St. Paul's Episcopal Church - Delray Beach, Florida
3 Pentecost - Proper 4 - Year A - May 31/June 1, 2008
Genesis 6:9 - 22; 7:24; 8:14 - 19; Psalm 46; Matthew 7:21 - 29
Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, Rector

Noah's Silence

Pop-Quiz!

Question: What lectionary year are we in?

Answer: Year A

Question: What does the word "lectionary" mean?

Answer: It comes from the Latin word for "reading" and refers to the set readings appointed by the Church for each Sunday of the Church year.

Question: What Gospel do we focus on in lectionary year A?

Answer? Matthew.

Question: What is new about the lectionary this year?

This past December, during Advent, something happened that you might not have noticed....We began using a new lectionary. It is called the Revised Common Lectionary, or "RCL" for short. It replaces the Common Lectionary which we had been using and which was developed by an ecumenical commission in 1969. The Common Lectionary appears in the back of the Book of Common Prayer.

The Revised Common Lectionary was also developed by international liturgical leaders from the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church and from mainline Protestant denominations. Its use is widespread across Christian denominations around the world. It was first published and released for trial use in 1983. Official public release came in 1999.

The Episcopal Church began considering resolutions for its formal adoption at General Convention in 2000. Formal adoption required acceptance by successive General Conventions. At General Convention 2006, held in Columbus, Ohio, the Revised Common Lectionary was formally adopted as the official lectionary of The Episcopal Church. The Resolution required that all Episcopal Churches begin using it in Advent 2007. Consequently, last December 2, we began reading from the Revised Common Lectionary.

From then until now there have been few noticeable differences between the revised Common Lectionary and its predecessor, the Common Lectionary. But with the beginning of Ordinary Time (Ordinary Time consisting of the Sundays following the Feast of Pentecost), a significant new feature of the Lectionary comes into play.

During Ordinary Time, we are given the option of following one of two different tracks. One track is pretty much the same as the lectionary we had been using. Readings from the synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – are read "in course," that is, more or less in sequence, week after week in Years A, B and C. In this track, which again, pretty much follows what we had been doing for years, the Old Testament lessons are chosen by how well they match the theme of the Gospel reading. This option, which is still available to us, has the advantage of establishing a consistent thematic harmony between the lessons.

The new option is different. In the new track, there is a "semi-continuous" reading of Old Testament narratives. In Year A, significant portions of the books of Genesis through Judges are read more or less "in course," which will allow for the consistent voices of the writers and their narrative line to be heard. In Year B, this track will follow the story of King David and his successors and also include readings from the Wisdom literature. In Year C, the lectionary focuses on the prophets: Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea,

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel and Habakkuk. This presents rich possibilities for study and preaching. Additionally, the RCL includes many more biblical stories that feature women than had the Common Lectionary. Another very positive development.

I think adoption of the RCL is exciting and a welcome change. To introduce us all to this change and to take advantage of it, Kathleen and I made the decision to use the track that appoints readings from the Old Testament in sequence, at least throughout the Summer. That means we will be in Genesis throughout the summer and then move on to Exodus. We might not preach on the Old Testament readings each time, though I am going to preach on the story of Noah this morning, but at least you will get to see the narrative in the books of Genesis and Exodus develop logically and sequentially.

Genesis has many of the stories that are very familiar to us. This morning, we began with the story of Noah. It's not the very beginning of Genesis. Genesis begins with the Creation and the story of Adam and Eve. It begins with God creating the heavens and the earth and seeing that it is all good. Pretty quickly however, with the creation of the first human beings in all of their radical freedom, things start to unravel for God and for God's Creation.

By chapter 4 of Genesis, there is the first fratricide: Cain kills his brother Abel. Although Genesis describes the generations and descendants of Adam after that, in chapter 5, the story of Noah and the Flood follows on the heels of that murder and begins in chapter 6. So it's still pretty close to the beginning, and in part, the narrative effect of the story of Noah is to suggest that the story of Creation was almost ended by God before it had a chance to develop.

We all know that story. In fact, the story is well known throughout our culture. Even people who are not biblically literate have some idea of the story of Noah. Yes, we are familiar with the story of Noah, so familiar we can even think of "take-offs" of the story. Last year, the movie Evan Almighty had some fun with the story. It's silly, but good family fare. And who can forget Bill Cosby's classic routine of the conversation between God and Noah? "Noah, how long can you tread water?"

While Cosby portrays a lively dialogue between Noah, filled with give and take, one of the things that is strikingly noticeable about the biblical narrative in Genesis is the silence of Noah. From the beginning of the story of Noah through the end of the flood, Noah never speaks a word. We hear from only two voices, the voice of the narrator and the voice of God.

The narrator, who may or may not be reliable, tells us two things. First, the narrator tells us that Noah was "a righteous man, blameless in his generation" (Gen 6:9) and that Noah "walked with God" (Gen 6:9). Noah, is, according to the narrator, a good man, and, of course, familiar as we are with the story, we know that. We have heard that all our lives. It is the reason that among all the people of the earth, Noah, and Noah alone, along with his wife, his sons and their wives, were spared. That's what we have been told all our lives. It is the party line and we likely have accepted this.

The other thing the narrator in Genesis tells us is "that the earth was corrupt in God's sight," that it was "filled with violence" (Gen 6:11). That "God had seen that the earth was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon earth" (Gen 6:12). God confirms this, in the story. God says, "I will blot out from the earth all the human beings I have created – people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them" (Gen 6:7).

This should give us some pause. Isn't the earth still filled with violence? Isn't it, and especially the human part of it, filled with corruption? Do we really believe that the world was any more filled with violence in the days of Noah than it is now? Do we honestly believe that Noah was the only righteous one God could find worth saving? As others have asked when considering the story of Noah, with all that violence and corruption, were there not any innocent victims?[1]

More than the idea of the great flood itself, more than the implausibility of an ark being able to contain two of every living thing on the face of the earth and all of the food necessary to feed them for forty days and forty nights, the idea that God could only find one righteous person on the face of the earth tests my credulity. What kind of God is this?

You know, I love reading the Old Testament, and I especially love reading Genesis. It generates as many questions as it answers. The portrayal of God in Genesis, the portrayal of God's relationship with his human creation, is lively, feisty, filled with give and take. It is often raucous and wild, at least as Genesis

portrays it. And in Genesis, and actually, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, human beings are not afraid to stand up to God, to talk back to God and even to challenge God when they think God is acting unjustly.

Abraham argued with God over the destruction of Sodom, and forced God to relent, at least for a time (Gen 18:16 -33). Moses argued with God when God wanted to kill off the Israelites in the wilderness, and Moses prevailed in that argument (Ex. 32:7 - 14). The great prophets all understood that their role was not merely to speak God's word to the people, but also to represent the people needs and voice, to God.

That's what troubling about the story of Noah. Noah doesn't say a word. God says to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth..." (Gen 6:13). Noah's response to this? Silence!

In his book Sages and Dreamers, Nobel Peace Prize Winner and author Elie Wiesel has a chapter on Noah. Wiesel observes, "In the biblical narrative he appears to be pious and faithful. He submits to God's will but takes no initiative. Whatever God wants him to do, he does – but nothing more."[2]

"And what if God had chosen not to talk to him?" Wiesel asks. "And what if God had chosen to talk to someone else? Could the others not have said to God, Listen, Master of the Universe, you are unfair; if you wanted us to behave differently, why didn't you tell us? In person, not through an emissary?" "Noah was obedient," Wiesel writes, "of course he was. Who wouldn't be under the circumstances?"[3]

Later in the chapter, Wiesel shares a provocative Midrash. Midrash are rabbinic commentaries on biblical texts. They are often filled with complex interpretations, edgy observations and keen insights. Here is what the 13th century Midrash on Noah cited by Wiesel says: "When Noah finally left the ark and realized the scope and magnitude of the universal desolation all around him, he turned to God and asked: 'Master of the Universe, we call you Rakhoum, the merciful one, the charitable one, the compassionate one – Where is Thy mercy? Thy charity? Where is Thy compassion?'"

"And God put him right back in his place: 'You are nothing but a mindless shepherd,' said the Almighty. 'Now you are asking me these questions? When it is too late — When it is over? Why didn't you speak up before? Really, Noah, when I told to you to your face, Ki othkha raiti tzaddik lefanai, that I considered you a Tzaddik, a Just Man, why did you think I said that? I said it for one reason only: to move you to become aware of your mission, to force you to intercede on behalf of mankind. Why else would I have called you a Tzaddik? I wanted you to assume the mantle of moral leadership and speak up for my intended victims. But you kept quiet. From the moment you heard me reassuring you that you would be saved, you said nothing. You were satisfied, complacent. You chose to become my accomplice, rather than humanity's friend – and only now do you begin to speak?'"[4]

As you probably know Elie Wiesel was a survivor of Aushwitz. His sister, mother and father all died there. It is understandable, his including this Midrash critique of Noah from the Zohar Hadash in his book. Wiesel has strong feelings about the silence of those who consider themselves righteous and just, but who watch atrocities, holocausts and genocides in silence and fail to act.

And it is a challenge to us, too, isn't it? We strive to be good people, and we often are good. But how often we are silent. How often we look away.

Well who can blame us? It is overwhelming, the ugliness corruption and brutality of the world from disasters both natural and manmade: In Sichuan Province, China as many as 80,000 are dead and 5 million are homeless; in Myanmar, in the wake of a devastating cyclone, a brutal dictatorship commandeers relief supplies from around the world so they can stamp their own names on it and take credit for giving it; in Darfur millions continue to live in terror and genocide is wiping them out while much of the world looks away; in the United States 45 million people are uninsured, 8 million of them children and where, as flyers you can find around the church make clear, black babies have the highest incident of infant mortality.

What can we do? What difference can we make? And prayer? What use is that? And so, too often we fall silent, like Noah, who was considered righteous and blameless in his generation, at least as far as the narrator of Genesis, is concerned.

I appreciate Judaism's willingness to wrestle with the text, I appreciate Judaism's willingness to wrestle with God – and after all that's what the name Israel means – He who struggles with God. I appreciate Israel's willingness to struggle and wrestle with the biblical texts and to struggle and wrestle with God because I think this often provokes us into asking important theological questions and leads us into a greater understanding of righteousness and justice and more meaningful and deeper faith and deeds of love.

Too often in Christianity, we set the Bible and its stories on a mantle of pristine and protected piety, treating the Bible and its stories as if they are fragile and easily damaged. We oversimplify the texts, tame them and make them safe and manageable, assuming that is, that we pay attention to them or take them seriously at all.

Of course biblical fundamentalists and literalists seem to take the texts seriously, but too often, they see no room for a lively engagement or critique of the texts. They don't allow room for questioning or challenging the texts and their meanings, and consequently, many fundamentalists' readings are hateful and tyrannical. But biblical fundamentalism and literalism are "Johnny-come latelys" on the religious stage.

Fundamentalism is a product of the early 20th century and represents an aberration of the Judeo-Christian tradition which has always accepted a lively playfulness in the biblical encounter between reader and text. One need only read the Midrash of the Jewish tradition or the allegorical interpretations of the early Christian fathers – Origin and Augustine of Hippo and many others.

This morning, as we sit here in St. Paul's Church, sit here surrounded by a world of violence and corruption, by people who are alienated and hurting, it strikes me that a lively, slightly unorthodox, reading of the story of Noah confronts us. It challenges us to become aware of our mission. It is calling upon us, even trying to force us to intercede on behalf of mankind. It is begging us to assume the mantle of moral leadership and speak up for victims everywhere: in Myanmar and Darfur, in China and our Midwest, victims on SW 12th Avenue in Delray Beach.

The story of Noah is telling us not to keep quiet and not to hide in silence just because we have heard God's reassuring word that we have been saved. It is provoking us and urging us not to be satisfied and complacent. The story of Noah is challenging us not be accomplices in the violence and corruption of our world, but rather, to assume the mantle of moral leadership, to be humanity's friend and advocate. And we have the capacity to do this.

If we have built the house of our faith on solid rock, the solid rock of Jesus, who at all times and in all places intercedes on behalf of the hurting and suffering world, of all who are abandoned and afraid, if we have built our house of faith on that solid rock, and that alone (Matt 7:24 - 27), then we can stand up to anyone and anything.

"Though this world with devils filled would threaten to undo us,"[5] we are called to have eyes that see, ears that hear and mouths that speak out for victims everywhere and anywhere. We can go anyplace and serve any person - in Haiti, in Honduras, Madagascar and Darfur, on the streets of the West Bank, Bagdhad, in Lake Worth, Boynton Beach and Delray Beach.

We can shout out in protest, to those who hurt others, to those who harm and do violence, to politicians and dictators who lie and mislead their people. We can even shout out to God, the Master of the Universe. We can cry out even as lightning strikes and thunder claps and the rains begin to fall, because God, who created us in his image; created us to work for justice and righteousness and peace; God who created us to and for love; expects this from us; this and nothing less.

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1. Wiesel, Elie *Sages and Dreamers* (New York: Summit Books, 1991), 24.

2. Wiesel, p. 25

3. Wiesel, p.25

4. Wiesel, p. 28.

5. *Hymnal 1982* #688 (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 1982)