Beacon UU Congregation

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In our opening words this morning, the poet Wendell Berry explains that he was born in drought year. Children being born this year, in 2022, all over the world, and especially here in the Southwest, share his origins. Wendell and our grandbabies are not alone. Drought years are ancient, too.

In the Book of Job in the Hebrew Scriptures, we find this question: “Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain? And a way for the thunderbolt to bring rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert which is empty of human life, to make the ground put forth grass?”

Well, this being Hebrew Scripture after all, the answer is fairly obvious – Yahweh, the God of Judaism, makes it rain. In fact, he does that a lot in the Bible and the first very impressive demonstration of this awesome and fearsome power shows up early in Genesis 6 : the story of Noah and his Ark. I grew up with this gem of Jewish myth at Beth Shalom Sunday School and sang camp songs about it on the banks of Lake Erie. (“Oh, the Lord said to Noah there’s gonna be a floody, floody...”)

Yes, God ultimately makes it rain on Noah, his family, and the wicked residents of Sodom and Gomorrah, but he takes his sweet time about it. Yahweh is giving Noah plenty of time to develop faith, sustain hope, learn carpentry, catalog the entire natural world, and craft a very, very big boat. It takes him decades. Yahweh is patiently observing and abiding with his faithful servant.

Noah needs as much time as he can get because he has no idea how an Ark is designed or constructed. He has received no itinerary on how far this vessel will need to travel or for how long. He acts on hope and gratitude for God’s blessings. When you read the passages about the Arks’ construction and if you know anything about boats, you’ll notice that the Ark has no rudder. One can safely assume that God is meant to serve this purpose. Even so, Noah and his brood are still the ones who need to make ready for the flood. So Noah does what makes him look crazy to the villagers– he builds a boat without a drop of water in sight.

He brings a male and female of every species on board, every plant, every variety of seed, and some humans, and he prays. He waits and prepares for water he isn’t thrilled to see pouring from the sky. But he prepares and waits for water that will both destroy and renew. Water that will carry them to the high ground of peace, goodness, and new possibilities.

The Genesis text tells us that God explains the flood to Noah by saying that “the earth is filled with violence.” Noah is an exception. A righteous man, blameless in his age.” So, not perfect, but a better class of people than the sinners next door. Yahweh also makes

the point that “the Earth has been corrupted.” My colleague, the Rev. Ana Levy-Lyons draws an incisive parallel between this ancient myth and our real life predicament in 2022. She writes that “In each, it is human wrongdoing, misuse of natural resources, and interpersonal violence that brings the threat of planetary destruction. In each, this desecration threatens not only the humans who precipitate it, but all living creatures. And, in each, it is only through the resolve of imperfect, faithful people willing to take responsibility and action, even if they are not the guilty ones.”

An editorial in the Jerusalem Post asks us to consider this: “In our daily lives, the small decisions we make may seem insignificant, but they add up and they support supply chains and systems that make us complicit in resource exhaustion, carbon overloading, ocean acidification, pollution, drought, and so much more. The signs are clear. The science is proven.”

Now, I’m not quite sure what constitutes a cubit and I have no idea where to find a supply of seasoned gopher wood or a pair of gazelles, a raven, or a messenger dove, but I’m going to ask that we follow Noah’s example and build ourselves an ark on faith. The planks will be hewn by self-reflection, conviction, gratitude and optimism. You see, we have to take our T squares and our saws and build these arks on the *inside* before setting to work on crafting the vessels that will carry us once water arrives.

This means focusing on essence qualities like kindness and character rather than form qualities like outer beauty and wealth. It means striving to develop beloved-ness with ourselves first and knowing that if we don’t value ourselves, love and forgive and cultivate compassionate with ourselves, the arks we build to carry us, our relationships, and this congregation will be full of leaks no matter how sturdy they appear.

But oh, what avoiders we can be - We say, "next week, when I'm less tired; next month, when somebody rescues me; next year, when I'm happier; tomorrow, when I'm braver; someday, when the moment is right and I actually feel a raindrop or two – then I’ll set my shoulder to the wheel.

Noah didn’t have this choice and I’m not sure he would have taken it, even if it had been on offer. He built the ark before he had water. He built a boat in anticipation of water. Just as we are building the ark of hope and possibility as a congregation in search.

Nearly every midrash or parshah (that is, scholarly or spiritual interpretations of Torah portions from Hebrew Scripture) centers hope as the theme of Noah’s heroic story. Noah is nearly always depicted with a dove and a rainbow. My favorite parshah comes from Rabbi Rachel Zerin, the spiritual leader of Temple Emanu-El in Providence, Rhode Island. She highlights something from the tale that is easy to miss. She notes that Noah cuts a window in the Ark. Yahweh does not command Noah to cut a window. He does this on his own. Why does the boat need a window? What function could it serve?

The thick covering of clouds and intense storms that will accompany the 40- day sojourn of Noah and his cargo must have meant that there would be no sunlight breaking through. The purpose of the window then, Rabbi Zerin suggests, was not to see the outside

world, but an expression of Noah's human hopefulness that no matter how dark it would get, light would eventually return. Noah's story would have been a true companion for us during the pandemic, I believe.

But, perhaps, we find the most touching message of hope in Noah's final few actions. After the flood ends and the waters subside, Noah opens the window and sends out a raven to see if it can find dry land. But the raven returns and they must remain on board. Noah waits hopefully and then sends of a dove, but it also returns.

Noah spends 10 months in the ark. God had promised to save Noah and his family and the bounty of the Earth, but he never promised that Noah would walk on dry land. Noah does not lose hope. He sends out the dove again and this time, it returns with an olive branch in its mouth, proof that the waters had subsided enough to find a tree. Proof that they would walk again on dry land, that the entire world had not disappeared.

Noah might not have had faith on his own; perhaps he would not have thought to create a window in the Ark, but God promised him water and also, promised him deliverance. To build a boat on dry land is an act of valor and an expression of faith; it is a humble and hopeful religious response – especially in a culture that does not easily trust what it cannot see.

But build we must, whether this means establishing more durable self esteem, greater compassion for others, more inclusiveness, clarity about who we want as our boat mates in life, who we want as our next minister. Build we must as stewards of our planet, as well, never ceasing to send out doves in a persistent search for signs of renewal, never losing faith that there will always be a way forward.

May we be patient with ourselves, beloved boat builders. May we celebrate the abundance in our lives. May we be grateful for the vessels that carry us. Like Wendell Berry, may our “sweetness be to wake in the night after days of dry heat, hearing the rain.”

May we carry on through all our seasons of love and pain. May we measure in love. May we take care, as Lise's poem encourages us – take care of our friends, our jobs, our bodies and faces, our souls. May we build, inwardly and outwardly, and then may we wait patiently together for water, even in a drought year.

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen

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