

Is it Noah and God or God and Noah?

**Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
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Noah's life story entered our worship this morning in the First Reading. We encountered some material from the 9th chapter of Genesis, towards the end of the Noah story – at least the popular part of Noah's life.

Most of us can recite the earlier part, about Noah being called by God to build an ark because God intended to clear up the evil mess on earth by sending a flood. The ark would be the means of survival for Noah, his wife, their sons and their wives plus lots of animals. Noah and his ark are well known by children. Some adults among us perhaps also remember Bill Cosby's rendition of the Noah story made very famous in one of his comedy routines done at least 40 years ago and still quite funny and instructive.

What's really remarkable is that Noah's sons were born when (according to 5:32) when Noah was 500 years old. He was 600 years old when the rains came (7:6) and he died at the age of 950 (9:29). That's incredible!

Reading from Genesis 6, specific directions are dictated to Noah about the construction of the ark – dimensions – 300 hundred cubits long, 50 cubits wide, 30 cubits high, the material including cypress wood (some say gopher wood which leads a few to the conclusion that it must have been built in Minnesota, for Minnesota is the Gopher State), pitch covering inside and out, three decks, a roof, a door in its side.

During my time as pastor of Christ the Savior Lutheran Church in Aurora, I used the Rabbi at Congregation Rodef Shalom on South Kearney Street as a consultant when I had questions about texts from the Hebrew Bible. Some neighbors of ours were members of that congregation and put me in touch with him. One visit focused on the story of Noah. In our conversation, he pointed out that we who approach Noah from the point of view in our prevailing culture miss the point. By prevailing culture he meant our propensity to always have to make sure we know just how long a cubit is so that we can make sure our visual dimensions of the ark are accurate, and then we want to know, "How could Noah get two of every kind of animal, because the platypus is only found in Australia, so how could Noah have two of them in the ark?" You and I can come up with all kinds of questions like that which miss the point of the story. My rabbi friend said the details of construction are included to show us that the ark had no means of navigation – no sails or rudder. It moved by the grace and power of God; the Lord alone was in charge of its course. That's the first point I want to make this morning.

Another Hebrew Bible scholar points out another important characteristic of the Noah story that often escapes our reading. Rabbi Gunther Plaut calls to our attention that Noah

is seen as righteous and found favor in the sight of the Lord; all the other people are described as wicked and evil. Yet Noah never expresses any compassion for the people that did not survive the flood, only for Noah himself and his family. Apparently the application of Noah's righteousness extended only so far and his concern for others was quite limited. His role in this story fits the adage so familiar to all of us, "Charity begins at home." Noah would have added, "And stops at home." God tells Noah in 6:18, "...you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you." Noah never raises the question, "What about all the other people?" The absence of such concern describes a self-serving Noah, says Rabbi Plaut. That's the second point I want to make this morning.

Then there's the follow up to the Flood story about Noah who became the first vine grower and wine maker. The inevitable occurred when Noah got drunk which was not pleasing to the Lord. We don't include that part when telling children about Noah.

Let's move to the portion read today from chapter 9. The rain has stopped, the skies cleared, the sun evaporated the water, land appeared, and Noah sent the dove out a second time. The dove came back with an olive branch, and Noah said it was time to empty the ark. Then the Lord established a covenant with Noah never to flood the earth again, and with the promise set the rainbow in the sky as a sign of the covenant. So it is not unusual to see a picture of the ark over which is placed the rainbow, tying the story together from beginning to the end.

This universal covenant proclaims the Lord's love for all creation, a covenant which is the first one in the Bible. It is for everyone, and each time we see a rainbow we are reminded of these early chapters in Genesis, Noah and his ark, and God's promise. We give thanks to God for these visual signs that remind us of God's covenant and God's intervention in the time of Noah.

When I was a late teenager, my friend and still my friend, Tom Gustafson, and I paled around together. Both of us purchased the Long Play record by Tennessee Ernie Ford entitled, "Spirituals." Tom bought the album before I did, and one day was telling me the selections on the record. He said when he bought it, the list concluded with "Others," which he thought meant several more spirituals. It was only after listening to the record a few times that he realized that the name of the last song was "Others." One of the bands was about Noah, the refrain of which repeatedly emphasized, "Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord, Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord, Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord, and he landed high and dry." The ark's course was directed by the Lord. Noah's compassion was rather short sighted. It's not because we're so wonderful that God loves us; it is God's nature to love us. We have received the grace of God, grace upon grace. And it is the Lord who guides us in life, who is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. I know I've mentioned it previously, but the place of the congregation in the church building is called the nave which means "ship." Like Noah's ark, this ship is not self-directed; it's course is set by the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the captain, leader, teacher, and Savior.

The Second Reading today interprets the Noah story from a Christian point of view. Did you catch the reference? The writer of 1st Peter declares that “eight persons were saved through water” (1 Peter 3:20). He quickly connects the Noah experience to the water of baptism saying in the next line, “And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you...” (1 Peter 3:21). The waters of baptism are saving waters, or as Martin Luther wrote in The Small Catechism, the benefits we receive in baptism are “forgiveness, life, and salvation.”

The text from the Gospel of Mark describes the baptism of Jesus, and since we covered that on January 11, I will not repeat myself regarding that event in Jesus’ life. Just note that after his baptism, Jesus was tempted by Satan, and following that experience he began proclaiming the Gospel, the good news of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

The story of Noah is interesting, fun, colorful, and exciting. We are to remember, it is really a story about God – how God called, equipped, led, and saved Noah. That’s the third point I want to make this morning. It’s always about the Lord God, how he sent his Son to be our Savior, how that Son, Jesus, lived, died, and rose again. The daily details are etched in our lives, our histories, and the hope planted within us. God is the subject of the Noah story, not Noah. The Lord God is the subject of our lives. We are so tempted to think that we are the ones who come to the Lord as indicated by the songs, “I have decided to follow Jesus” and “Just as I am..O Lamb of God, I come, I come,” as if I am the one that initiates faith. The Bible says a loud “No!” to that perspective. The story of faith starts with the Lord God and ends with the Lord God. As we read in the Book of Revelation, the living Lord God says, “I am the alpha and the omega” (Revelation 1:8), - the first and the last, the beginning and the end. I simply respond to the love of the Lord revealed in Christ Jesus. The Lord invites, we accept. The Lord calls, we follow. The Lord saves, we rejoice. “Guide me, ever great Redeemer” (ELW 618). Amen.