

Before the Flood

Genesis 6:9-22

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A few weeks ago I cornered a colleague and asked him if he'd read this story of Noah with me and talk about it. "Okay," he said, "but you've got to answer one thing for me first. Anna—what *is* the 'liquid' church?"

I told him that our colleague Rodger Nishioka would soon make all things plain, and "life in the liquid church" would be revealed to us. But since we were not yet living in the fullness of eschatological knowledge, I could only look through a glass darkly. Actually, I thought a *solid* church was a desirable thing to be. If you live in a solid church, doesn't that mean you can count on things to hold their shape, rather than to simply ooze all over the place? Wouldn't a solid church be all about stability and certainty and foundations that no one questions? And isn't that exactly what youth and young adults need, for heaven's sake? Sure. But it isn't where they *are*. Where they *are* is a place more liquid than solid, where every boundary gets pushed and every certainty questioned. A place so hot that anything solid will melt. A place where foundations crumble and you don't know what will rise from the ruins, but you're waiting; you're waiting for the new world that's coming. It isn't the easiest place to be, but you don't always have a choice about that: *where you are*. It's just your context. And the liquid church is a context for ministry.

My friend Kenda Creasy Dean often says that youth ministry isn't just a subset of "real" ministry; it is a *model* for ministry. Youth ministry can teach the church about how to engage all its members, no matter how old they are. And that says to me that maybe this liquid church context has something to teach those of us do ministry in the solid church—or at least, who think we do. Maybe the solid church is a figment of our imaginations. Maybe our churches are more liquid than we want to know. Maybe there isn't a whole lot that's fixed and certain anymore, and maybe we're all standing at some sort of Ground Zero after the towers have fallen. If so, we're going to have to approach ministry in this new context the way you approach an adolescent who's challenging her curfew: carefully. There are some models out there in the chaos if you look for them, people who know what to do when it looks like rain. Which is of course what led me to Noah.

You push a liquid to extremes, and you get a flood; you get chaos. You get the end of the world. And that is the first thing we learn from the story of Noah: *worlds do end*. Towers fall. Old certainties die. Not because people are bad and God is angry, although Noah's story has often been read that way. No, worlds end because God has a vision for how things can be, and powerful ways to bring us to it. God decides when it is time to call a halt to this enterprise and send something new. Maybe the human beings, who are filled with the violence of their faces, would have destroyed the world themselves sooner or later anyway; we don't know. But in the story of Noah, God looks, and sees that it is time for chaos to replace a corrupted order. God sends a flood of waters to cover the world as we know it.

Creation was hard work the first time: six days, light, dark, sea, land, dust, breath:

hard work. But it's even harder the second time, because the only thing God creates is chaos. And by definition, chaos takes it out of you. Maybe that's why God enlists the help of Noah, because if there are to be living creatures after the flood, it won't be because God re-created them. It will be because Noah preserved them. This time around, there will be no *creatio ex nihilo*, no creation out of nothing. Creation must *survive* nothingness. It must survive the flood.

It's hard to say why God chose Noah. We know he was a righteous man, a man of integrity in his generations; we know he walked with God. But the text doesn't claim that he was the only one who did. It never says that Noah was the *last* righteous man left on earth, or that good behavior is the reason God picked him in the first place. It just says, "Noah found favor with God," and we don't know why, exactly. Maybe God needed someone who was good at following directions. Maybe God needed someone who built things that lasted. Maybe God needed someone who wouldn't be distracted by chaos or unhinged by the end of a world. Maybe God needed someone who understood that sometimes the main thing is to stay afloat on top of the waters, and not to try to steer too much: this is an ark, after all; not a clipper ship. Noah might have been all those things: the text says he was a man of integrity, a *many-sided man*, as one translator puts it. And Noah walked with God. My guess is he'd walked that way long enough to imagine the kind of world God imagines. A many-sided world. One you have to cross chaos to get to.

It isn't just Noah that God chooses. It is also Noah's family: his three sons, his wife, his sons' wives. The covenant is with all of them. And when you think about it, that is quite remarkable, because God is investing in memory. God is investing in a story that will be passed down from generation to generation. And God is counting on Noah's family, both generations of it, to do the enormous job of building this ark, because it will take all of them to do it—all their time and labor and sweat and money. It will take all they have. And when the flood starts, it will take all of them to do the work of preserving life, and faith, and (to be brutally honest about it) sanity. When chaos comes, it is death to face it alone. If you want to keep faith and sanity, you need your people.

The ark, as we have noted, is not a clipper ship. It's more like a bathtub the length of one-and-a-half football fields, which must have looked rather ridiculous in dry dock. Obviously it is not meant to navigate the far reaches of the seven seas; it just has to float through chaos. And it may be ungainly, but it's structured: God is quite particular about that. God as much as hands Noah the blueprints for what he is to build, right down to the window and door. It has to have three decks with separate stalls, because of course there is a lot of life to preserve, and you don't want the carnivores sharing deck space with the herbivores. It has to be waterproof. It has to hold a lot of food, but only for a limited time; they won't be living there forever. After all, an ark is just provisional shelter; it isn't a permanent home. It just has to be big enough and safe enough to hold them all for a little while. And if it looks absurd, sitting there in the backyard in dry dock, well, it only looks that way *before* the flood begins. Once the world starts to end, you're a little less discriminating about how absurd you look on your way to the next one.

The text doesn't tell us how Noah reacted to any of God's instructions. There are no words about how he *felt*, whether he laughed hysterically or bit his lip or screamed and yelled about the price of gopher wood. Apparently it's not important—not as

important as what he *did*. And what he *did* was *everything*, exactly as God commanded. Impending chaos demands that, I think. You get very concrete, very focused; you *do* rather than *think* or *feel*. Later, when the flood starts, there will be months and months when you can't do anything but wait, and think about what you did, and what God did, and how it feels to float over the ruins of your worlds.

So now I'm thinking about the liquid church again, and the solid church, and whether there's a model for ministry, somewhere in all this chaos. I think it's an ark.

And then I look around this room, and I see dozens of Noahs. I see youth workers and leaders and ministers in the liquid church who understand that the deeper context for youth ministry is *the end of the world*. It is the end of the world. Childhood ends, innocence dies, and you have to enter the chaos of adolescence if you have any intention of making it to the next world of adulthood. You don't have a choice about it: your body just says, "It's time." One big liquid mess, that's what it is: just a flood of hormones and tears and peer pressure and Please-God-let-me-find-someone-to-eat-lunch-with-today-so-I-don't-have-to-sit-by-myself. Everything you thought you could count on suddenly turns on you: your body, your parents, your friends; where in the world are you? Chaos, that's where. Just a word away from nothingness. The only way to get through it is in something that will float. And that's where youth ministry happens: in an ark.

I look around this room and I see dozens of Noahs. I see people who do Noah's work: building arks to hold their teenage carnivores and herbivores, planning retreats for the long months of rain, laying in junk food to go with the Bible studies, mucking out stalls when the lock-in is over, trying not to get distracted by the elders who see chaos, trying not to steer too much but to let the kids write their own sermons for Youth Sunday, listening, praying, hoping that what they have built is big enough and safe enough to hold them all for a little while, big enough and safe enough to preserve life. I see them floating on nothing more than God's promise: *I will uphold my covenant with you. Make the ark and it will float.*

I look around this room and I see dozens of Noahs. They're not much different than those ancient Celtic monks who believed the best way to found a new church was to build a little waterproof vessel no bigger than a bathtub, climb in, and let the tides and currents take you, because wherever you landed, that was the place to begin your ministry. Those monks knew what youth ministers know: when you're traveling from one world to the next, an ark is a faithful way to go.

I wonder if we're between worlds right now, or about to be. Because there is no doubt about the chaos: the church is in flood. We know what happens when the waters rise, and worlds end. We know about the panic that comes when things you thought you could count on fall away, and the foundations of church and culture threaten to collapse. We know about the fear of being torn apart. Churches split, worlds end, and it's tempting to look for a terrorist to blame: feminism or pluralism or liberalism or postmodernism: something that brought our towers down, disturbed the peace and unity and purity of our church, made us realize we aren't as safe as we thought we were. Find a terrorist, and then all you have to do is go after them; destroy them. Take them out, and rebuild your towers. Maybe you'll end the chaos if you do. Maybe, if you can prove that the earth is filled with the violence of *their* faces, you can justify using a verb like "destroy," a verb which, in this story, belongs to God alone.

Or maybe there are no terrorists to blame. Maybe, as in the time of Noah, the earth

is filled with the violence of *our* faces; *our faces*. Maybe this world as we know it must end. God has a vision for us, another vision. God also has powerful ways to bring us back to that vision, even if we have to float through chaos to get there. We have a few choices, here. We can look around for the last righteous person on earth. Or we can ask who is up for building an ark.

If the liquid church can survive in an ark, that is a huge relief, because it means we don't have to do the work of creating life; we just have to *preserve* it. And not just the parts we like, either; not just the creatures who are warm and fuzzy and easy to house train. No, we have to get some of everything. Some seventh graders. Some sixteen-year-olds. Some twenty-somethings with pierced body parts that you don't want to know about. Some of their parents, and their grandparents, and their neighbors who fought like cats and dogs at the presbytery meeting. We gather some of every creature, and we do our best to nurture them and love them and keep them from eating each other. We get very concrete with our verbs, very focused: we build, we make, we store, we gather-in. We leave the verbs like *destroy* and *flood* to God, because that's not our job. Our job is to preserve life until the waters recede. We do it because God commands it, in the name of memory and in the light of promise. We do it because common sense tells you that when chaos comes, you can't float on your heavy, rubble foundations. You have to go looking for some gopher wood and some pitch, and you make an ark, just big enough and safe enough to preserve life.

I look outside, and I wish it weren't raining. I wish we didn't have to worship in one big liquid mess, with rubble coming down around our ears. I wish God would just take care of it, *the new creation*, without our having to deal with arks and preserving life. I wish every twelve-year-old was guaranteed safe passage to adulthood. I wish chaos didn't strike us without warning, out of a clear blue sky. It does. Worlds end. The only foundation that will float is God's promise: I will uphold my covenant with you. Make the ark, and it will float.