

Sermon Title: "Life in the Ark"  
Text: Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15  
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First Sunday of Lent

It may well be that the hardest thing about reading, and understanding, the Bible is that we are born and bred to be "figgerers." The world, as it presents itself to us, is more often than not construed to be a problem in search of a solution.

It was true, but I think in a very different way, for those among whom the stories we hold to be sacred first emerged, but we're at least quantitatively, if not qualitatively *different*. The questions that skip through our minds when the specter of Noah and the Ark are raised—I hope I'm not alone in this—are mostly questions of "what" and "how." We'll find ourselves scurrying for some shred of evidence on which to hang our belief, which is a telltale sign that it is our skepticism that gets the better of us. We don't usually, search for proof of that which we know to be true! But when it comes to the Ark, we'll search the layers of soil in the Holy Land for water marks, and watch as climbers scour mountaintops in Turkey for anything that might console us. We will do what we might to figure out exactly how big the ark might have had to have been, or what sort of state the world's fauna might have been in a prehistoric time in order to fit into a single craft. It is a peculiarly *modern* problem that the story of Noah presents us first and foremost as a question that must be answered, rather than an answer to a fundamental question that has perplexed us.

So maybe it's a good thing that our reading started this morning as the waters had already receded. I wonder if that might let us set aside, at least for this morning, the questions of how the waters rose, and ponder, at least for these moments which prepare us for this table, the *promise* that, I suspect, is the real purpose of the story.

You see, we're on the first steps of a journey together this morning—a Lenten pilgrimage—that leads us, alongside Jesus, into the wilderness, and I've found myself wondering this week if one of the problems we have, collectively, with this idea of a Lenten fast is that we somehow see it as an end in itself—some sort of religious Iron Man competition. We see ourselves as the survivors, perched on stumps and hopping from foot to foot: the last one standing *wins*. And so this season stands in our minds as something of an endurance test—what can you give up for how long? It's tempting to imagine that what we're trying to do is somehow *earn* our Easter, or at least that somehow whatever Easter has to offer us is contingent upon making it through our self-imposed trial.

But picking up the story of Noah where we do, the thing that should be clear to us is that the *reason* for this story is first of all to remind us that the promise is *sure*. Whatever it is that we are about in this world, it is *not* a matter of trying to appease an angry God who wants nothing more than to send us all packing. The point of the flood narrative—and this is particularly pointed when you realize that the world into which it emerged was *precisely* a world in which all creation hinged on a heavenly battle—was to tell a story in which it would never happen again: "See, I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth...between me and you and every living creature...the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh." The *first* word of our faith is not God's wrath, but God's promise.

And if you need further confirmation, look to our Gospel, and Mark's breathless telling of the beginnings of Jesus' ministry. Yes, the Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness in the middle two of these six short verses, and so we are given the paradigm for this season leading up to the holy Week. But Jesus does not step foot into that wilderness before the promise is secure: as Jesus was baptized by John, and came up out of the waters, that same voice that spoke to Noah shouts out to all creation: "This is my Son, my beloved!" And in an echo of the days of creation, God says, "it is good." "With you I am well pleased."

It is the exclamation point through which the rest of Jesus' story *must* be read: God does not say to Jesus, "you're on the right course, and if you hang in there, I just might make you the Savior of the World." He doesn't say, "let's give it a couple of thousand years, and if people rally around you, we'll know you were the messiah." Everything that is to happen is validated before it even begins: "You are my Son. You are my beloved. My joy," we might even translate it, "is complete in you!" That, for Mark, is the first word of the Good News. It's why the story is told: because God *loves* this world so deeply that God will *never* forsake it.

Of course, if you're following along, the answer comes fully equipped with its *own* question. Sure, God has promised to never again allow the waters to destroy all flesh, but that certainly has not foreclosed the possibility that it can destroy a big chunk of it. Tell the people of New Orleans, who lived through Katrina's wrath, or of Indonesia, where 174,000 people perished not much more than a year ago in the waves of the Tsunami. And where God's hand might be stayed from destruction, the centuries seem to have proven that we frankly don't need God's help: we're pretty good at destroying flesh without it.

If Jesus was truly the apple of God's eye, his delight and his joy, then why the wilderness, why the temptation? Why, for God's sake, the cross? We could find the frozen remains of the Ark high atop Mount Ararat, with a unicorn safely tucked inside, and it would offer no answer to *that* question, would it?

The fact of our human living is that God's love, God's promise, even God's mighty hand will not, in the end, keep us *from* all harm. But if you listen carefully to the promise, I'm not sure that's exactly what God said. If the life of Jesus is our model, the objective is not to be saved from all trials, but to be held safe *through* all trials, until our lives, fulfilled, return to the God whose breath gives us life. As a matter of fact, it just might be that the fulfillment of this life that God intends *requires* just those tests and trials that can only be found in the wilderness—that our humanity is not fully *human* until it has in some way been drawn through the fire, and tested, and tempered, and shaped. God's promise is not a "Get out of jail free" card, but rather, in the words on the lips of Matthew's Jesus when everything else has been said and done: "Lo, I will be with you always, even to the end of the age."

And the proof, for us who dare to claim the name of Christian, is in the very person who stepped out of those waters, and into that wilderness, and who went on to proclaim the fullness of time, and the nearness of God's reign. It's why it is so important that we claim that this Jesus, whom we call the Christ, is truly God among us—because it's the proof, not like frozen timbers on a Turkish mountain, or logarithms that reconcile the total mass of the world's animals with the

total volume of a floating vessel, but proof as in yeast that bubbles and foams, and breaks forth into new life, that the God of all creation, as John would say, “so loved this world” that he poured his own self out on its behalf, so that, at the end, death would have no dominion: the waters would never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

The promise, which we live out in this season of Lent, through the journey through the wilderness, through the fast, is that wherever we go, God has gone their first, and waits before us, spreading a table before us, welcoming us home—a home to which we can never come unless we claim the promise, and with Noah, and Moses, and Jesus, and all who call upon God’s Name, step into the wilderness, “that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (Ephesians 3:18-21)