

## **Only the Sound of Rain Sermon on Noah and the Flood**

**Genesis 6:11-22; 7:24; 8:14-19; 9:1+8-17**

Sisters and brothers,  
at the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church in mid June I will celebrate my 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a minister. 25 years...  
And I must admit for all those 25 years I have managed to avoid preaching on the whole of the OT text which the Methodist lectionary suggests for today. Since the lectionary is repeated every 3 years, you can tell how often I've succeeded in getting away with that! I've always found something else to preach about rather than this entire text on Noah and the flood.

To be honest, I don't quite understand why it is regarded as a must for all children's Bibles; the ark sometimes even features on their covers. I am convinced that you can only use this story for children if you leave out the image of God determined to cause the deathly catastrophe in ch 6, and emphasise the saving and promising part God plays in chapters 8 and 9. And this is what we've done at Peace Church, if I recall the all-age stories of the past few years.

The dove which flies from the ark and returns with an olive branch, and the bright colours of the rainbow, are as famous as the pairs of animals entering the ark, and leaving it safe and sound after 150 days. The beauty of nature and the little animal show, cute pictures to delight our hearts...

...all this is rather surprising, for the flood story is one of the darkest in the whole Bible. And certain aspects of its theology are very disquieting and full of contradictions and leave us without satisfying answers. Some famous preachers have tried to find a way out of the dilemma by talking of the ark drifting on the ocean of God's tears... expressing that there was pain and grief, maybe regret "in heaven". But that is not how Genesis presents it, if you look at all the chapters and do not only focus on the happy ending.

In Genesis 6 God regrets having created human beings, but he does not regret destroying them. And it is only at the end of the 4 chapters dealing with Noah that God establishes a new covenant and sets his rainbow in the clouds and vows never again to bring such disaster over his earth.

The flood in Genesis is a response to a humanity whose wickedness is complete (6:5), and which has somehow infected all creation, so that all of the earth must be washed clean.

God looked at the earth and "see, it was all ruined". – What a difference to God's words at the beginning of creation, when it was all good. Very good. At creation God sees a paradise, where all is in place and as it should be, all is beautiful.

Only six chapters later, he sees a vast trouble spot, a battle field, war, violence, hatred and corruption as far as the eye can see.

God's arrived in reality, the cynics among us may be tempted to say.

We are not far from that today, if we take into account what our sisters and brothers in other parts of the world have to suffer and struggle through...

God looks at his creation and his heart is broken. His dreams lie shattered. And then – this is hard to understand – then, God plans the flood. God sets free the waters which he had cultivated in his act of creation. The creator deliberately dismantles his creation. He ruins an earth that is already ruined – by its own wickedness. But does that save God’s skin? Saying that the flood was caused by the violence of his creatures?

Claus Westermann, a famous German OT scholar whose works are translated into many languages, writes:

The actual description of the flood, which is really the main part, is relatively short. The reason for this brevity is that the coming and the effect of the flood are presented without comment or dialogue. There is no reaction from those involved; no lament, cry, death agony – nothing at all of this sort. There is absolute silence...

And this is true. I’ve read carefully through chapters 6 to 9. There is no dialogue anywhere in the whole story. The only sound to be found, Trevor Dennis, a British OT professor, says, is the persistent noise of the falling of the rain. (...his essay on our passage today has the headline “only the sound of rain”.)

There is speech in our text, but it is only found before the waters come and after they have disappeared. And all that is said is put into the mouth of God.

Noah and his family are silent throughout.

God says a great deal to Noah, before the flood begins, and to him and his sons after it has gone down, but not once do we hear them respond.

Back on dry land Noah builds an altar and offers sacrifices, yet this is done in silence, too.

Without speech.

Without spoken prayer.

There is a wordlessness to be observed that shows us at once that the intimacy between God and his people has been lost.

Communicating with God is not as simple as it was before.

This intimacy will only be restored some chapters later, when we come to Abraham and God’s story with him and his family.

What tops the whole wordlessness of the story, is that even God had nothing to say while the destruction was going on. The waters wash away all life except what is in the ark, and they take speech along with it.

Maybe this is the only way to deal with such a scene of horror?

Even for God?

Just think of how many millions of people throughout the history of humankind have simply turned speechless, when confronted with unspeakable horror...

Think for instance of Lot’s wife, when she turned and looked back at Sodom and Gomorrah.

The silence in the story of the flood is the most terrible silence and darkness in all Scripture. And it cannot possibly be filled with songs or prayers. It just can’t.

There is only this huge dark which we have to live through... when we deal with this story or with the floods in our lives...

In the end the flood story offers more hope than we could have expected, not because Noah and the rest are now back on dry land, but because the flood changes God! It is when the waters have gone down, and those in the ark are back on land, that the author of our story comes to the conclusion:

**Gen 8: 20-22**

**20 Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar.**

**21 And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odor, the LORD said in his heart, «I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.**

**22 As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.»**

The storyteller is deliberately echoing the language he used at the start of the flood story; he has changed some terms, but as far as human nature is concerned, nothing has changed. The anger of God has turned to resignation. Human beings have not changed.

We don't have to set much against that, do we?

The flood has not changed human beings, but it has changed God.

Genesis 1, the story of creation, presented God in majestic control of all events. Near the end of it he gave a great deal of this power away to the human beings he had made. In the flood story, he takes that power back into his hands.

For the last time.

And at the end of it, God vows never to destroy creation again.

He sets the rainbow in the sky as a reminder – for both: for himself and for us.

God will never again be in absolute control of events.

The composer of our story makes clear that from then on the responsibility for life on earth had to be exercised by human beings – in co-operation with their God.

God gives freedom to his creation, dignity and power. God will live with his creation, whatever price he has to pay.

And Trevor Dennis in his essay remarks in brackets that the storyteller of Genesis surely did not know that this freedom of God given to humankind would one day cost him death on a cross... maybe the second worst darkness in scripture...?

After the flood we can find a new era in the generosity, the patience and the pain of God. All creatures are granted a new security. The rhythms of earth can now be relied upon. There's no threat of destruction from God's side. Human violence will no longer meet with the punishment it deserves. Ruin will not be answered with ruin.

We are coming close to Jesus' famous words from his sermon on the mount "but if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also..."

The world after the flood has more room for God's grace.

Grace is the essential in the new order of things!

And, sisters and brothers, here lies the true hope of this story.

In its aspect of grace and in the images the story offers to identify with, lies its hope.

There is the flood in our story: chaos, disaster, fear, pain and speechlessness as the only reaction to so much darkness. Floods have always scared people. The flood is a way of describing fear and threats, uncertainties, accidents, illnesses, crises...

The images of floods and earthquakes describe how people's lives can be torn apart, shaken to their depths and almost destroyed. And I think we all have our share to add to that, don't we?

The ancient stories tell us how many people simply drowned in such floods of life... and how a few however managed to build an ark.

A little nutshell – simply to survive.

Without speaking in this story of the flood, Noah had understood that in the situation of crisis the only possible way out was to build a little something, a nutshell, an ark, a small floating shelter, a space of calm. And the only thing that can save them is moving away from the firm ground and seeing whether the flood can actually carry it... whether there is something in the midst of chaos that allows survival and growth... whether God is there with them – in the middle of it all.

In Noah's story holding onto houses and possessions meant clear death.

But letting go and daring to live in the tiny safe space which the ark was, would open the possibility of finding new life.

...of course not always immediately.

Crises can last a long time.

So can chaos.

150 days in the ark can be 5 years in my life. This isn't easy to accept and bear and live through, but within the nutshell God has shown me how to build, I may survive.

And a second aspect of survival surely is: Noah (whose name actually means "calm") – Noah is not alone in his nutshell. Noah is with family, friends and food.

Only together can they make it!

It is their togetherness that one day, after times of uncertainties and fears, sadness and mourning, will help them to step out on firm ground and dry land again.

So, look around. If it came to the worst..., would it be us in the ark together?

Letting go of certainties and instead sailing into the unknown?

One last tiny but interesting aspect, when it comes to the interpretation of the ark:

the term ARK only appears twice in the OT. It is a Hebrew word which means box or basket. And we only find it in Noah's story as a kind of boat that leads to a

new beginning on earth, and (!) – in Moses' story as the little basket in which the baby Moses survives to grow up and bring about liberation to his enslaved people. Just that much. I leave that with you to think about. ☺

Back to our story of the flood...

Noah carefully opens a window and checks the outside world. Can they already live and settle down again?

What we didn't have in the readings, but what you may well remember from former encounters with the text: Noah sends out birds. At first he sends out a raven which keeps coming back; then he takes a dove. He sends it out and it comes back without having found a sign of life. The only place to sit and rest is Noah's outstretched arm, when it returns to the ark...

When Noah sends the dove a second time, it comes back with this famous olive branch in its beak.

If the dove – which has become a symbol of peace – finds a place to stay, this would certainly be a sign for all humankind that there is peace again between God and his people!

The images at the end of the text are full of optimism: peace and a place to stay, an earth that will again welcome and nourish humankind. And at the very end: the rainbow. God's sign of his covenant with us.

From now on no flood will ever again be strong enough to separate us from God! Whatever we will have to go through, we will – as Noah did – experience the day of building an altar again.

The altar is the sign of a new beginning, the sign of our thank you to God, the sign of the experience of God's presence in the midst of the chaos of life.

We are not promised a life without floods and storms, but we are promised a saving hand stretching out to us and pulling us back into the sheltered space, - just as Jesus did with Peter in our all-age story today.

We are not promised a walk through life without hurt, but we are promised God's grace surrounding us whatever comes.

And whenever we are sitting in arks, facing storms, sending out birds, longing for new life, we may know that there is always the offer of community, bread and wine – a foretaste of the kingdom of God. Amen.