

## Noah: God's Plan for a New Beginning

First UMC of Pocatello

July 31, 2022

Genesis 6:9-22

\*\*\*

### I

In this passage of scripture there is a sharp distinction between what Noah is commanded to do and what God takes responsibility for doing. The verbs – the imperatives – placed upon Noah are actions of an industrious, creative, and nurturing nature. They call Noah into a posture of awareness of the needs of other people and other creatures, and into a season of meaningful action. The verb “make” is used four times, in reference to the ark that Noah will build. “Keep alive” is used twice, in reference to Noah’s family, as well as the birds, the animals, and the creeping things who will come to him. “Store up” is used once, in reference to the food that will sustain and nourish the inhabitants of the ark. Noah’s is a *constructive* vocation.

God, on the other hand, takes on a very different kind of responsibility – and owns it. “For *my* part,” says the Lord, “I will bring an end to all flesh. Everything in which there is the breath of life will die. I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth. I will destroy. I will destroy.” God takes on a work of deconstruction and dissolution. God is going to bring to naught the things that are. God will do this in response to an earth that is wicked, corrupt, and filled with violence.

In this distinction is a work of profound grace. By taking from Noah the responsibility of judgement, of retribution, of destruction, God frees Noah from many of the temptations that plague us when the world feels full of violence, and when everything feels like it’s going to fall apart.

In times like those – times like *these* – we might be tempted to adopt a passive despair, to numb out, to stop feeling just how hard and tragic life is. In times like these we might be conformed to the likeness of the world, grow angry, bitter, and confrontational, and verbally or otherwise contribute to that sense of ubiquitous violence. We might run away and seek some secret place where the consequences of humanity’s actions will not reach us. We might agonize over the facts, inundate ourselves with the news, burn out our minds trying to understand the big picture, the world’s next step. We might decide that it is our role to take vengeance.

God steals the burden of all of that stuff away from Noah. God will deal with that. And in its place God gives Noah – gives us – a creative mission that is tangible, describable, material, and local: *Build a giant boat. Gather a bunch of food. Call the animals to you. Keep them alive.*

## II

My brother-in-law, whose name is also Mike, used to work at a California Department of Forestry facility in Davis, California known as the L.A. Moran Reforestation Center. The Reforestation Center began as a tree nursery for the state of California in the 1920s. From a first crop of 86,000 seedlings to its output today of half a million trees annually, it helps California’s private citizens and public entities to replenish forests lost to drought, fire, and disease.

But that’s not all the Center is equipped to do. It is also known throughout the state for its zero-degree seed bank. This seed bank is basically a giant freezer that stores conifer tree seeds – currently over 36,000 pounds of pine seed! – which are harvested from cones collected in the field all across California. These seeds can be planted in climate zones and elevations that will allow only very particular kinds of trees to flourish. There are seeds in the Seed Bank over forty years old. It is a record of life, a storehouse of potential lives.

When I talked to Mike about all this on the phone a few days ago, I asked him – because I wanted it to be true –, “Was the Reforestation Center started with an ecological collapse in mind? Were they planning for our present moment of crisis?” Probably too dramatic and contemporary of a question to ask of a facility founded in the 1920s, but I wanted to know: *Was the seed bank some past prophet’s great gamble, their bold solution to a bold problem?* After all, a frozen Walt Disney won’t do us any good – but seeds! We will always need seeds.

Mike is a realistic, historically minded, unemotional person who doesn’t get carried away. “No,” he said, “probably not. It was just started as an insurance against wildfires in this particular place.”

Of course. Seeds grow and seedlings thrive under certain conditions of elevation, temperature, moisture, and soil makeup. A California seed bank can’t save the world.

But then Mike added, “Having said that, what it has to offer the future could be huge,” and he began to explain a reforestation theory to me called “assisted migration.”

Forests naturally migrate. It can take decades, centuries, or whole epochs to perceive the changes on a large scale, but nevertheless over time trees will cast their seeds and develop fresh stands wherever the conditions are best. Forests are not static. They move. 50 million years ago, there were tropical forests encroaching on the Arctic circle. Nature adapts. But the human-induced climate crisis has ramped up ecological change to such a pace that many creatures, including trees, struggle to adapt in time. Enter “assisted migration.”

“Assisted migration” is a reforestation tactic based on the belief that humans can intervene in forest migration in a positive way. We can speed up a forest’s movement over space toward more favorable conditions by planting saplings and seeds. So, a seed collected in

Southern California in the 1980s might yield a ponderosa or Jeffrey pine that would now thrive better somewhere in Northern California in the 2020s. In *that* sense, the seed bank has more than just a *replenishing* mission – it has a *salvific* mission, especially if we remember that the root of salvation is *salvos*, which means “healing” and “wholeness.” Along with replenishing lost forests, the seed bank preserves potentially lost species. And this will only matter more as time goes on.

What I took from that conversation with Mike is this:

Sometimes, it is just enough to give life an edge.

### III

Of course, when you start to think of how that might manifest in your own life, there are two problems that arise. The first is that *giving life an edge often seem impossible*. Save the trees? Save the animals, the birds, the creeping things? Save the children from poverty, starvation, and warfare? Save our bodies from pandemic? Save our public life from despair and divisiveness? Give life an edge? The work is too big. The scale is too huge. The threads of our various sufferings are too knotted together. It's *impossible*.

The second problem is that, if you take giving life an edge seriously, *it's weird*. It's weird. It's weird to build a giant seed freezer in the middle of California. It's weird to build a huge houseboat in the middle of a desert climate where he hardly rains. It is *weird* to build an ark, and corral a bunch of animals, and store up food for a journey when there isn't a cloud in the sky to indicate your work is worth the trouble. People will think you're crazy. And we don't like for people to think that we're crazy.

So often, our response to a dream of giving life an edge is either “I can't do it” or “I won't do it.” Without missing a beat, however, the

scripture tells us, “Noah did this. He did all that the Lord commanded him.”

Why – how – was he so willing?

The first answer is that Noah walked with God. Noah was a person of prayer. In this passage, the majority of the verses constitute an unbroken divine speech to Noah. Noah is *listening* to God – walking and talking with the Lord. As Noah walks with God and listens to God, God begins not just to disclose the *idea* of the dream, some nebulous longing, but a *plan* for bringing the dream into being. “These are the dimensions of the ark: 300 cubits, 50 cubits, 30 cubits. You also need to go get animals, a reproductive pair of each species. Oh, and don’t forget, while you’re in the ark, everyone’s going to need to eat. So store up a lot of food.”

Noah isn’t left hanging. He doesn’t have to wonder. He simply has to listen. The dimensions, the contours, scope and limitations of the dream all become clear to him as he spends time in prayer.

The second resource that Noah had – that you and I have – is that the dream to give life an edge is given in the context of covenant. Covenant is a widely used word in the Bible. It’s a primary way that God relates to God’s people. A covenant is meant to be an unbreakable pledge of relationship between two parties. As much as people are fickle, and much as they falter and fail, from God’s side, from God’s perspective, a covenant never fails. God is always faithful to hold up God’s end of the relationship.

In all the Bible, this is the first instance of this promise. This is the *first* covenant – the covenant with Noah. God promises to be with Noah forever, through all things, as a preserving, inspiring, and empowering presence. God will uphold him through this work. Noah does not have to fear. He may be afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed,

but not driven to despair; persecuted by the mocking of his neighbors, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

As we sang in our hymn a moment ago, in prayer Noah gleans *wisdom* for the work ahead, and in the context of covenant he finds his *courage*. This is why when God says, “Build an ark,” Noah can respond, “How big?”

I believe that the world around us *right now*, in 2022, is still filled with violence. *And* there are moments in history when the consequences of human action return to haunt us. *And* there are times, such as during a pandemic, when we are simply confronted with the fact of our fragility and mortality. Even so, I believe that in your heart, and your heart, and your heart, and my heart, the Spirit is speaking impossible and weird dreams to us. Creative missions! The end of which are very simple: “Keep them alive!” – the poor, the hungry and the thirsty, the despairing and the afraid, the marginalized and the oppressed, the animals and the trees. “Keep them alive!”

God is preparing God’s people *always* to be an ark, a refuge, a sanctuary. So, brothers and sisters, *listen* to that impossible, strange thing inside you.

Bring it to the God who will lead you and who will not forsake you.

May the prayer of our hearts be as a people and as a church, “Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary.”

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.