

Life in the Ark

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“For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.” -- 1 Peter 3:18a

If those of you out there in Pewville will look up for a moment, you'll discover why where you're sitting is called the nave. A church's nave comes from the same Latin word as the words “navy” and “naval” and “navigate,” which is the word *navis*, which is how Caesar would have said the word boat.

If you've ever been in a rowboat, you might notice this morning a resemblance between what was then under your feet and what is now above your heads. If the boat was wooden, you probably saw narrow planks running the length of the vessel, reinforced by perpendicular wooden ribs, which pretty much describes the inside of our roof, both in this room and in the Social Hall, which was our first worship space.

And that similarity of design and appearance is not coincidental, because the physical space where Christians have gathered for centuries to worship has been understood as a kind of boat, specifically an ark, and even more specifically, Noah's ark. The church, from its earliest days, has been understood as a place of refuge, of safety, and of deliverance. While the rest of the world goes to hell in a hand basket, the church has been seen as the place where the exceptions gather.

The followers of Jesus Christ order their lives differently, we say; have different priorities, we say; and looked to a different leader, or so we say. We have always been a people who believe that we, like Noah, have been set apart by God for a mission, and that mission is salvation – our own, and the world's.

We Christians have always understood ourselves, as the reading from 1 Peter indicates, not simply as followers of Jesus, or as the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, but also as the heirs of the twofold covenant God made with Noah: the covenant of delivering the world from the consequences of its own self-destruction, on the one hand, and, on the other, of giving the world a re-start, the chance at new life.

That's why the author of 1 Peter compared the early days of the church to the time of Noah. Neither was what we'd call a golden age. Humanity's besetting sins had been running rampant, and misery abounded. People were looking for something better than what was on offer from the movers and the shakers. The lying, the cheating, the bought politicians, the get-rich schemes masquerading as public works, the powerful exploiting the weak – we'd seen them all before and we were seeing them all again.

The world was pulling itself apart in the days of Noah and it was doing it again at the time 1 Peter was written, which was probably a generation or two after Jesus. The world was, as the world is, a mess, and people wishing to avoid being overwhelmed by that mess turned, as they always have, to communities of faith, housed, as they've always been, in buildings that look surprisingly like an ark. People turn to places like this place not because of the building itself, but rather because of what they hope to find here – a way of life that's different from what they've found out there in the storm. And for the sake of preserving on earth that kind of life – life in the ark – we Christians do what we do

and always have done. I want to talk about three of the most important characteristics of the Christian life – life in the ark – this morning.

First, we pray. Life in the ark is first and foremost a life of prayer. If prayer is foreign to you, you need to come and see me, because life without prayer is life without one of its principal sources of joy.

We Christians – and we Protestant Christians especially – have made a mess of prayer. We’ve scripted it so narrowly – eyes closed, head bowed, mouth open – that we’ve forgotten that prayer is first about listening, and only later about talking. Prayer is the deliberate opening up of one’s heart and mind to what Paul Tillich called “the Ground of Being” -- his phrase for God – and sensing what that fundamental reality is saying to us.

A few days ago, thanks to a link Karen sent me, I listened to an interview with the poet Mary Oliver. Mary Oliver starts her work day by stepping outside her back door with her notebook and pen in hand, and then she waits. She waits until reality begins to tell her things that she can write down – how warm the sun is or how close the fox’s track is to the door – and only after she’s listened to the world is she ready to write about it. She watches and waits out of a sense of reverence, because attention, she says, is the beginning of devotion.

That’s what prayer is for – it’s to help us direct our attention to life’s deepest level, so that we can devote our lives to it. And when you’ve devoted your life to life at its deepest level, you will have joy. That’s what makes a life steeped in prayer a life permeated with joy. That’s not my guarantee, it’s Jesus’s: “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” That’s from the Gospel of John.

So life here in the ark is first about the joyous life of prayer. It’s also about a life of study, of returning again and again to those foundational stories that make up so much of what we call the Bible.

That’s what we did this morning. We returned to one of the first stories any of us learns who grows up here in the ark, the story about that first ark. And if we had good teachers – and here at Faith we have very good teachers – we learned that the story of Noah and the flood and the animals and the ark is about much deeper realities than keeping the lions away from the gazelles.

We learned about sin and its consequences. We learned about forgiveness and redemption. We learned about promise and hope. And we learned about looking for God’s faithfulness even in the midst of life’s storms. Each time our teachers brought us back into the presence of that foundational story – as primary children, as adolescents, as young adults – we built some more of our lives on those realities of sin and salvation and hope. That’s why that story’s called foundational – you can build on it.

This past Wednesday, our midweek Lenten study group explored another of the Bible’s foundational stories, Jesus’s story of the forgiving father. We commonly call it the parable of the prodigal son, but I think that’s a misnomer; the story’s much more about the dad than about either of his boys. We talked about that story and we talked about ourselves, because forgiveness lies at the heart of both that ancient story and our contemporary story. Forgiveness is the common denominator in stories about ancient dysfunctional families and our own dysfunctional families. With the help of Marjorie Thompson’s little book on forgiveness, we began to see how we often trivialize forgiveness by making it simply about people doing each other wrong. Forgiveness is much more about a way of life than about who did something rotten to somebody else.

So life here in the ark is also about keeping a well-worn copy of the Bible close at hand. We don’t use the Bible like a cookbook or a first-aid manual, but more like a

bundle of letters from someone who means a great deal to us and who wants only the best for us. We cherish words from someone like that, and we return to them often. Such should be our relationship with the Bible.

Finally, life here in the ark is about community, which is to say it's about living together in such a way that we can do things that we can't do on our own. That's what community is and that's what community is for. It's essentially missional, which is to say that it has a purpose beyond itself. We don't form communities as ends in themselves; we form communities so that together we can reach goals none of us could reach on our own.

Back in our boar-spearing days, when we huddled around the fire at the mouth of the cave, we realized fairly quickly that life outside the cave was more or less a death sentence for the individual. Without someone else's help – help keeping the fire going, help locating the sources of food and water, help preventing the strong from abusing the weak – without that kind of mutual help, life was a very dicey proposition. We need one another – that's a fact, not a desideratum – and that fact is the undeniable refutation of social Darwinism. It may be a dog-eat-dog world out there, but here in the ark, where we recognize our mutual need of one another, we don't simply play by different rules, we play a different game altogether.

Our game isn't called Survival of the Fittest. Our game – which we need to play with deadly earnestness – is called Entering by the Narrow Gate. Our game – the thing we do because it brings us delight, which is what all games do – is the game of Finding our Lives by Losing Them. Of Receiving Our Selves by Giving Ourselves Away. Of Laying down Our Lives for the World so that the world's creator can, in divine and mysterious love, raise us up again on the last day.

That's the game we play, friends, here in the ark, and it's straight-up, unadorned, evangelical Christianity. You won't find that kind of talk about losing one's self to find oneself anywhere but here. You won't find it in Congress, you won't find it on Main Street, and you certainly won't find it on Wall Street. It's the funny talk of the Christian church, of that peculiar people of that peculiar first-century Palestinian rabbi named Jesus, who went around saying crazy things like, "Blessed are the poor."

Ha! We don't think the poor are blessed – far from it – but he did, and you have to work hard to figure out what Jesus meant, and you have to work even harder to try to give flesh-and-blood meaning to the truth of his words. It takes a lifetime of work, with the right tools and the right co-workers, and if you want to know where to find both, try looking here – here in the ark.