

Service with a Maritime Theme

Rev. Fraser McNaughton
St. Magnus Cathedral
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I could begin by telling you why didn't Noah go fishing? He only had two worms! Or that Noah was the greatest financier in the Bible as he was floating his stock while everyone else was in liquidation.

The flood story in beginning in **Genesis 6** was interpreted and written down by the Hebrew people during their exile as a way to be reminded that there is a God who is in a covenant relationship with God's people.

In an ancient worldview, where gods were considered responsible for the future, destruction provided a way to clear away the past and allow a new beginning. This story of the great flood conveys immense hope for the future. Human responsibility for destruction is admitted, but God has a righteous person and a plan. Noah listens and obeys God's instructions. People will once again enjoy a relationship with God, beginning with Noah's family. Having received God's plan Noah stays the distance and plays his part. God involves people in bringing about the restoration that only God can accomplish.

One of the first points to make is the significance of the flood story as a universal human narrative:

The flood narrative is widespread throughout the world. Only a survey of its occurrence in all places and in the most diverse civilizations can enable us to answer the question of its origin. We can say at once that the flood narrative like the creation story is part of the common property of humanity. It is humankind's basic expression of its being-in-the-world, of the threat to human existence and at the same time its permanence.

We could do a lot worse than simply reflecting on that statement together. As a great mythic narrative, the flood story describes life as experienced by humans. It is not a memory of some past historical event, but a profound reflection of what it feels like to be alive as a human person.

The story can only be fully understood when we read it in the context of the universal distribution of this narrative. With more than 250 examples of this story known from different times and places around the earth, we do seem to have a very special human myth before us in this story. That universal quality makes a mockery of those erstwhile Ark hunters who seek to prove the historical and religious truth of the Bible by discovering remains from Noah's flood.

What is striking is the similarity of many of the images of all these stories. However, many of the stories lack an announcement of the impending flood. Such an announcement is always linked to a commission for the hero to construct the means of survival (box, raft, ship, etc). In the earlier stories people survive by taking refuge on a high place not reached by the flood. In such stories there is no interest in a divine wish to save some people from the effects of the flood. The diversity of technologies mentioned reflects the complex tradition history of this narrative in different times

and places. By the stage represented in the biblical stories, the preservation of human life requires the saving of Noah's family, their animals and food. From sail to steam, from ferries to catamarans that same story continues to this day and affects us as we seek new technologies to harness the power of the oceans and seas

The final goal of the flood narrative is to explain how it happens that we are still here when we could so easily have all perished. After the flood humanity needs to be restored: either by natural reproduction or by some other miracle. The biblical scholar Claus Westermann comments as follows:

"The restoration of humanity" (new creation) is of special significance for the history of the narrative. It is the clearest sign of progress from the mere report of an event (coming of the flood -- end of the flood) to a narrative with a specific goal. The natural conclusion of a mere report would be that the survivors lived on as before. But the narrative underlines the significance and uniqueness of the event by replacing mere survival with the end of the flood conceived as the beginning of humankind as it now exists. A primeval event has been constructed out of an event in the past. "

For those of us who watched with horror as news of the Indian Ocean tsunami reached us in December 2004, and with renewed dismay as an extreme cyclone devastated the southern Burma in May 2008, these are poignant words by Westermann. The risk of annihilation by flood, tidal wave or drowning at sea is an archetypal fear for a land-based creature who cannot survive in the waters without technological assistance or unsustainable physical exertion. In countless locations during our history as humans we have experienced the horror of seeing family and neighbours swept away by the raging waters. Yet some have survived, and in the process the memory of the tragedy has been transformed from a nightmare to a dream.

There are times when even our best technology is unable to rescue us. Others will survive by finding a strong tree or a hill with sufficient elevation to stand above the waters. Some of us have the good fortune to live far from the flood zone. Can we create a story of compassion and hope? Better still: can we be so compassionate and responsive to the suffering of the latest victims of this ancient nightmare that they in turn will find the grace to discover a story of new beginning in these most terrible events?