

Good Morning! I hope you had a good 4th of July.

This morning, we're continuing our sermon series on Noah and the Ark. So far, we've been looking at the character of Noah, Noah is meant to be an exemplary figure of faith in the Bible. And Noah shows us what faith looks like: Noah trust God, he listens to God, and then he acts, he does what God commands him to do. Noah shows us that faith – when fully matured – has these dual elements of faith and obedience – and we're supposed to be like Noah.

We left off last Sunday in chapter 7 of Genesis, where “Noah did all the Lord commanded.” Noah gets everybody and everything into the Ark and, then it says, “and the Lord shut him in.” God shuts the door and the rains come.

Today we've come to chapter 8 and we're looking at the flood. Noah and his family and the animals have been on the ark now for 150 days, around 5 months. And it looks like there's no end in sight. They've got no idea when the floods are going to end. God didn't tell Noah how long this was going to last. So, it's been about 5 months they've been in the Ark.

It was March 20th that the stay-at-home orders were put into effect in Illinois because of COVID-19. I think we might just have a pretty good idea of how Noah and his family and the animals must have feeling after 5 months in the Ark. “God, is this ever going to end? I can't keep doing this. The Ark's rocking, the waves throw us to and fro. There's no sail, no motor, no rudder. There's nothing steering this ship and we've got no idea where we're going. How long, O Lord! How long is this flood going to last?”

Can you relate? Have you said something like that in the last months? The flood is a metaphor for our lives and the storms that we go through. Right now, our nation – our world – is flooded with the Coronavirus. It's a global storm and in it, we are all on a ship without a rudder.

The flood is also a metaphor for our personal storms: a divorce, losing your job, a bad diagnosis, the death of a spouse or a child... We go through some things in our lives that are so difficult sometimes, we wonder if God's even there. “God, where are you? In this pain, in this loss, in this fear, in this global pandemic, in this storm. God, is the storm ever going to end? God, we are crying out. Please make it end.”

We all go through storms in life. And it seems at times like this, God seems conspicuously absent. We cry out to God and we feel like we're not getting any answers. God, where are you?

The Psalmists felt that way, too. And they confront God, they rail against God in times of crisis and distress. They express their feelings and thoughts to God boldly, no hold barred. They're good examples to us of how we should express ourselves fully to God. Psalm 13 is one of the Psalms of Complaint or Lament and there are many Psalms of Lament. Psalm 13 starts "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" We can understand that.

There's an entire book in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) called the Book of Lamentations. It's complaints against God when things go horribly wrong. This language of lament gives permission to complain, to lament our circumstances, to speak the truth about our distress. We go to God, honest and bare before him. And this is not a lack of faith, it is part of faith. It's honesty before God. The Psalmists encourage us to just put it all out there. And after we've gotten it all out and there are no words left – we are just silent for a time – and then, we end the same way that all the Psalms of Complaint end. At the very end, after the railing, after the pleading, after the bargaining, after we've pounded the floor – all the Psalms of Lament end with "But Lord, I will trust you in the midst of this storm. I will trust that you are with me." We choose to trust in God in the midst of adversity, when we don't understand why or how we will make it through, when God seems conspicuously absent, we choose to trust in God.

Is God absent in the storm? The 1st verse in Genesis 8 says, "But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided." Did God forget about Noah? Was God off, busy doing something else and after 5 months God goes, "Oi vay! I forgot about the guy on the Ark with the animals"? No, God remembered Noah the whole time. The storms of life no more indicate the absence of God than clouds indicate the absence of the sky. God remembered Noah the whole time.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, when it says that God remembers somebody, we're supposed to perk up and take notice because it means that God is getting ready to act. God is getting ready to deliver them. In Abraham's story, when Abraham got into trouble, it says "God remembered Abraham." And God delivered Abraham. When Rachael, Jacob's wife, was crying out to God, "God, I can't have children!" God remembered Rachael and it says, "God opened her womb." When the Israelites were held as slaves in Egypt, they cried out to God, and when it says, "God remembered them," that was when God sent Moses to deliver them from captivity. When God remembers in the Old Testament, it means - God's getting ready to act. It's our cue that there's something about to turn here.

So now – after 5 months – the waters have hit an apex. And it says: “and the waters gradually receded from the earth. At the end of 150 days, the waters had abated; and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. The waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains appeared.”

And then it goes on to say that it’s going to be 2 more months – 12 months in total – until Noah can get off the Ark with the animals. So, after 5 months (150 days) God remembers Noah. God intervenes. But it was a going to be 7 more months before he fully delivers them. And this 7 months is what’s called “the in-between time,” the time between when God intervenes and the time when we’re fully delivered.

The in-between time is important time in the Bible. In fact, it’s the norm. The pattern for God’s people is a pattern of waiting. Adam waits for a partner; Noah waits for the flood waters to recede; Abraham waits for a son; Jacob waits to marry Rachel; Hannah waits for Samuel. The Israelites wait for deliverance. Jesus waits to begin his public ministry. It’s the norm in the Bible. It’s almost like a necessity.

But we live in a culture that demands instant gratification. I can order just about anything and find it on my doorstep 24 hours later. I can send a message across the ocean almost instantaneously. I have 24/7 access to information, health care, nourishment, and just about anything. In our culture, a delay feels like a waste of time. A delay feels like a valid reason to doubt the love of God.

Our faith teaches us that God works at a different pace and our lives are lived in a different rhythm. And there is something important to this rhythm - something to embrace in the in-between time.

The in-between time looks a lot like letting go. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years before they reached the Promised Land. They had to let go of the past, their dependence on their flesh pots and the way things were.

This in-between time today is a time where I’m finding myself having to give up a lot of things I’ve held dear. I’m having to give up my certainty - my insistence - that there will always be quick answers and easy resolutions. I’m learning to give up my belief that my happiness is contingent on having my short-term needs and wants and hungers met. This in-between time is teaching me to accept the reality of today as it is. And this acceptance is hard work. Richard Rohr says, “To accept reality is to forgive reality for being what it is.”

I can't say that I've accepted it yet. But I'm learning to live intentionally in the life I have now, instead of putting my heart on hold until circumstances improve. This in-between time is the time God is giving us to stumble our way into new expressions of hope and faith and gratitude in order that we might be God's renewed people, ready to love and serve him in whatever lies ahead.

The poet, John O'Donohue, encourages us not to lose confidence during the in-between times, but to remain patient and open to renewal. He writes:

What is being transfigured here is your mind,

And it is difficult and slow to become new.

The more faithfully you can endure here,

The more refined your heart will become

For your arrival in the new dawn.

There are always storms in life and we will always be changed by them. But God is always working in multiple ways in the storm. And if we slow down, to listen, and to wait, if we are willing to venture boldly into the richness of the in-between time – with God's help, it can free us, transfigure us, and refine us, and prepare us for the dawn that awaits.

“Listen to your life,” says Frederick Buechner. “See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness; touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace. One of the great gifts of Christianity is that nothing needs to be wasted. Everything—every pause, every wait, every seemingly uneventful hour—is shot through with the sacred.”

May it be so for us all. Amen.