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Our First Families of Faith Stories from the Book of Genesis I. What's on Your Ark?

Selections from Genesis 6, 7, 8 (NRSV) The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth.... So the Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals...." But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God.... And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch.... For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female.... And Noah did all that the Lord had commanded him. And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood... The flood continued forty days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth.... And all flesh died that moved on the earth.... But God remembered Noah and... God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided.... Then God said to Noah, "Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you... so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth." So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives.... Then Noah built an altar to the Lord,... [and] the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, ... nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."

The older I get, the more fascinated I am with the origins of things, the more fascinated I am with old family stories that tell of my ancestors going back several generations. Not long after my mother died, my dad gave her family Bible. It had been originally by to my mother's great-great-great grandmother by her new husband in 1853. It is a poignant book. In it are yellowed obituaries – including a haunting one noting the deaths of two of their little girls on the same day – and autumn leaves pressed by decades of time, leaving me wondering which of my ancestors placed that

leaf in the family Bible and what occasion it signified. This family Bible is revealing and yet it also makes me want to know more about those men and women without whom I would not have had life. For, as one of my seminary professors has noted the *“Stories of [our] origins often contain clues as to who we are and why we act the way we do.”*¹

The same is true of those “origin stories” from our family of faith. During the next few weeks, I want to look at some of those stories in the Book of Genesis about those whom we might call our “first families in faith.” Noah and his family, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and Rebecca, and so on. They may be familiar names to us, familiar stories. Some of you in this room bear or have family members who bear their names. And Professor Allen is right: “family origin stories” do indeed give us clues to who we are and why we do what we do. For example, how many folks in this room can remember as children hearing in answer to a question about why something shouldn’t be done something like, *“Well, you’re a Blaisdell and Blaisdells just don’t do that sort of thing.* Or perhaps when you asked a question about why a certain thing is to be done a certain way, you were told a story as your answer: *“For you see, when your grandfather...”* Or *“...when your great-grandmother....”* And while who we have been and where we have come from never exhaust who we are and who we can become, it is still true that our origins indeed tell us something important about the values we carry that we may not even realize, the things that shape us that we never even consciously knew. So let us begin today with the story of Noah and the Ark and the flood, and let me name five things about this story that will help us understand ourselves and God better.

First, this story, and, in fact, all of the stories of our “first families in faith” in Genesis give me hope. Why? Well, the folks in this extended family as they are portrayed in Genesis are very flawed folks in many ways. Noah, for example, is hardly

¹http://www.artofthesermon.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=55&Itemid=1&ed=3

perfect; if you read further in this story you will hear of a rather tawdry episode in which he gets drunk and says some things that are pretty vile. And, as we shall see in the coming weeks, Abraham and Sarah were not perfect people either; they had their moments when they doubted God and decided they could do a better job of their lives than God could – and then at one point when Abraham **should** have questioned God he didn't. Jacob connived to steal from his brother Esau what was rightfully his. We remember Joseph and his coat of many colors, but what we sometimes forget is that Joseph is described as a youth as a narcissistic and even selfish young man whose behavior understandably triggered his brothers' resentment of him. So why do these stories about such flawed folks give me hope? Precisely **because** they are flawed – and yet God nonetheless used them to further God's intentions for creation. The good news for them and for you and me is that we don't have to be perfect to be vehicles of God's good grace and work. The good news is that what we may have done in our pasts that is imperfect and even shameful doesn't need to forever define us. God works through flawed human beings like Noah and Jacob and Joseph and you and me. For you see, in some fashion every family is dysfunctional in some way, large or small, and yet God still loves them and calls them to forgiveness and a new future.

A second point: this story of Noah and the Ark and the flood is not a children's story, even though our culture has turned it into one. You can go to Babies 'R Us or Target or Walmart and find all sorts of cute Noah and the Ark stuff – crib sheets and mobiles and wallpaper and pajamas, with sweetly drawn parades of cute animals. But, my friends, that is to "domesticate" and tame what is not a children's story at all. No, this is a very grownup story, an R-rated story in fact; it's disturbing, it's terrible, it's awful. It is the story of the complete death of the earth and its inhabitants. If you can even begin to imagine what it was like for those who didn't get on that ark as the rains fell you know that this is not a cute story for children, but a nightmarish, terrifying story.

So why was this story preserved in scripture? What does it possibly say about either us or God that is good? Well, in order to begin to answer that, we need to know a third thing about this story and all the other stories of our “first families of faith” that are found in Genesis, and that is this: these stories and the Book of Genesis itself were not the first things **written** in the Bible. Now, they are ordered first in our Bibles because, of course, what they describe is chronologically at the beginning. But these stories were **actually** written down when the Hebrew people were in their terrible 70 year exile in Babylon a thousand years after the time of Noah and 500 years before the birth of Christ. There were a variety of stories about these Genesis families that had circulated orally for centuries but it was only during the exile that the Jewish priests decided to preserve them and write them down into what we now know as the first five books of the Bible. They wrote down the stories of creation, and of Noah and Abraham; and then later of Moses and the Egyptian slavery and the exodus and the journey to the Promised Land. And if you have ever wondered why there are, say, two very different creation stories to be found in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, or why there seems such repetition in some of these stories, it is because there were several slightly different oral traditions and the priests during the exile more or less simply compiled them. So, throughout Genesis, you will often find stories told from the first and second and third person perspectives, sometimes alternating in the space of a few verses, as well as somewhat different versions of the same story laid side-by-side. And the Priests wrote them down, collated them, if you will, into what we now know as Genesis and the other four first books of the Bible.

But **why** did they write them down then? And why, specifically, did the Noah story get preserved and handed on – because it is indeed a troubling, disturbing story. Well, the key is when the story was written down – during the Hebrews 70 years of exile in Babylon. Because I want you to think for a moment about what it would be like if you

were, say, fifty years into an exile from home, not knowing when it might end, if ever. Fifty years earlier you had been forcibly taken from everything you had ever known. By now, your children themselves have adult children and they are in danger of forgetting who they are. They are in danger of simply becoming the latest Babylonians instead of faithful Jews. It has happened time and again in world history, the conquerors absorb the conquered. And so the values that you had held dear and the God whom you worshiped now seem more and more a distant memory, and the allures and values of the culture around you seem to your children – and sometimes to you! – so much more enticing than the long-ago stories of the homeland. *That's* what was happening to the Hebrew people in Babylon. It was an impending disaster, it was the very real possibility of the Hebrew people being wiped out as a people. And so the story of Noah and the Flood becomes a **metaphor** for all that those exiles were undergoing. So, to spin this out a little, just like the Hebrew people were facing impending extinction as a people, so to, in the story, was the earth itself facing impending extinction. And here's the point of this metaphor – it is meant to remind the reader that anytime the most important things about life and faith are threatened, God will ask you to build an Ark to safely traverse that impending flood. So do you see it? For the Hebrews there in exile in Babylon, the impending "flood" was the complete victory of Babylonian values and ways and the complete extinguishing of the knowledge of the true God. And that's what the Noah story is about too and it becomes a metaphor for what happens and what God calls us to do whenever our values and our faith is threatened.

And so – fourth point – what **does** God say to do in the midst of such a situation? **Build an ark**. Build an ark. Build it sturdy, build it tight, build it big enough to take in what you need to carry you through the impending flood, whatever it may be. Make it able to stay intact and stay afloat during a time of crisis. But most of all, having built that Ark, make sure you take aboard stuff that can *breed*, that can reproduce, that

can sustain life and meaning and hope after the crisis, after the flood has passed.

That's why in this story Noah is commanded to take two of every kind of animal on the Ark, of course, and not just any two but a male and a female. Because when the crisis is over, life must go on. Now, my mother used to say that she didn't know why Noah needed to take aboard rattlesnakes and mosquitos, and yet her question, offered in jest, actually suggests something very, very important about your life and my life – when you and I find ourselves amidst the flood of troubles, when life seems to have thrown us into exile from everything we've known and believed, when troubles rise like a storm around us, and when we build an ark of hope to move through such times *it is important, it is key, it is essential that we **NOT** take certain things aboard that Ark, it is important that we leave some things behind that will only cause us trouble on the other side of the crisis, that will breed and make our lives less than they could be.*

What do I mean? I know that there have been times in my life, times of trouble, of hurt, of fear in which I have carefully taken aboard my ark a resentment or two, ones that I could carefully nourish and feed and so when the crisis was past the resentments were still there and it would continue to make my life worse than it needed to be. Have any of you ever carried an old hurt, an old resentment, an old grudge, an old wound forward through the years, through life's changes, only to find that when you came out on the other side that hurt, that resentment, that grudge had indeed bred and multiplied and still was hurting your life? I'll bet most of you have at one time or another. I'll bet most of you have come out on the other side of a crisis, a flood of worries and troubles, only to find that the things that bedeviled and made your life worse were still there and even more powerful. My friends, sometimes that is precisely because you and I carefully carried those things onto our Ark.

And so, *unlike* Noah, our job in the face of change, in the face of crisis, is to **NOT** take **everything** onto **our** Arks. In the life of a church, a congregation, in the midst of

flood of change all around us, the job is to not take stuff onto the Ark that won't help us in the future – that means to deny boarding to any nostalgia that tries to paralyze, to leave on shore any attitudes that suggest that the best days of the church were in its past, to heave overboard any resentments about things not being the way they used to be. Because those things WILL **breed** and they will not be helpful for life and mission. So don't let makes sure we don't let them on the Ark; let's leave them behind. And in your life and my life, amidst our personal fears and crises and problems and worries, our mandate is the also same: leave the things behind that don't help. Leave behind your resentments, your long-nursed hurts, your wounds that never seem to heal because sometimes you can't seem to help but pick at them – let them go; don't take them on your Ark. Now, it's not easy to do. Writer Anne Lamott says these very profound words: "...it's [really] the hardest work we do. ...[L]etting go, letting go, letting God, letting go. I've always said that **everything I've let go of has claw marks on it.**"²

"Everything I've [ever] let go of has claw marks on it." Wow. Doesn't that just nail it? It **is** hard to give up things – even hurtful things – that have been a long-time companion in our lives, and the claw marks will be there when we do so. It's **not** easy, but the promise of the story today, what we learn from this "first family of faith" is that God is always onshore on the other side of the crisis, always there when our Ark lands, always calling us forward, always hoping that we were indeed able to leave behind those things that stunt our lives. For, once more in the wise words of Anne Lamott: "...during every single terrible problem and tragedy, [God has always given me] enough guidance and stamina and even humor to bear up, and be transformed, for the good."³ That, my friends, is why we should **not** take some things on the Arks of our lives, because God has promised to replace those things with something so much better,

²http://www.beliefnet.com/story/192/story_19235_3.html Emphasis mine.

³<http://www.amazon.com/Grace-Eventually-Thoughts-Anne-Lamott/dp/1594489424>

and, indeed, to transform us always and ever for the good. May it be so. Amen.