

**June 1, 2008 ~ Celebrating Communion ~ 3rd Sunday after Pentecost**

Genesis 6: 9-22; 7: 24; 8: 14-19; Romans 1:16-17, 3:22b-31; Matthew 7: 21-29

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**RIGHTEOUSNESS – LIVING BY FAITH – 25¢ AT A TIME**

It is one of the darkest stories in the Bible – a story which says that God came to a point early on in the divine relationship with humankind when God was ready to give the whole thing up. It is a story of God's terrible despair over what was happening to the human race, God's sorrowful regret at having made us in the first place, and the painful decision to put an end to us all by visiting the earth with a great flood.

Anybody who has ever heard this ancient story thinks he or she knows what it means: that God gets so angry with the world that God decides to punish it by sending a flood; and that if it hadn't been for good old Noah and his family – well... we wouldn't be having this conversation. That, generally speaking, people get just what they deserve; and that somehow that is the way things should be: that the good get rewarded and the bad get punished. It is the way things are – right?

Well, maybe not so much. When we take time to listen to the story, really listen to what is being said, what we find here is not an angry tyrant who gives us what we deserve, but a troubled parent who grieves over what has gone wrong. What has happened is indeed wrong because the world has betrayed creation's intent. God called the world into being to be a faithful covenant partner. God willed unity, harmony, and goodness – but things haven't turned out as God willed. Creation has refused to be God's creation –refused to honour God as God. It is filled with violence and pain and disobedience. Human beings have worshipped one another, their own abilities and accomplishments. Like anyone who has ever had grand intentions for something or someone –like anyone who has nurtured high hopes – like anyone who has created and stood back saying, "That is very, very good," – it is a shock to see things transform and sour.

Many of us think of God as timeless, unchanging and rigid – immune to what goes on in the world and in our lives – apathetic and indifferent – a God who is above mortal matters. But nothing could be further from the God revealed in this story of the flood – this is a God who cannot help feeling, who is devastated, crushed, angered by what is all too visible. God's anger has turned to deep sorrow, a sorrow that convinces the Creator that the creation would be better off without humankind, better off if there were no trace left that any of us were ever here.

Yet, God cannot quite do it. God cannot quite give up on us entirely – almost, but not quite. It is the good news of this ancient and well known story that God cannot quite abandon the world so joyously created – cannot quite stand back from it and say, "Bad idea!" – cannot quite turn away.

God stays with tragic creation continuing to participate in the desired creation and leaves enough of us to begin again. The Creator decides to continue loving us even in terrible hurt and grief – decides to act in a new way toward us. The new beginning wrought by the speech of God continues – emerges as Noah walks with God – as Noah is faithful in relationship with God. God’s powerful words direct Noah in an unpredictable way.

We are so used to the story of the flood – the story of Noah’s Ark – that we don’t hear the unpredictable elements. We no longer think it odd that God would go to a man in the desert and instruct him in the finer points of boat building. And not just any boat but something massive – something unlikely – something that seems foolish to any thinking person. We take no notice of the fact that Noah diligently builds, despite the almost certain ridicule of his neighbours. We are immune to the seemingly crazy task that is set before the righteous Noah and just as untouched by his obedience.

Dark tales can be told of our time just as easily as of ancient times and there are likely occasions when God is just as despairing today as in times past. We know that Christ’s obedience and sacrifice has created a new covenant of grace that saves us from getting what we deserve, saves us from our own sinfulness. Yet, there is still something for us in the story of the flood because in it we see someone who walks with God – someone who does what we are called to do – someone who is obedient to God’s will and God’s intention for creation.

We identify with Noah – he is the righteous person – the one we hope to be – are there any righteous people outside of scripture? Noah is the one who journeys in the presence of God – the one who demonstrates obedience. Our New Testament readings tell us that we cannot be righteous by ourselves – can’t be obedient enough to deserve the grace we have received but by faithful dependence on Christ we are invited time and again into relationship with our merciful creator God.

Matthew says it is not enough to say, “Lord, Lord,” we must be the ones who do the will of the Father which is only possible as we are in relationship with Jesus. The apostle Paul reminds us in his unflinching way that since we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God we are justified by God’s grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus – that although we may not be righteous, we can be made right by our faith in Jesus. “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

There are among us those whom we have seen to live by faith – those we have called, elected and ordained them as ruling elders to serve in our churches. The session of Knox Church currently has 11 active elders and there are several others in our congregation who have been ordained as elders but are not serving at this time. At our meeting of session on Monday I asked all the elders to recall the number of years since they were ordained – whether a short or a long time I believe it is important to take note of and to rejoice in this faith-filled service.

Ruling elders have a tremendous responsibility and many opportunities to do the work of Christ as they seek to help a congregation move ahead in ministry. In their ordination vows these individuals proclaimed their belief in God, made known in Jesus Christ, to whom the Holy Spirit witnesses in the Bible. They accepted and promised to uphold the doctrine of the church under the continual illumination and correction of the Holy Spirit – to foster Christian belief, worship and service among the people. They accepted the government of the church by sessions, presbyteries, synods and General Assemblies, and pledged follow no divisive course but to always seek the peace and unity of Christ among the people. They promised to perform their duties in the grace of Christ, striving to build up the church and to strengthen the church's mission in the world.

They are listening to and walking with God in a particular way just as Noah listened to and walked with God. Perhaps their obedience and commitment doesn't look as special as Noah's – but according to renowned preacher Fred Craddock it might be harder to live a faithful life little by little over the long haul. He said that, *"To give my life for Christ appears glorious. To pour myself out for others... to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom – I'll do it. I'm ready, Lord, to go out in a blaze of glory. We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table – 'Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all.' But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid's troubles – go to a committee meeting – give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home. Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time."*

Noah is asked to do a seemingly foolish thing and does it because of his relationship with God – does it because he honours God as God – because he knows that the creation serves the Creator. Noah is creation fulfilling its intention, living up to God's desire. Similarly, our elders have been asked to render their service – once ordained they are ordained for life even if they do not sit on a session as a ruling elder. There are times when that may seem a foolish thing to have agreed to but they do it because of their relationship with God – because they honour the call of God expressed through the community of faith – because they are participating in God's desire.

As we gather at the table of our Lord by divine invitation we can reflect on what we have done and what we would be willing to do to share in God's desire – to be the creation fulfilling its intention. **Amen.**

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