

The story of Noah is one of the earliest stories that we as children learn, and it is one of the earliest stories in human history. On the extra sheet handed to you with your bulletin, you have the two versions of the story that are interwoven in chapters of 6-8 of Genesis. Tom has separated them for us, and each version tells the same complete story, but from different angles.

Long before the Bible was ever written down, when very few people could read or write, the Word of God was passed by word of mouth from generation to generation. God’s inspired Word was given through the oral traditions of the storytellers until these versions came together in the chapters we look at today. Together the two interwoven stories provide a more complete telling of God’s acts in human history than either could alone.

To ponder all the details of these two timeless passages would take several hours of Bible study: it’s too much for a single sermon. But I’d like to point out just a few things. First, scholars call the two traditions J and P; J for Lord, P for Priestly. J always refers to God as the Lord and writes about the Lord in very personal terms. The Lord is sorry that he ever made humankind and it grieves him to his heart.

But Noah finds his favor and carries the Lord’s hope for a new and different world into the future. In J’s story Noah is to take 7 pairs of each clean animal and 1 pair of unclean animals. In J’s version it rains for 40 days and nights. In the P version, God is always called “God.” In it, God sees a world filled with violence and this violence is not pleasing to the Creator. So God withdraws the order of the universe and all watery hell breaks loose. But first Noah is told exactly how to build the ark, he is told to take *one* pair of all the animals, and the rain lasts for 150 days. There are other differences in details, but these details are not the important element to be passed on. It is the faith witnesses of each that together give us a broader picture of the deep and abiding faith of the Hebrews.

I think it is important to note that even before these ancient texts existed there were yet more ancient flood stories. As early as 2000 B.C. the ancient Sumerians had a flood story passed on to the Assyrians and then the Babylonians. Yet, their stories were different from the Biblical story in very significant ways. Their stories describe multiple gods, capricious in nature, acting on whims to fulfill their own personal pleasures. These gods had little regard for humankind. Floods to them were a means of decreasing the surplus population and quieting the mob of human voices. And when the floods ceased and their hero made an altar of appeasement, it is written: the gods “swarmed down to the altar like flies” to devour the offering.

On the contrary the Biblical text describes a God that acts on moral principle and who receives Noah’s altar offering by making a commitment, a pledge to never again curse the ground because of humankind--”as long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease.” God’s covenant IS made visible with the sign of the rainbow:

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ‘As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’

God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds,

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. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.’ God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.’

Our daughter Allison, the archeologist, explained to us that in images throughout the ancient Middle-East, the archers’ bow was a symbol of military power. In such images, if the bow is placed on the ground with the curved part up, it symbolizes a time when military power is no longer necessary, that is, a time of peace. The rainbow is thus a cosmic symbol of God’s war-bow cast down, a clear promise of peace and hope, not war and dissolution of flood but, a visible symbol that everyone in the ancient Middle East would immediately know how to read. The covenant is thus signed and sealed with God’s visible promise to act peacefully towards humankind and all creation.

It is likely that the Priestly version of the story attained its form while the Israelites were living in exile in Babylon. It was important to get it written down because the God in whom they believed was radically different than the gods of the Babylonian version of the flood story. For people caught exiled in a foreign land with foreign gods all around and the frightening destruction of their national life this is what they needed to hear stated clearly: **Their** God acted on moral principles; not on whim or fancy. **Their** God cares, grieves, loves like the humankind God created. **Their** God is faithful to promises made and keeps covenant. **Their** God is symbolized by the bow of peace not the bow of war. Most important, **their** God became committed to this path of peace in the *far-distant past*, long before the nation of Israel even existed. The exiles current experience of flood-like chaos would be made right by such a caring God; God has promised. We see that the Priestly writers are making a bold and clear theological statement of faith about the God in whom they believed.

I know you’re just holding your breath to see how I tie this story of Noah’s ark into the sermon title, “Over the Rainbow,” the theme song of the *Wizard of Oz*. If you remember the story, Dorothy is not all that happy with her world. Kansas is a little too boring for her and has unpleasant people in it. But by the end of the story she is transformed and decides “there’s no place like home.” She changes her mind about home.

After the flood, God changes too. The flood, the natural consequences of human evil, proves too much for God’s heart to bear. God decides that in spite of the inclinations of the human heart to do wrong, God will keep covenant with creation and will never again allow creation to spiral back into primordial chaos. So we humans see in the rainbow the kind of God we trust in and worship.

So today we celebrate arks and the people they carry and we celebrate rainbows and their promise of peace. We thank God for our church family, and we thank God for Gwen Noah and others like her, who help to keep this Ark of San Dimas Community UCC afloat by their faithfulness to God, helping to carry God’s hope for a new world into the future. Most of all we celebrate the promises of God that sustain our travels over the seas, seas that are sometimes calm and sometimes chaotic, the seas of life that always lead us to our true home to the very heart of God. The rainbow reminds us of God’s promise, inspires us to greater good, and never lets us forget there are possibilities for the future of which, with God’s help, we can dare to imagine.