

## ***Noah's Dove***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC  
September 23, 2018  
Text: Genesis 8:6-12

*“The Lord said to Noah, there’s gonna be a floody, floody (2X)*

*Get those children (X) out of the muddy, muddy*

*Children of the Lord.*

*So, rise and shine and give God the glory, glory,*

*Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory*

*Rise and shine and (X) give God the glory, glory,*

*Children of the lord.*

Ah, yes. There is a song that is truly a trip down memory lane. Anyone else here familiar with this one? It’s been a Vacation Bible School favorite for decades and, truthfully, one of my favorite songs to sing with little ones. I like it because it tells a Bible story, in about a zillion verses, but the chorus is so simple everyone can join in. And even the non-singers can join in on the claps. It’s such a great song to use with kids that I used to use it even when the Noah story wasn’t part of the curriculum! Even then it still worked and that was because the Noah story is so much a part of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Just like the Adam and Eve story we talked about last week, everyone knows this story too. Noah’s Ark themed nurseries and children’s bedroom décor are always option for parents to consider, something which

always surprised me given the fact that the Noah story is truly not a pleasant one.

I mean, think about it. What is the Noah story really about? That's not a rhetorical question! I'm really asking you – what is the Noah story about? (*pause for answers and use them to reconstruct the story*) So, essentially, the Noah story is about a flood, about a God who intentionally and willfully destroys God's own Creation because He decides the people are not worthy of all God has done for them. In spite of all the positive images folks cherry-pick from this text routinely – like Noah building the ark, animals coming on to the ark two by two, and so on and so on – this story is actually a story about death and destruction as punishment from a God we tell ourselves and our children is a loving God. Huh??? What's up with that??

Well, I think this story is so beloved in Judeo-Christian culture today because, like we do with so many other things, we sanitize it. We tell the story as simply as we can, glossing over the awful parts – people and animals drowning in a horrible flood – and focus only on the happy parts – a smiling Noah and his family boarding a massive boat built by hand and then loaded down with an adorable assortment of critters. We leapfrog right over the obvious problems with this scenario – death and destruction at the hands of God off the boat plus the issue of the care and feeding of all these animals including cleaning up after them –

and jump instead to the ending with the dove and the dry land and the rainbow God places in the sky as proof of God's commitment to this new Creation. Not really a story for the faint of heart, is it?

So, why is it here in the Bible? Why is a story that paints such a horrible portrait of a judging, vengeful God such a beloved one for so many people? Why, of all the stories in the Old Testament, is this one of the few people really know and remember? Well, I'm not sure, but I do have a couple of theories. For folks who are biblical literalists, this story is a powerful illustration of why they, the literalists, must be right about God. Look at the story of Noah, they say, and you will understand that God sees the world and the people in it in stark terms. You are either good or bad, sinful or saved, and it's easy to tell which because the Bible tells us. Look at the flood, they say, and you will realize that God destroys evil wherever God finds it and since the world is so evil in so many ways today, we are all living on borrowed time. Sooner or later Noah's God is gonna get us too, they think. So, we better pay attention to the right way, the one and only way which also happens to be their way, to be a follower of Jesus because it's only Jesus standing between us and the wrath of God so clear in Noah's story. Of course, we don't want to scare the heck out of the little kids with the truth behind this story so we make it a fun one about boats and animals and rainbows.

The only problem here that I see, though, is that it's just not true. This is not a story about kittens and rainbows. This is truly a story about death and destruction at the hands of an angry God – and that is just not the God I believe in. That is not the God I have devoted my life to.

So, where does that leave us? How are we to make sense of this story? Why is it included in the Bible in the first place and what value can we find in it? As to why it's included, that's a fairly simple one to answer, especially with what we know about the other cultures in the ancient Mediterranean world at this same time. The fact is, all of the major cultures in the area – the Babylonians, the Egyptians and more – all had similar epic stories in their religious traditions about a massive flood that wiped out all life except for a chosen few favored by the gods. In other words, the flood story is a story common to the cultures throughout the region where the ancient Israelites were beginning the process of forming their own identity. They knew the stories of their neighbors – like the Babylonians with their Gilgamesh epic, almost identical to the Noah story by the way – and most likely decided that if it happened to their neighbors, it must have happened to them too. But, they needed to put their own spin on it, which was not so difficult as the stories from the oral traditions of all the cultures intermingled together as the stories were told and retold across the generations. In other words, the Israelites

took the flood story and made it their own, adding details and their own characters.

Important to realize here is that archaeological evidence indicates that at one time in the ancient world there was in fact an incredibly huge flood that devastated much of the known world in its time. So, the flood itself is most likely a real historical event. The stories, like Noah and Gilgamesh and others, are how the ancient peoples who experienced the flood made sense of it for themselves. So, like the Adam and Eve story, this too is an etiology, a story which attempts to explain and make meaning out of an event that was beyond the scope of normal life.

All well and good, but what are we to make of the story now? How is it relevant to us today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Is it relevant? I would argue that it is relevant, very relevant and how it relates to us is most visible as the story is coming to an end. This is the part of the story we heard read this morning. It's been forty days and Noah thinks the flood waters are starting to recede. But all he can see is water. So, he improvises. He decides to make use of what he has at his disposal and one of those things is the birds he has on the ark. First, he sends out the raven. A curious choice to my way of thinking, or was it? A raven, which is a black bird, would later come to be seen as unclean and therefore unworthy for temple sacrifice, for two reasons. First, because it was black and temple sacrificial birds had to be white. Second, because it was

known to feed on carrion, or dead carcasses. So, when you put these two pieces of information together, it's clear why Noah sent the raven out first. If it didn't come back, no loss. And, it didn't come back – no doubt because it was feeding on all the dead carcasses still floating in the flood waters. Yuck...

So that brings us to the dove. Noah sends the dove out three separate times. Reading the text closely, it seems that it is the same dove he sends out all three times. The first time, it goes out and flies around and around, but finds no place to land so it returns to the ark exhausted, landing on Noah's outstretched hand. The second time it goes out and comes back with an olive branch in its beak. This is way more significant than a casual reading of this story reveals. An olive tree to be fruitful must be carefully cultivated. Wild olive trees produce small fruit that is virtually inedible. But, a wild olive tree can be redeemed by grafting on a branch from a cultivated olive tree. So, the olive branch would have been recognizable to the first hearers of this story as a symbol of divine blessing leading to prosperity, beauty and ever increasing strength. In other words, the olive tree branch the dove brings back proves to Noah that new life is now possible, and Creation can be restored, carefully cultivated, as the flood waters recede and the land restores itself. Now we come to the last time Noah sends out the dove. This is the fourth time he has released a bird to figure out what he should do next and this

time he gets his answer when the dove does not return. He then knows the dove has found food and a place to roost. He knows new life is already under way and its time for the ark's inhabitants to join in.

This notion of new life as always possible for the people of God is the essential message of the entire Noah saga. No matter what happens in your life, the Noah story says, you can always start over. Even if a flood destroys everything, you can start over. It won't be easy or simple when your life has been turned upside down by forces way beyond your control, but it is always possible. Especially when you invite God into the process. And this is where I see in the dove an even more meaningful reminder of an essential story of the Christian tradition. The dove is a central character in the story of Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan as his ministry began. The dove was the tangible representative of God in that moment reminding Jesus and everyone else that God was a part of what would be happening in Jesus' life and ministry. This is why the dove is still a symbol of baptism in our church today, as Bob Sicilian's beautiful carved dove reminds us every week.

In the Christian tradition we claim as our own, baptism is indeed the visible sign of an invisible grace. The waters of baptism are not really so different from the flood waters of Noah since both are intended to symbolize new life, new beginnings, ever emerging possibilities as we continue our journey through

life as beloved of God each day. And the dove – whether it is the dove of baptism or Noah’s dove – the dove reminds us that there is no where we can go in life, no challenge we will face in life, no change in life circumstances that can separate us from God’s Spirit, God’s love. Noah’s dove and Jesus’ dove both remind us that there is no place we can be where God is not already present. There is no circumstance that washes over us, floods out our lives, that will cause God to leave us bereft. There is nothing that can separate us from God’s love no matter what else is going in our lives. Except us, of course. We *can* separate ourselves from God, creating distance God would never put there. But, why would we? That’s something each of us must decide for ourselves, isn’t it. Amen.