

**The Flood Continues**  
First UMC of Pocatello  
August 14, 2022

Genesis 7:17-24

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For forty days the rains fell. For one-hundred and fifty days after that, they swelled, rising higher and higher, engulfing more and more until everything was covered. Everything, that is, except the ark. In this case, the translation offered by the King James Version gets it right: “the waters *prevailed* exceedingly upon the earth.” The waters prevailed! They were victorious over flesh and field and forest and mountain. The waters were victorious *except*...except over that boat, built by Noah in faithfulness and obedience to God, which now contained the seeds of a new creation.

But here’s a questions: Do you think Noah believed deep down in his bones that the ark would survive? Asked another way, what is the nature of Noah’s faith as he meets disaster, meets suffering head on?

Noah was in the ark for months. That’s a long enough time to have a variety of internal responses to the fact that the plan had worked, the ark had risen along with the waters and not been overtaken by them. Verses 17 & 18 cue us into this by using a literary device known as “Hebrew Parallelism.” This means that an idea is repeated in two slightly different forms, in order to paint a fuller picture of the truth. It’s common in Hebrew poetry, especially in the Psalms. Here, it meets us in narrative. We are told on the one hand that “the waters bore up the ark,” and, on the other, that “the ark floated on the face of the waters.”

I’m going to do my best to tease out a difference here, and you’ll have to let me know if you see it, too, or if your experience confirms it. It is the difference between a faith that endures suffering and grows in

maturity and in depth as a result of it, and a faith that triumphs over suffering by the power of its conviction. It is the difference between *the surprise of faith* – “Oh my goodness, we’re floating—it worked!” – and *the assurance of faith* – “Of course we’re floating; God told us we’d float.”

Let’s take each of these in turn.

“The waters bore up the ark.” This is a way of relating to pain, suffering, and disaster that takes them as they come and acknowledges their power to lift us up to a higher plane of perspective, insight, and wisdom. Faith does not so much seek to *overcome* experiences of suffering, to triumph over them, to be hopeful through them, but to endure them and to learn from them.

The Hebrew word for “bore up” is *Nasa*. It means to lift up, to carry. The waters are carrying the ark. They’re lifting up the ark. They’re proving it’s efficacy and its soundness. From this angle, it is through the endurance of suffering that Noah’s faith and the ark’s soundness prove themselves. They are tested and found to be true.

The time in my life when I have been most disoriented, not knowing up from down or left from right, completely awash in chaos both externally and internally, was during the transition between my last year of college and my first year of graduate school. I had grown up in New Jersey in the same house. But toward the end of my last year of college, my parents sold that house, right before Christmas, and moved to Virginia, a place where none of us knew anyone, and then *I* moved – only the Lord knows why – to North Carolina for Divinity School, and was immersed in Southern culture for the first time while living in a stranger’s house. I had some key relationships in my life go by the wayside during that transition. I have to admit, I was not confident or assured of myself or my faith during that season. I had lost my anchor point, my foundation, in New Jersey. I had no friends or connections in balmy, swampy North Carolina. Never again would I go home, only to

my parents' house. The waters were gathering under my feet, and I wasn't sure that I would rise.

But I did. I did. Turns out, upon reflection, I learned lots of things from that time. I grew stronger, more independent, more mature. For example, I came to realize for the first time that my parents were their own independent selves with their own desires. I learned that sometimes it's good to be a wanderer. You entertain a broader set of ideas about yourself and about the world than would you have if you'd never been thrust out of your comfort zone.

Jesus' teachings often point to this mode of encountering suffering. Lose your life and you will find it. Take the worst seat at the banquet and you may be moved up to the best. Spend your time in obscurity, serving the least of these, and you will spend eternity in glory. Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it cannot bear fruit. Go, sell all your possessions and give the proceeds to the poor, and you will know eternal life. There is a wisdom that comes to us when we are diminished, humbled, challenged.

For some of us, this is our experience of church. The church can feel like a bulky, awkward ark. We invest in it, we help build it, we participate in it, but it can feel like a boat in the desert waiting to prove itself. And then the skies fall in and the foundations fall in, and we find that we are so grateful to have this vessel. This vessel which contains a community that will let us fall apart in safety and security, a space to come and center ourselves before God and to hear the gospel proclaimed. For some of us, the church is a gift that proves itself when the storm comes.

This is a safe that endures and learns from suffering.

Then, the scripture fills out the picture with the parallel line: "The ark floated on the face of the waters." This is a way of relating to pain, disaster, and suffering that acknowledges its weakness relative to God's

strength and the great hope of the gospel. This faith does not let itself be troubled or overly fixated on the rising waters. It showcases its fleet-footedness upon them.

For that is what *this* Hebrew verb means. Our translators have chosen to say “floated,” but that’s a bit of a liberty. The word is simply a common verb – *halak* – which simply means going from one place to the next, to walk. This is a faith that *walks* on water. Don’t you like to imagine the ark just *walking* on top of those raging seas?

From this angle, there was never a question that the ark would be seaworthy, never a question that the ark would dance upon this storm. This is not a *faith* that is tested and found to be true but a *storm* that is tested and found to be false.

This makes me think about my grandma. My mom’s mom. Her name is Gail and she lives in Wilmington, Delaware. Grandma is a three-time cancer survivor. She’s had a breast and portion of her jaw removed. She lost her husband almost two decades ago to a gruesome, protracted battle with brain cancer. Ever since then, but in a pronounced way over the last ten years, she has been losing her memory faculties, particularly her short-term memory. The inside of her small house is wallpapered with sticky notes reminding her of birthdays, anniversaries, who to call for what, when and where to shop, that she can’t drive anymore because she doesn’t have her license anymore – *so don’t even think about it, mom* – that’s what my Uncle Scott says, and yet! I have never once heard her complain about her lot in life. I have never once heard her grumble about these losses or doubt the goodness of her God.

She’s grieved, of course. She’s gotten anxious when she realizes she’s not remembering something she ought to know. But for her, faith is that trustworthy ark which dances upon any and all waters. Whenever we talk, she always tells me she’s praying for me, even though she can’t remember where I live. Her home is full of tchotchkes in the form of frogs, and she’s always worn a necklace with a gold frog pendant,

because, for her, FROG is a moment-by-moment reminder to “Forever Rely On God.”

Jesus’ miracles often point to this way of encountering suffering. He rises from the dead. He walks upon the water. He takes a meager supply of bread and fish and multiplies it to feed the masses. He casts out demons with a word and returns the possessed to their true center, their true self. He heals, the forgives. Faith can move mountains!

For some of us, *this* is our experience of the church. The church is the perpetual sign that Christ has overcome the world. It is the present manifestation of the promise that all will be well. So, to participate in the church is to exercise that assurance in community, to proclaim the saving power of Christ to the world, to welcome people into a space that is unshakeable in the midst of every storm. We’re not looking for faith to prove itself to us; we prove our faith to the world.

On some nights around the fire, long after those waters had receded, Noah perhaps told his grandchildren, “The storm came and, would you believe it, I rose. I knew then that I could trust in God.” And, on other nights, telling the same story, he might’ve said to them, “I always knew we’d be okay, because God was with us.”

We need both. I don’t think one of these perspectives is essentially better than the other, more evolved or mature. They both bring their gifts to the community. The *faith that endures* brings a realistic, authentic view of life as something that naturally and inevitably contains storms. The faith that endures allows itself to be fully present to those storms. It *discovers* afresh that God can be trusted. It is teachable. But the *faith that triumphs*, that walks on water, brings a confidence that relativizes every storm. For there is nothing new under the sun. The world may sometimes fall apart. But there is a secret center one can access where peace abides.

Church must be a place that holds space for both outlooks because we are fickle creatures, and our primary or natural posture toward suffering sometimes fails us. For those of us who generally take the way of *assurance*, there may come a time when our confidence is shaken, and we will need people around us who can show us that there is another way to practice faith, a way that isn't dependent on things "working out for the best" or being discernibly God's will, but that is open and curious and teachable about where suffering can lead us. For those of us who generally take the way of *endurance*, there may come a time when we just get too tired – tired of encountering every new storm in its particular messiness. We'll just get worn out. And we will need to hear our brother or sister say, in the words of the old hymn, "Be not dismayed, whatever betide, God will take care of you."

The storm came, and – my goodness – the ark floated.

The storm came – the ark walked upon the waters!

I bet one of those resonates with you more than the other. Even so, let us celebrate both – the faith that endures and the faith that overcomes. By doing so, we will have a greater sympathy for one another and a deeper well of wisdom to draw upon when the world caves in.

Amen.