



First, the darkest image: of the flood itself, which is a symbol for divine judgment. It is an idea so terrifying that we human beings deal with it mostly by trivializing it. We make it the basis of cartoons and jokes, until the notion itself may seem to be a joke. This theme of the “total destruction of the planet” recurs in movie after movie nowadays, and our paranoia is heightened because of the realistic images now produced by our high-tech wizards of Hollywood.

Yet there are times – and this current age appears to be one of them – when the world’s chaos and confusion cause us to stop, think and wonder whether there may be validity to this idea of a God who looks at what is going on and says, “Enough!” According to the Genesis story, that is what God said: *“The earth was corrupt in God’s sight, ... filled with violence; and God saw it... and said to Noah, ‘I have determined to make an end of all flesh...’* The story thus testifies to the moral dimension of life, suggesting that human arrogance and pride, greed and the lust for power, hatred and violence can reach such a point that tragedy is inevitable – and so a terrible price must be paid.

That, you remember, is the conclusion Abraham Lincoln drew with regard to the long and bloody American Civil War. In his Second Inaugural address he expressed it this way: “Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet if God wills that it continue until ... every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword; as was said 3,000 years ago, so still it must be said, *‘The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’*” In Lincoln’s eyes, the war was not just a human tragedy; it involved divine judgment.

How does such judgment happen, if it does? In his letter to the Romans, Paul suggested that God’s judgment is usually not by way of some divine intervention but occurs because God gives us humans up – to the destructive consequences of our own attitudes and actions. This is one way to understand what’s going on in our world today: from Syria, to Somalia, to Afghanistan; to the widening income disparities – and the resulting suffering – here and abroad; to the ecological crisis of climate change; to the continuing production of armaments here, there and everywhere.

Maybe God is saying, “If this is what you want, dear people, this is what you shall have!” To use the terms of the Genesis story, perhaps God has given us up to the consequences of our own corruption and incessant antagonisms. In any case, the flood story signifies that the world turns on a moral axis – the flood says in one way what the Apostle says in another: *“Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.”*

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The second image from the old story is that of Noah. Presbyterian author Fred Buechner has written, in his book *The Hungering Dark*, “The one thing that is certain is that Noah must have looked like an awful fool for a while, for all those days it took him to knock together the great and ponderous craft... all three decks of it covered inside and out with pitch. And he had no more plausible explanation... than that he was building it – and doing so many miles from the nearest port – because a voice had told him to, which maybe was God’s voice, or maybe just hardening of the arteries.”

Noah definitely looked foolish for a while – and maybe he felt foolish. One of the things not in the Genesis text, but written into the script in the recent Steve Carrel movie “Evan Almighty” which you may have seen — is what Mrs. Noah thought of all this shipbuilding. The answer is, not much: she ridicules her husband and steadfastly refuses to have anything to do with his project. Put yourself back there at that time: would you have entered enthusiastically into Noah’s enterprise? Or would you have joined Mrs. Noah in mocking it? Imagine, also, that you were there that fine day when Jesus came along by the Sea of Galilee to say, *“Come, follow me.”* Would you have joined Peter and Andrew, James and John, or just continued mending your fishing nets?

“Noah!”... “Yes, what is it?” “Build an ark!” “Why?” “Because there is going to be a great flood...” In some such disturbing and embarrassing way, the word of the Lord often comes, or so it seems. “*Go and tell Pharaoh, ‘Let my people go...’*” “*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...*” “*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow me.*” There is a “foolishness” to the Gospel, Paul said, and once he described himself as “*a fool for Christ’s sake.*”

To much of our secular world that is how we must look – we Christians, I mean: spending our time the way we do; giving our hard-earned money to support Christ’s mission, from affluent Westchester County, to nearby Soup Kitchens, to house-building efforts in Nicaragua. That is how we must look: to believe what we believe, to pray as we pray, to listen for a word from One who often asks people to do crazy things – like building an ark, or giving themselves away, or trusting the promise of eternal life. From the viewpoint of much of the world – at home right now with the Sunday newspaper, or heading for the shopping mall, or heading down a ski slope – we who are at worship must look downright foolish. Perhaps, sometimes, that is how we appear, even to ourselves. But in God’s sight? Maybe, just maybe, with all our quirks and despite all our questions, we may be among the “Noahs” upon whom God is counting to listen for a holy word, and then obey a righteous will.

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The third image in this old story is that of the ark, symbol of the community of faith, of those who trust God, crazy as that seems sometimes. The ark, however, should not be seen for more than it is: it’s not the ark which saves Noah’s family and the other creatures, but God. The ark is merely an instrument of salvation, and a fragile one at that. Noah’s wooden tub was a perilous craft, and so is the church which the ark has come to symbolize. It is not much, and as the old joke has it, if it were not for the storm without, you might not be able to stand the stench within.

It may not be much, but we would be lost without it. And the world would be lost without it, too – which, if the church ever comes to shipwreck, everybody finally will realize. To speak of the church as an ark suggests that it is, or ought to be, a kind of haven. There are other images, and there is a hope that the church will be more than a “haven.” Sometimes it is said – and I’ve said it once or twice myself – that the church is meant to be a risky and restless place, an instrument of confrontation and change in the face of injustice; or, as in the phraseology of St. Paul, an “*army girded and ready for battle with the principalities and powers.*”

But the church is also meant to be a true haven, where all who wish to do so may find safety and security, may know genuine hospitality. It is – or ought to be – a place where the sorrowful find consolation; where the broken experience mending; where those in pain find relief; and where the discouraged discover tangible hope. It ought also to be a place where it is safe to say what one thinks, where it is safe to expose one’s doubts, to explore innovative ideas, and to seek the truth. And above all, the church should be a compassionate place, where all varieties of the human species are made to feel cared for.

There are some today, especially in the mainstream historic denominations like ours, who seem fearful that “the wrong kind of people” may get into the “boat” called the church and contaminate all the other passengers. The image of the ark suggests to me that we modern Christians need to pray an old prayer. It goes like this: “O God, make the door of this house wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship, but narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride and strife. Make its threshold smooth enough to be no stumbling block to children and youth, nor to straying feet, but rugged and strong enough to turn back the Tempter’s power. O God, make the door of this house a gateway to Thine eternal kingdom.” The ark called the church ought to be big enough to welcome all who want in.

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Finally, and most importantly, there is the image of the rainbow. It is the sign of God’s covenant, not only with human beings – so the Genesis story says – but with “*every living creature...*” It is a sign of God’s promise not to give up on the creation. In this post-Easter world, we have an even better sign than the rainbow: the sign of an empty cross. That sign says that this world, including you and me, haven’t got it right yet. The earth still is corrupt in God’s sight, still filled with violence. Only this time, it wasn’t a flood which God sent, but a Son. According to John’s Gospel, “*God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*”

With that promise ringing in our ears, the sign of the empty cross before our eyes, and the community of faith enfolding us as “brothers and sisters,” we ought to be able – with courage and hope – to ride out the personal and societal storms that sometimes threaten to overwhelm and destroy us.

According to the old story, when the waters finally had receded and Noah was able to come down the gangplank to walk again on the soggy earth, the very first thing he did was build an altar and give thanks to God. That response of praise continues to be the one made by those who, whatever the stormy seas upon which they sail, know themselves to be part of an everlasting covenant, and in the hands of one who is “*strong to save.*”