Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring
The Gospel | Mark 1:9–15
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ALL SAINTS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH

In the early 4th century, a little known Syrian monk, named James, was sent to the people of Nisibis, a Christian city in ancient Mesopotamia. As James came to know the people there he became distressed that they doubted the story of Noah and the ark. As an act of dedication to his new-found flock, James set out to make the 350-mile journey north-west to Mt. Ararat, the biblical resting place of Noah's ark. As the story goes, as James made his way up the mountain in search of the ark, every time he rested for the night he would awake in the morning further back down the mountain than he'd already climbed.

After a remarkable seven years of going up only to awake down the mountain, an angel appeared to James in a dream proclaiming that while he would not be permitted to see the whole ark, he would be gifted one piece of it, a holy remnant to take back to the people of Nisibis. Upon awaking, James is said to have found an ancient piece of wood tucked under his folded arms, and his seven-year search for Noah's ark came to an end.

I love that story, not only because it reminds us of how stubbornly determined saints can be, but because James forms the beginning of a long line of ark seekers. According to one Islamic tradition, in the 7th century the discovery of Noah's ark provided the wood for the construction of a mosque, and in the 20th century a cross worn around the neck of Princess Anastasia of Russia is said to have been crafted from ark wood. The search for the ark has beckoned the pious on pilgrimage and it has beguiled the powerful including our very own President Jimmy Carter, who on his way to Iran allegedly ordered Air Force One to fly over Mt. Ararat in an effort to see the ark.

It's tempting for us merely to dismiss the story of Noah and the ark as myth, and the search for any kind of remnant of the great wooden ship as nothing more than religious sentimentality. Yet, Noah's ark is a story and a quest much more profound than it first appears.

As biblical stories go, the one that tells of Noah and his ark is truly epic: a planet-wide divine judgement with catastrophic consequences; a stupendously proportioned solution in the form of a giant boat and history's first zoological census; the drama of a skeptical public pitted against the righteous few; and to top it off near the end a family feud, drunkenness, and Noah himself wandering naked on deck.

As a piece of theology, the story of the flood ends up posing more questions than it answers, primarily the one that asks what sort of God it is we see in the story? Is God a vengeful deity, electing to wipe out the creation he has only just a few chapters ago put into being, or does God become merciful because of the experience of the Flood? If so, if God can change once – from the urge to annihilate what has been created, to 'never again' 'destroy all flesh' as we hear in our portion of Genesis today - might God change a second time? In other words, is God truly reliable?

A capricious God and a boat large enough to hold two of every creature on the earth tends to be where we choose to leave the story of Noah behind. Yet, there is, I believe, reason to pause. For Noah's story asks one of the most pressing theological questions we can imagine, one that many might have asked during this pandemic: when we are in the depth of the darkness, at the lowest point of our hope, will we be forgotten or will we be remembered?

There are few fears more crushing to the human spirit than the fear of being forgotten. In the years I spent among people who lived on the streets in San Diego, I can recall many a grown man and woman tear up as they would tell me how one of the hardest parts about homelessness was being rendered invisible. Hidden in plain sight. What I heard them saying is that to feel forgotten is to feel as if you have lost your worth, like you no longer matter.

How many of our fellow human beings on this earth feel that way, do you imagine? Over this past year as we have all lived with one form of isolation or another I have found myself imagining what it must be like for those who receive the cruel and unusual punishment of solitary confinement, longing for proof of the world's existence beyond the prison walls. Many of us might know people who live with chronically poor mental health, with that silent and often hidden burden that isolates persons not only from family and friends but from themselves. Of the many lessons that Covid has taught us, the devastating power of feeling forgotten must surely be one we carry with us as we seek to re-build our lives in the years to come.

This foundational human fear is one that the Bible understands well. The Psalms repeatedly speak of the God who forgets his people, who hides his face from them (Ps 10:11; 13:1; 42:9). The prophet Isaiah portrays the city of God itself, Jerusalem, as forsaken and forgotten in its conquest and in the exile of her people (Isaiah 49:14). And most notably, the Book of Lamentations ends with an answer to its own question as to why God has forgotten his people, because the Lord is 'angry with us beyond measure' (Lamentations 5:22).

For biblical theologian, Walter Brueggemann, the story of the flood is at its heart a story about the forgetfulness of God. The oblivion of the flood destroys memory – the people's of life on this planet, and apparently God's, of having created that life in the first place. The flood sets us – to use Brueggemann's words - 'in a world of utter amnesia'. As we picture Noah day after day casting his eyes out onto the empty ocean, no land nor hope in sight, we find our connection to our gospel reading this morning and Jesus' wilderness struggle with Satan, with the voice that keeps on telling him that God has indeed forgotten about him; that he is, in the final analysis, utterly alone. And it is in that wilderness way that our eyes are directed to the cross, and to perhaps the loneliest lines in all of scripture, of Christ's cry of dereliction from the cross: 'my God, my God, why have your forsaken me'.

Lent is a season for us to confront what we believe about God, about our lives, about where it is we really place our hope. This fantastical story of Noah opens a space for us to confront the startling emptiness of Lent and our fear that after all is said and done we might have been praying to nothing at all. When I imagine James of Nisibis on the mountainside of Ararat, clinging to that piece of ancient wood, I don't imagine him holding onto proof of a biblical account of history; I imagine a man somehow wishing to hold on to a memory, an emblem that offers an answer to his aloneness. A sign of his hope that in the vastness of the cosmos he is seen and known and loved of God.

As the great mystics of the Christian tradition teach us, we can only see the full measure of our hope when we are willing to dwell long enough in the darkness to feel the weight of its burden. I imagine that forty days in the desert felt like aeons, and the 150 days of Noah on the ark a terrible burden to bear. We have grieved in this country alone nearly half a million deaths due to this virus. And as hard as it is to stay with that loss, to linger with that feeling when this has already been such a long, arduous road, as people of this faith our calling is to weep with those who weep, to stand with the broken, to sit in solidarity with the lost such that our words of hope might have a texture of realism to them when Easter comes.

For that is indeed the long arc of our story. Light breaks through the darkness. We are not, in fact, forgotten. In the end, Noah and the ark is not a disaster movie, it's a love story, one that says to every one of us during life's dark chapters that we too are remembered by God. God remembers his people, and in placing a bow in the sky God tells faithful Noah that the Lord will forever remember 'every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth'.

Only you can know what you are struggling with this Lent. Yet you are not alone in carrying that burden. In the gospel account we hear today, we see how Jesus' time of struggle in the wilderness is preceded by his baptism. He is named as beloved by God, loved from age to age the same, and then walks into the time of trial. Our hope in that same Jesus is that no matter where our life's journey takes us, no question how immense the burden we might feel, we never walk alone. One who calls us by name, who knows us as beloved, who wills for us an abundance of life goes with us. We are all searching for some sign of a greater hope in this life. I pray that you may discover the hope that lives in you, the one who will remember you now and always.