

On Building an Ark

Psalm 29

The new year has begun, and conditions look good for a flood. A flood of arks that is; as in Noah's Ark. For the past five years now, Arks have been bobbing up around the world at a surprising rate. In the Netherlands, you can now visit "Ark van Noach." This is a full-sized ark model that actually floats. Built by a construction company owner named Johan Huibers, it cost \$1.3 million and weighs 3,000 tons.

In Hong Kong, another full-sized replica of Noah's ark exists at "Noah's Ark Park and Resort." It stands alongside a solar telescope, a set of gardens and evangelistic displays. In addition, there's a two-thirds-sized replica of the ark that stands in Florenceville, New Brunswick. Not to be outdone, the government of Yerevan, Armenia, the place where according to Biblical records it all started, wants to eventually host an ark themed park within view of Mount Ararat itself. Probably the granddaddy of them all is the "Ark Encounter" in Williamstown, Kentucky. A group called "Answers in Genesis" has completed a full-scale model of its Ark, now open for tours, which is the centerpiece of its planned \$93 million theme park that will include other Genesis story exhibits, and a zoo.

Perhaps we are drawn to arks because we naturally fear the power of a flood. What with Global Climate change, floods are becoming almost paradoxically as destructive as fire. A look at the Psalms, including this morning's, would agree with that. Psalm 29 speaks of "mighty waters" that can drench, drown and destroy us (v. 3). Other psalms include talk of "deep waters" where "the flood sweeps over" (Psalm 69:2), waters that "roar and foam" (Psalm 46:3), and a desperate appeal to God for help, because "the waters have come up to my neck" and "I sink in deep mire" (Psalm 69:1-2). Of course, all these water references in the Psalms are intended as metaphors for the struggles of human life.

That speaks to a real truth about life. Sometimes life does overwhelm us, with personal and professional problems that can feel like a flood of mighty waters. We can feel overpowered by difficulties rushing toward us, whether they be emotional, financial, relational or vocational. We find ourselves gasping for breath, with the waters coming up to our necks and our feet in deep mire. Flailing around in the flood, we desperately need an ark.

Now, none of the aforementioned arks are of any help to us here. What we need, rather, is an ark that is spiritual, not physical: a shelter from the flood, a refuge from the "mighty waters," a vessel to carry us across the waves to a place of safety and salvation; in short, an ark for our souls. But how do we build that sort of ark? Our Psalm and Gospel lessons this morning can help us here. They point us to the three essential elements we need for the construction of such an ark.

And our first essential element is this: prayer; prayer to the God who has power over the flood. "The voice of the Lord is over the waters," says Psalm 29; "the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters. ... The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever. May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!" (vv. 3, 10-11). Psalm 29 is telling us that God, to whom we pray, is more powerful than life's floods that swirl around us and would drown us.

But what are we to pray for when caught in the tide? We can certainly pray for deliverance. Sometimes that is the direction that God will take us; out of the flood. But more often it isn't total deliverance that we most need. More often what we need is God's strength to face our flood, and God's peace in the midst of the chaos.

A rabbi friend of mine once put it this way. "If someone prays for patience, do you think God just gives them patience? Or does he give

them the opportunity to be patient? If someone prays for courage, does God just give them courage, or does God give them opportunities to be courageous? If someone prays for the family to be closer, do you think God zaps them with warm fuzzy feelings, or does God give them opportunities to love each other?"

God has power over the flood. When we pray, God will answer our prayers with strength and peace, so that we will not be overwhelmed by the waters. God will bring us through the flood. Prayer is the first essential element for building our spiritual ark.

And the second essential element is this: our church. The construction of a spiritual ark also requires us to build, and be part of, a community of support and accountability. For millennia now, the church has been understood to be an ark in this very sense. Consider that in liturgical churches such as ours, our church buildings have nautical terminology attached to them. For example, the section in which most of us sit is called "the nave." Nave comes from the Latin *navis*, meaning ship. That reminds us that though there is a storm raging out there, with "wild winds and terrible waves," our church is built to carry us safely through.

Theologian Frederick Buechner put it this way. "At its best, the church provides "shelter from the blast, a sense of somehow heading in the right direction in spite of everything, a ship to keep afloat, and, like a beacon in the dark, the hope of finding safe harbor at last."

Building a spiritual ark can never be a totally individual pursuit. It requires a church; this group of people who share "the hope of finding safe harbor at last." And, it provides each of us with a community of support and accountability, a place where we can be encouraged to do the right thing and be gently pulled back when we go off course. The Church is not a perfect place, but it heads in the right direction in spite of everything, because Jesus is at the helm. Our church is the second

essential element in building our ark.

And that leads us to the third and most essential element of all for building our ark: Jesus. Jesus must be its pilot, the pilot at the helm. The presence of Jesus is the most important element in the building of a spiritual ark. As we are beginning this New Year together, we have come to this Sunday known as The Baptism of the Lord. Today, from our Gospel lesson, we are reminded of the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan, and how "just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him" (Matthew 3:16).

Jesus came up from the water -- up from the mighty waters that threaten to drench, drown and destroy. He emerged from the water to receive the spirit of God, descending like a dove. He is the one who now sits "enthroned over the flood" as our Psalm would say it. (Psalm 29:10). Remember all those wonderful Gospel stories of Jesus on the waters? These are true metaphors for how he can pilot our lives. He saved his disciples from a storm on the sea, leaving them to wonder, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41). He showed his power over the chaos by walking on the water. Then he rescued Peter when he was about to sink beneath the waves (Matthew 14:22-33). He does the same for you and me today, as he gives us strength to face stormy trials, and peace to preserve us in the chaos. He walks the seas beside us through storm and flood.

There are, in the historic Mariner's Anglican Church, The Maritime Sailor's Cathedral as it is often called in Detroit, these words chiseled into a wall that call out to Jesus:

"Jesus, Saviour, pilot me over life's tempestuous sea;
Unknown waves before me roll, hiding rock and treacherous shoal;
Chart and compass come from Thee: Jesus, Saviour, pilot me."

Jesus, our pilot at the helm, is the third and most essential element in building our ark. In a world that threatens to drown us in its floods and chaos, this is the ark that will bring us through.

This morning we enter the waters together. The waters of baptism are before us, calling us to enter them again and renew those baptismal vows we have taken: vows to go with our pilot wherever he leads us, vows to support each other whatever the floods may come, vows to be his strengthening, loving, healing presence to a drowning world. Deep calls to deep. Let us now answer the call, and renew our Baptismal vows together.