

“The Lifeboat of Jesus”

One of my favorite stories in the Bible is that of Noah and the Flood. Now I do not like it because the story is about the destruction of the world or the sinning that brought it on. It is also not because of all of the animals which make it a favorite children’s story, except for the fact that all of the people and animals in the story, excluding the fish, are drowned. That part of the story is quite grim. It usually does not show up in children’s storybooks. What attracts me to the story is how important it was in my education.

When I was in seminary and first started to learn to read Hebrew, I focused on the flood narrative. The reason being the way in which one word in the passage was translated. In the NRSV translation it reads “I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”¹ Whereas in the NIV translation it reads “I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”² The problem for me was that the more scholarly version the NRSV, used bow instead of rainbow. I could not understand why the NRSV was so unclear. It is a rainbow not a bow. So they should use rainbow.

But as I went into the resources to determine the Hebrew word behind the English I learned that it was indeed bow. In fact, it was the same word as the name for a warrior’s weapon. Then a light went on and I realized that the reason the writer used bow was to have the reference to what a warrior does when he retires from battle. That is, that he hangs his bow on the wall never to use it again. The writer wanted us to see the similarity between what the warrior does and God does by using the word bow and not rainbow. Indeed, using the word rainbow pretties up the story and one loses the imagery that the writer was intending for us to see. Yes, I am definitely a Bible nerd.

That is a long way into the passage from the First letter of Peter which introduces the flood narrative into the concept of how we receive salvation through the life and death of Jesus. Peter uses the water of the flood that cleansed the earth of those who were doing wrong in God’s eyes with the water of baptism which cleanses us from our sins. Honestly I think that is a bit of a stretch. The waters of the flood killed almost all life on earth. All land animals, perhaps all birds, and of course all humans. The only animals or humans that were saved were those on the ark. Of course, sea creatures would not have drowned so perhaps they were sinless.

The more compelling argument is that the church is like the ark; a place of safety, security and the dwelling place of God’s favor. Church architects took this to heart centuries ago. Many churches, especially Episcopal, Church of England and Roman Catholic, have interiors that are shaped like the inside of a ship. Our church does not but look up in many churches and you see a boat turned upside down. It is no coincidence that the main part of those churches is called the nave. Does that sound like any other word you know that has to do with ships? How about navy and naval (not belly buttons but having to do with ships). The term nave is from *navis*, the Latin word for ship. In many Nordic and Baltic countries a model ship is commonly found hanging in the nave of a church.³

This parallel between the ark and the church makes more sense to me. The church should be a place of safety. “The church is a life boat and shelter from the

¹ Genesis 9:13 NRSV

² Genesis 9:13 NIV

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nave> May 13, 2023

storm.”⁴ Sadly the church has not always lived up to this ideal, and I do not need to detail its many failures. But for centuries if a person was in a church they could not be arrested. The most famous literary example is Quasimodo saving Esmerelda from execution shouting “Sanctuary” as he carries her into the cathedral.⁵ The church was a sanctuary for those wanted by the government. This was long before the concept of the separation of church and state. We have seen some churches revive that practice in recent years as they have become shelters for those wanted by immigration authorities. In most instance those authorities have respected the precincts of the church.

Frederick Buechner wrote about this metaphor thus:

“In one as in the other, just about everything imaginable is aboard, the clean and the unclean both. They are all piled in together helter-skelter, the predators and the prey, the wild and the tame, the sleek and beautiful ones and the ones that are ugly as sin. There are sly young foxes and impossible old cows. There are the catty and the piggish and the peacock-proud. There are hawks and there are doves. Some are wise as owls, some silly as geese; some meek as lambs and others fire-breathing dragons. There are times when they all cackle and grunt and roar and sing together, and there are times when you could hear a pin drop. Most of them have no clear idea just where they’re supposed to be heading or how they’re supposed to get there or what they’ll find if and when they finally do, but they figure the people in charge must know and in the meanwhile sit back on their haunches and try to enjoy the ride.

It’s not all enjoyable. There’s backbiting just like everywhere else. There’s a pecking order. There’s jostling at the trough. There’s growling and grouching, [complaining] and whining. There are dogs in the manger and old goats and black widows. It’s a regular menagerie in there, and sometimes it smells to high Heaven like one.

But even at its worst, there’s at least one thing that makes it bearable within, and that is the storm without—the wild winds and terrible waves and in all the watery waste [with] no help in sight.

And at its best there is, if never clear sailing, shelter from the blast, a sense of somehow heading in the right direction in spite of everything, a ship to keep afloat, and, like a beacon in the dark, the hope of finding safe harbor at last.”⁶

I am not sure it was Peter’s point but we can see that Jesus takes the concept of water of the flood that destroys the sinful and turns it into water of baptism that destroys sin. Thus the ark that floats on its keel is flipped upside down making it into a shelter for us from the many storms that buffet us. A shelter that holds the sacred water of baptism within. Water that symbolizes the saving and loving power of God.

For millennia people have been coming to the church as a shelter from the changes and chances of this life. We come also to find life that is nourishing, food that feeds our souls in the Word and the Table, the two parts of our service. We also come to join in community with others who are similarly searching for safety until the time that we cross in safety to be with God in peace and glory eternal.

⁴ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay> for May 14, 2023

⁵ Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*

⁶ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary* [New York: Harper Collins, 1988]