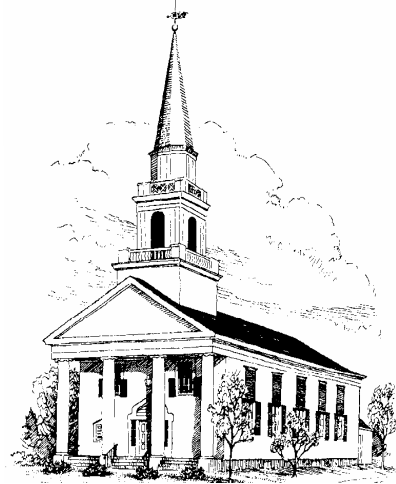


Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from June 1, 2008
Rev. Barbara J. Libby
“Faith and Trust”

Scriptures:
Psalm 46
Genesis 6:9-22, 7:24, 8:14-19



I sometimes wonder why one of the most popular themes for nursery decorations is that of Noah's Ark. Many infants gaze from their cribs at walls papered with cheery images of a friendly, bearded man and his family surrounded by pairs of charming little animals, all cute, all harmless, riding along on what looks like a warm and cozy boat. This church has its infant care room called Noah's Ark Nursery. Perhaps many of our children play or played with a wooden ark loaded with animals which they line up two by two to go up and down the ramp onto the ark.

Today's passage from Genesis presents us with that familiar and somewhat horrifying story about a great flood—a great flood that, let's be clear, was intended to wash away all life on this earth except for one good man, his wife and his family and a large assortment of pairs of animals. Genesis tells us that God got so frustrated with the way things were going that God decided to kill off all but a select few to return God's creation to a sort of pristine garden of Eden again. It is odd how a story of genocide becomes a story that we put up on the walls of our children's rooms, isn't it?

Today's story about Noah and the ark really allows us only a glimpse into a piece of the story. We do need to remember that the story continues after the part of the story we hear today. God does indeed bring hope and comfort back to all those who remain on the earth and gifts us with the rainbow, a symbol of a promise that God will never do such a thing again.

Barbara Brown Taylor observes in her book, *Gospel Medicine*:

Cain killed his brother Abel – the first murder but not the last – and humankind went on breaking what God had made until, by the sixth chapter of Genesis, God ran out of pity... What a fast catastrophe to go from “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” to “I am sorry that I have made them,” in five short chapters.

Perhaps another striking piece that is also missing from our reading for today is the all-important line that begins the eighth chapter of Genesis where it reads "But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark." (*Genesis 8:1*)

Yes, God remembered. Yes, God did not forget about those floating on the deep waters. God remembered all the animals, both domestic and wild, and all of the human Noah and his family. God remembered. God did not forget anything. God remembered that the earth had become corrupt and “filled with violence”. Yet, after the great flood, God remembers and still continues to love the earth and all its inhabitants. After the floodwaters receded God makes a covenant with Noah and all his descendants. God blesses Noah and his family and promises that God will never again make a flood to cover the earth. And the rainbow is the sign of that covenant, an everlasting covenant between God and “every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” (*Genesis 9: 6*)

So this ancient story reminds us that God has kept God’s promise to this day. This text invites us to remember our own responsibility for the creation and for all animals as part of this covenant for we are covenant partners with God. We are covenant partners who have promised to tend and care for the creation, to uphold our end of the deal with God and God does uphold God’s end of the covenant.

Taylor writes that God’s covenant:

Includes all the species disappearing daily off the face of the earth. They are all of them our covenant partners—heirs of God’s promise just like we are—and those of us who understand our kinship with them tremble to think what we have done, killing off those to whom God has promised life. We too are allies of creation wounded by the brokenness we see around us, the brokenness in which we ourselves participate. We are both the breakers and the healers. It is still raining, you see. In our own time, the ark does not look so much like a barn floating on a choppy sea. It looks more like a blue-green ball bobbing on the dark ocean of space. If we go on perishing, it may have less to do with divine fiat than with our own amnesia.

We have forgotten who we are and what we are supposed to be doing so that every living creature who rides this ark with us may share the unmitigated joy of walking down the rickety ramp to plant a foot, a paw, a hoof on dry land.

Someone else has said:

God brings people into deep waters, not to drown them, but to cleanse them.

It isn’t just wishful thinking on our part for us to consider that God chose to save some of every specie as well as human kind so that we could all begin over again after the great flood. At one time God felt the earth was in need of both cleansing and renewal. Sometimes our lives are in need of both cleansing and renewal.

When I sit down and chat with a family before a baptism, we talk about how we use water as a symbol of cleansing and renewal in the baptism service. In our tradition, as we did here last Sunday, we don’t use that much water really. We tend to ‘sprinkle’ really, with just a little bit of water, rather than pour large amounts of water or immerse the entire body in water.

We do not pretend to truly cleanse a baby in any real sense when we baptize. The water we use is a symbol for God’s spirit that comes and inhabits and surrounds the child, not because

the child is dirty or sinful or already at odds with God; rather we recognize that living life on this earth will need all the help we can get to handle all that comes our way. Each of us knows how complicated our lives sometimes get. We know, each of us, how many challenges life brings us and we need God's presence in us and around us to help us fend off and respond to life's challenges.

Baptism is one of the two sacraments of our church's tradition. Baptism and communion are the two sacraments we celebrate in this tradition. Baptism is one way that we say, usually early in a child's life, that God surrounds each child with God's love, strength, power, support and guidance for all that life will bring. We baptize our children to publicly make a commitment in the midst of the gathered community to raise that child in the faith and with the understanding that God does support and guide them all along their path.

In a few more Sundays, on June 15th, we will celebrate with five of our young people as they affirm their baptism, as they affirm for themselves that they are ready to continue on their journey of faith as young adults with God's help. Confirmation is the reaffirmation of baptism, a baptism that for all of these young people happened when they were very young. On June 15, we will hear each of them affirm the covenant that was made for them at their baptism.

God does sometimes bring us into deep waters, not to drown us but to cleanse us. We might even say cleanse and purify us. We might say that God brings us into times of great challenge not to overwhelm us; rather to make us stronger.

Each of us can identify times in our lives when there have been deep waters in our lives, right? Each of us knows about those events and occasions that could so easily have "drowned" us, which could have destroyed our lives, and instead, well, those "deep waters" turned into events that transformed and grew us in ways we could not have imagined at the time.

Many of life's greatest tragedies, in fact, bring us into new places where life is changed and different in significant ways. "God brings us into deep waters, not to drown us, rather to cleanse us" is more true than we would sometimes like to admit. The waters of the great flood of ancient times are also the waters of our baptism. These same waters are also the deep waters of our lives, waters that could drown us but rather become deep waters that also cleanse us and bring us to new places on our life's journeys.

We are covenant partners with God. We are covenant partners with a God who walks with us every step of the way. We are covenant partners with a God who can transform and renew us through times of deep waters.

We come to the communion table this day to be renewed and refreshed in our commitment to that same God. We come to the communion table this day by faith and trust in God that we might be readied to go out and serve in the world refreshed and renewed by the bread of life and the cup of salvation. We come to this table by faith and trust in a God who invites us to open our hearts to the life giving power of bread and cup for the living of our days.

Let us prepare to receive those gifts. Amen.

