

Neutralizing Nutty Noah

Genesis 6 and 7 (Sel.)

January 13, 2008

This sermon is simply an invitation to reflect with me upon what is the most ancient story in our Judeo-Christian Bible. It is the flood story and it's substantially older than our bible. Noah is the central character in our bible's version.

Is this story factual? Is it, that is, a geologically, geographically, and meteorologically accurate historical account? If so, it raises some daunting questions. How, for example, could the entire topography of the earth be covered with water in not quite four weeks of rain? Even if one could round them up, could two of every species of life on earth along with sufficient food to sustain them for weeks, fit into a barge smaller than many modern cruise ships? Where on earth would that much water go when the flood was over?

But the story isn't about meteorological phenomena or topographical issues. It's much better than that. It's a parable having to do with God using one man-Noah, a man of principle and conscience — in such a way that he became the key to there being a future. Living amidst hopeless decadence, corruption and violence, this Noah heard or felt the voice of God singling him out to be the one who must provide a bridge to the future. "Build an ark," God said, and then went on to explain precisely how it should be built.

Poor Noah. No matter how righteous and principled, what does one make of an experience like that? Yes, he understood the problem: how awful things had gotten. Yes, he was concerned – troubled. Yes, he would have been willing to vote for any referendum that would have brought much needed reforms. He would have gladly contributed to any fund that might lead to positive changes. He might have welcomed an opportunity to be part of a focus group or task force of likeminded, concerned people.

But this? This voice, these strange urgings, this inspiration or whatever it was, pushing him to build an ark made no sense. Besides, he was a landlubber. He knew nothing of ships or shipbuilding. How then, could he build one that was 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet high, and do so in a neighborhood not zoned for shipbuilding? This wasn't some home-craftsman, basement project. And what was the reason for it? There was no precedent for anything close to a catastrophe that would require or make sense

of building something like this. To the contrary, the last couple of years had been drier than usual.

Wouldn't this be a gross waste of time, of materials, of energy, not to mention making him the laughingstock of the area. He would probably end up in a locked psychiatric ward wearing a strait jacket before the hull was half built. "God, I'm willing to take risks, even to endure criticism and being controversial, but I'm not psychotic, not a religious fanatic, and not a radical environmentalist."

"God, as unprincipled and decadent as all these people have gotten to be, and as much as I disapprove of their morals and behavior, what good will it do to have them come to consider me to be crazy? I can hear them now, whispering, 'It's too bad about Noah. He's really gone over the edge this time. He's always been much too serious, stuffy and prudish, but now it's gone on to where he thinks he hears the voice of God telling him to build a two-block long, enclosed barge miles from the nearest water. And that's not all. He thinks he's going to fill it with animals in order to rescue them from a great flood that God has told him about. It just goes to show that a person can be too good, can be so righteous that it scrambles the mind.'"

We don't know what agonizing internal struggle Noah would have gone through before he cut the first plank and drove the first nail, but it's true that being an "inner-directed" person can be a very lonely, unsettling, excruciating experience. That's why people will often squelch the light or truth or hope or gift that is uniquely theirs. Understandably they prefer not to complicate their lives or attract controversy by venturing beyond the borders of easygoing mediocrity.

Somehow though, Noah survives his internal doubts and misgivings and shuts out whatever the external taunts and jeers. Convinced that those inner urgings are godly ones, and that the streets and yards and offices and bars and locker rooms and family rooms and malls and legislative chambers and golf courses and theme parks will be gone, he has to do what he can. He can't just sit by and do nothing. So he sets out to create a bridge to the future. He may be wrong and end up remembered as "nutty Noah and his backyard freighter" but that's the risk he has to take in order to live with himself.

Then one day the construction is completed. And though the sun was still shining brightly, traffic was still normal, and the stores still busy, he loads his family and the menagerie he has assembled, onto the ark. Then the door is shut. A few days later the month-long, unprecedented downpour begins, creating the terrible flood that people said

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could never happen. Clumsy and creaky as it was, the odd, unwieldy craft does float and stay afloat, undoubtedly belching great clouds of methane from its unusual cargo. As the story would have it, it preserved its entire human and animal passengers until the flood subsided, making ongoing life on earth possible.

The story isn't without flaws. A major one is the way it pictures God. The God in whom most of us believe isn't a God who, in a fit of wrath would deliberately wipe out young children, the elderly, the handicapped and all animal life in one mighty vindictive flushing. Unlike the primitive belief of the early bronze age, floods, fires, famines, epidemics, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions aren't God's vengeance or retribution.

Even so, there's an important side to the Noah saga, one that is quite worth contemplating. It pertains to hoping and keeping up the struggle while living in chaotic, deteriorating, troubled, ominous times. That was Noah's story: trying to understand who and what he needs to be and what he needs to become here in the middle of the mess. It is, for example, about trusting his agitated social conscience, his inner urgings, his principles and his idealism, trampled upon though it may be.

It has to do with shushing that all-too-tempting voice that says "C'mon Noah (or make that Jerry or Joan or Sam or Jim) you are only one person. All that can reasonably be asked of you is that you, yourself stay good, upright, and respectable. All a reasonable god could ask of you is personal, private piety. Don't get carried away. Don't imagine that you can save the world. Don't get pulled into things that aren't your responsibility. Don't rock the boat (or in Noah's case: don't build the boat). If and when God wants things different, God will make them different."

Though I hate to admit it, I'm not at all certain that that isn't the advice I might have given to Noah had he stopped by my office to discuss this strange urge that was impelling him to embark upon something so controversial, untenable, and quite likely impossible.

Yes, if I'm honest, I have to admit that much (if not most) of the time I'm not Noah in this story. No. I'm one of the townspeople who is laughing up my sleeve at him, is patronizing toward him or derisive of him. Far from even some minimal respect for his convictions and determination, I see him as having delusions of grandeur.

It isn't too difficult for me to imagine myself saying (with fake charitability), "I've always enjoyed the laid-back, live-and-let-live, practical version of Noah. But this "ark-building" Noah who withdraws his savings and takes a second mortgage on his home to

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buy lumber, who blows off the counsel of sensible, conservative, and reasonable people; this Noah who has allowed himself – as if the world’s evil were his problem -- to become so totally engrossed, disturbed and obsessed with the ozone layer or saving the whales or air quality or homelessness or global warming or immigration or health care being inaccessible or the rain forests, is nothing but fanatic and neurotic. “Noah, if you were campaigning for larger storm sewers, for example, I’d be right there with you, but thinking you can accomplish something of this scope is lunatic.”

But the message being delivered here, early in Genesis, right at the beginning of the story of God’s speaking, God’s acting and God’s moving in our human history, is that the God who IS God isn’t always the benign, accommodating, mostly a passive deity who has mainly to do with beautiful sunsets, dazzling us with star-spangled summer nights, fawning over newborn babies and being in general, a nice, grandfatherly deity. This remarkable story from so primitive a time, seems to say that God singles out specific people and situations in which to create or move or become present.

It makes clear that the voice that Noah heard, off-the-wall and unreasonable as it must have seemed, wasn’t just a figment of his having eaten too much pizza before bed earlier in the night. The peril was real. The need was vital. The ark-project was appropriate. Yes, God was actually speaking to and through nutty Noah.

This isn’t, of course, to imply that every odd-ball cause, every self-appointed prophet, every shrill radical, every weird extremist is the voice of God. But the Noah story and the stories of dozens of other biblical characters and incidents make it very clear that God doesn’t limit God’s self to only speaking and acting in nice religious ways, to very credible people, using discreet and reasonable methods and in ways with which everyone is comfortable.

Among other things that means, for example, that if you or I end up as Noah, pursued by some nagging concern or some stubborn sense of urgency or some irrepressible voice of conscience or some irrational temptation to take on something quite outside of our comfort zone, instead of fighting it, take it seriously. For again, a powerful theme throughout our Bible is that of God unexpectedly and maybe strangely, acting through people like you or me to bring change or healing or truth or renewal or justice or hope. True, what is tugging at you may not be that at all but (shades of Noah’s odd experience) it is never safe to assume that that this strong concern of yours, this direction your conscience has suddenly taken, or some troublesome impulse to jump in

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rather than duck out....you can never be certain that it is NOT God moving to become flesh in you.

The bottom line then, is first, it's almost never a safe bet to dismiss the passion or the zealotry or the unswerving determination of someone as being neurotic, stupid, fanatic, proof that she is some kind of "whacko," or any of the similar categories of perception that are commonly used to dismiss and discredit people who are disruptive of our opinions, practices and complacencies. Not all of them are Noah's but like it or not, it will turn out that some of them are. At some point when the water recedes and the crises are past, they turn out to have been God's word made flesh.

The other part of the moral is even more unsettling. It is the possibility: that it could happen to you or me, that the burning concern or the odd impulse or the dream or the troubling insight that is haunting you despite your trying to shrug it off -- trying not to think about it -- is a kind of divine encounter that we do well to embrace rather than avoid or contend against.

YES! It really can and does happen. Though often misunderstood these instances of God becoming incarnate in us from time to time, are a longstanding "cutting edge" of God's creating work in our world and our life together.