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9th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Year A
More Light Sunday
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Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

ON NOAH'S ARK

GENESIS 6:9-22, 7:24, 8:14-19

“Look at Noah building that ark. What does he know about construction? At least he is using Cyprus; it is what the Egyptians use to build caskets.”

“Even if he feels that he has to build this ark, why does he have to do it so publicly? It is embarrassing. It is embarrassing to us; it is embarrassing for him. What if the BBC asks for an interview?”

“Noah would start babbling about a vision and a flood.”

“Anybody who knows the *Epic of Gilgamesh* will accuse him of plagiarism, and anybody who does not will dismiss him as insane.”

“But what if...what if Noah's vision is, in fact, God's?”

“Sure...and soon same sex unions will be legal in California; and Presbyterians will ordain gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons.”

“Stranger things have happened; and look, it is beginning to rain...”

Is there a story in Scripture that has been interpreted more liberally than this one? It, like God's covenant with Israel, is becoming all things to all people, appearing in everything from Bill Cosby's stand-up comedy---“Noah, build an ark”---to church nurseries. The story is used to frame hurricanes and

tornados as evidence of God's wrath and to suggest that all suffering on the earth ceases to exist when a vengeful God puts down the arrow and hangs a multi-colored bow in the sky.

Which part of the story offends you more: that people of faith are being laughed at for being the people God created them to be; that God obliterates the earth; or that this image of God is among the first that churches give to children? Noah's Ark is not the Good Ship Lollipop. It is not propelled by a gentle breeze; the seas on which it sails are restless. The sights and smells, unlike the baby powder-scented stuffed animals in the nursery, are pungent. Animals sleep standing up, and circumstances do not allow for the cleaning of stables. The storm outside is brutal; to be inside is to be alive, and yet being inside is not without sacrifice.

God judges all the people of the earth, and nobody comes off looking all that lovable, even God, because the Almighty would rather be feared than loved in this story. It is not a question of whether human beings deserve to be punished. Of course, human beings deserve to be punished. Who among us is without sin? The question is whether God is forgiving, and a God who destroys the earth with a flood does not seem all that forgiving? God is forgiving, and God is forgiving in this story. It is just not the forgiveness that we have come to know in Jesus Christ. Maybe this story is offensive only to those of us who have felt judged, and in so feeling, gravitate toward those whose stories are written outside of the ark.

Perhaps this story is to be interpreted from inside the ark, because that is where God's grace is in the story. Come to think of it, maybe God is not as vengeful as it appears. Maybe Noah and his sons are the ones who are angry. In the end, they are human beings, and human beings---especially those who have been objects of abuse---are capable of being its subjects. They are capable of being selfish and vindictive, of not welcoming others onto the ark, of pressuring others to walk the plank. Even if they would be further cramped, being uncomfortable is a small price to pay for giving another human being the gift of shelter, which, in this scenario, translates into the gift of life.

Inside the ark, God's covenant people are representative and inclusive, even though the human beings take precedent over the "birds of the air" and "beasts of the field." God commands Noah to "come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife and your son's wives with you. And of everything 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. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground, according to the kind, two of every kind shall come into you, to keep them alive. Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them." Noah follows God's orders, and the world is re-created in the image of those who survive.

Now this is the part of the story that excites our Presbyterian neighbors who are comfortable with the church's ordination standards and are opposed to recognizing same sex unions. The language of "two of every kind" followed by the phrase "male and female" is interpreted to say that God's blessing of an ordination or union is contingent upon the possibility of procreation. To interpret the Scriptures in this way, however, suggests that heterosexual men and women who are incapable of having children would not be welcomed on the ark (or to serve as Minister of Word and Sacrament or to be united in the covenant of marriage). Or if you are welcomed, married and/or ordained, your status expires as soon as you age out of parenting. But who knows exactly when this is? Only God, and yet if this interpretation of Scripture is authoritative, then Abraham and Sarah would not have been welcomed on the ark. Of if they had been accepted previously, they would have been asked to leave at one point only to be invited back when Sarah finds out that she is pregnant. If this seems absurd to you, then thanks be to God! In a world in which worms go from being male to female and back (and reproduce by themselves every other step of the way), why is the church reluctant to evolve with the rest of God's creations? Has life inside the ark insulated us from reality and inoculated us against

compassion? Are we incapable of hearing the cries of those scratching the sides of the ark begging to come inside?

Years ago, I participated in a discussion of the church's stance on ordination and marriage at Union-PSCE at Charlotte (and guess on which side of the aisle I was sitting). At one point in the conversation, a person objected strongly to what I was saying. At a loss for words, he raised the volume and declared, "No self-avowing practicing homosexual should be ordained." To which I responded, "If they do not practice, how are they going to get any good at it?" Yes, I am capable of being flippant, and for that, I apologize, and yet I do not apologize for encouraging people of faith to be self-avowing, to be clear about who you are, about who God created you to be and about pursuing God's vision for your life and the life of the church.

I confess to being especially sensitive to this subject, because I am a straight, divorced male, who is subject to the same parts of the *Book of Order* that has captured the church's imagination in ways that worship, peace and justice have not; and in truth, I feel violated (since it is More Light Sunday, I trust that it is safe to come out as a self-avowing heterosexual). Why does the church feel as if it belongs in the bedrooms of its ministers and elders? Remember the infamous clause: "fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness." The ark in this construction is marriage, and anyone who chooses to be single or who is not permitted to enter this covenant is relegated to the stables on the ark (if he or she is welcomed at all).

One of the strengths of the Reformed tradition is that we are reformed and being reformed according to the Word of God, and I pray that you feel that every time we revisit the story of Noah's Ark. When we come to that place in the story in which Noah "and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives...every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth (come) out of the ark by families," I pray that we will find ourselves there. Sure, families may exit the ark two by two. It is just that it is dad and a daughter followed by a mother and a son or a mom and a dad

followed by people who are barren or who were woven together in their mothers' wombs to be gay, lesbian, transgendered or bisexual.

Jesus Christ has already rewritten this story. Remember when Jesus calms a raging sea? Why does he do that: because the disciples ask? Maybe. Or maybe it is because he knows the story of Noah's Ark. He knows what it is like to be judged, to be excluded, to be unwelcomed on the ark. Maybe this is why he says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." And so he does now and forever. Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.