

THE NEW BEGINNING

by Ray C. Stedman

Today we emerge with Noah from the ark into a new world and a new beginning. We have already seen in these series that though these stories in the Old Testament are actual history -- that is, they are not myth but actual historic occurrences -- they are also prototypes of the spiritual history each of us can experience. In other words, we reproduce these stories in the course of our spiritual pilgrimage. Since this is so, then every detail of these stories is highly significant to us. Learn to read the Old Testament in this way. It is deliberately designed to illustrate to us what is going on in our own lives.

The Flood, as we have already seen, is a picture of a new creation, a new beginning, and for us, a new birth. Paul describes the new birth in Second Corinthians, "Therefore, if any one is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come," {2 Cor 5:17 RSV}. But the Flood is also a picture of smaller events of our lives which involve a crisis of judgment and a new beginning. Such events occur all the time in Christian experience. This reduplication is the way nature functions, also. We know that the smallest atom is built along the general pattern of the whole solar system. God reproduces in miniature in the atom what he writes large across the great wheeling canvas of space. So in these stories of the Old Testament are reproduced the great crisis experiences of our spiritual pilgrimage, and also the miniature crises that occur. Every experience of forgiveness is like a miniflood wherein we miraculously survive a possible spiritual disaster and are brought safely through to repentance and cleansing, and the possibility of beginning afresh on a totally different basis. If you have experienced that you have also experienced in some degree what Noah did in the Flood.

Throughout Chapter 8 of Genesis we will note the alternation of the activity of God and Noah. God acts first to create a certain situation, then Noah reacts to that situation. This is the way it is in the Christian life as well. As always, the initiative is taken by God:

But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, and the waters receded from the earth continually. At the end of a hundred and fifty days the waters had abated; and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest upon the mountains of Ararat. And the waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains were seen. {Gen 8:1-5 RSV}

We are told that "God remembered Noah." Wherever Scripture uses the phrase, "God remembered," it marks the activity of God on behalf of these whom he so remembers. God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark. This is a charming way of saying that God thought constantly about them. He was concerned about Noah and also the dumb beasts that were with him. I think quite justifiably we see here a picture of God's concern also for the church and the world. Noah represents the people of God in any age -- the church in our age -- and, though this is not very complimentary, the dumb beasts in the ark represent worldlings. The unregenerate, in their blindness and their incapacity to help themselves, are frequently compared in Scripture to dumb, irrational beasts. These characteristics are manifested in history in the constant blunders made by a secular society, and by the impossible problems that arise out of secular thinking. How this is being called to our attention today when the thinkers, the philosophers, the statesmen of our age are confessing with embarrassing frequency their bewilderment and bafflement at the problems they are facing and their utter incapacity to solve them. We read so frequently of these things in the news reports today.

But God saves the world for the sake of his people. He preserved the animals in the ark for Noah's sake. He "remembered" them for Noah's sake. The Word of God alone gives us the true picture of the structure of

society. God deals with the secular world on the basis of, and for the sake of, his people. What his people are will determine what God does with the world. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world," {Matt 5:13a, 5:14a RSV}. Far too little has been said about this from the pulpit. The business of preaching is to help Christians see that they are responsible for the way society goes. We must learn this, for history and Scripture both unite to confirm it.

So God moves to save the beasts and cattle because of Noah. The result is, the wind blows upon the earth. As you know, the wind is throughout Scripture a picture and symbol of the Holy Spirit in his sovereign activity. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound thereof, but you cannot direct its activity," {cf, John 3:8}. You cannot predict where the wind is going to blow; it is sovereign. And you cannot understand it; it is mysterious. It is amazing that even in this day of advanced meteorology we still do not understand much about the blowing of the wind. It is an apt symbol of the Holy Spirit whose sovereign, mysterious activity is essential to mankind.

As the wind blew, the account tells us, the strange forces which produced the Flood were reversed. The fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed. Thus these two unique forces, which have never been active in earth since that time, were reversed and the waters began to subside. The waters apparently flowed back into the ocean basins, the floor of the ocean subsiding to its present level, and the hills and mountains changing, rising and falling in various places. This perhaps accounts for much that scientists are finding in nature today. It may explain the great bone yards where great numbers of bones of animals and birds, mingled together, are found, especially upon hilltops. These may well be the direct result of the Flood. As the account tells us, the waters receded; and in the Hebrew it is made clear they receded in tides, "going and coming," which is translated in our version "continually." It indicates great tides washing around the earth.

What is particularly significant in this section is the date when the ark grounded on the hills of Ararat. This is given very precisely. It was the first sign to Noah and the inhabitants of the ark that a new world was about to appear from the waters. It was their first ground of confidence that the judgment was abating and the flood waters were receding. They felt the ark ground itself upon on the mountains of Ararat, and the date of that is given. It is a very significant date. You will, perhaps, be amazed to learn that it is the exact day of the year when Jesus rose from the dead. In Exodus Chapter 12 we are told that, at the giving of the Passover, God changed the seventh month to the first month. He made Passover the beginning of the year, though previously the beginning of the year had come in the fall. On the fourteenth day of the first month (which was formerly the seventh month) the Passover was to be eaten. We know from the gospels that, on the day the Passover was eaten, our Lord died in Jerusalem. Three days from the fourteenth would bring us to the seventeenth, and on the seventeenth day of the first month Jesus rose from the dead. That would be the same as the seventeenth day of the seventh month in the old reckoning of this passage in Genesis. It is most significant that the ark grounded upon the mountains of Ararat on the same calendar day on which our Lord rose from the dead, thus signifying that life in the new earth for God's people was to rest upon resurrection power. I do not think we could possibly have a clearer picture given us than this portrayal of the basis for our life in this present world.

Now Noah is expected to act upon God's activity. So the Christian life is not to be a passive, lazy experience, but a continual response to God's activity. We read in the next section:

At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made, and sent forth a raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put forth his hand and took her and brought her into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and lo, in her mouth a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days, and sent forth the dove; and she did not return to him any more. {Gen 8:6-12 RSV}

What shall we make of this strange story of the raven and the dove? They are clearly symbolical, even though also historical. The raven is listed in Leviticus as one of the unclean birds, forbidden to the Jewish people to

eat. It is the first bird that is released from the ark. According to the Hebrew it flew to and fro, never returning to the ark, evidently feeding upon carrion and resting upon floating carcasses that were there in abundance during the Flood. As the account makes clear, the raven is no help to Noah whatsoever. The release of the raven tells him nothing about the condition of earth. Noah sees it flying to and fro above the waters, seemingly quite satisfied with the conditions it finds. It does not return to the ark but rests upon floating carcasses and feeds upon them. The dove, on the other hand, is a clean bird. It did not fly abroad and remain, but returned to the ark. It rested only in the ark until a new world was ready for it: On its last return it brought an olive leaf in its bill as a symbol of life and peace.

Now what does this all mean? It clearly pictures facts with which we daily must relate. In our present life, according to the Scriptures, though we are redeemed, there are two natures present within us. One is truly ours; the other is an imposter which is no longer ours, as Paul puts it in Romans 7, but with which we must contend until we are released from its presence by the resurrection of the body. One is called "the flesh" and the other "the spirit." The whole struggle of the spiritual life arises out of the conflict of the flesh with the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh. One is evil, unclean; the other is clean, and good. These are symbolized by these two birds. It is God's way of telling us that in the present age, like Noah, we must live with two natures: one which is truly ours, and one which is an imposter.

One is like a raven: it rests and feeds on anything. It finds delight even in carrion, in foul and filthy things. But it is of no help to us. If we rely on it we will learn nothing worthwhile about ourselves or the world around us. It is useless, as far as any profit in life is concerned. That is the flesh. Scripture is utterly consistent in these things, teaching us all the way through of the worthlessness and emptiness of the flesh in its apparent ability to think, reason, and act. It is all worthless, and God pronounces it so in the cross. That is the offense of the cross. The natural man does not like to be told that all that he can do apart from God is useless, yet that is exactly what the Lord Jesus says. He told his disciples, "Without me, you can do nothing," {John 15:5b KJV}. It is not that they would not be active, but there would be nothing worthwhile, nothing of any value, nothing that would enhance or bless or strengthen, or prove at last to be gold, silver, or precious stones. It would all be wood, hay, and stubble; an imposing facade, but nothing behind it.

I was privileged to have part once in a baccalaureate service held at Stanford University Memorial Church. It was a strange mixture of truth and error. The music was great, consisting of great hymns of the church, but much of what was said was directly contrary to the Christian position. Here, in part, is a responsive reading which was used in place of Scripture: "The whole nature of man must be used wisely by the one who desires to enter the way. Each man is to himself absolutely the way, the truth, and the life. Seek it by plunging into the mysterious and glorious depths of your own inmost being." There is the raven flying. It is so much humanistic gas! No wonder our present generation looks in vain to the secular wisdom of the world to guide it. How can it when it feeds on that kind of carrion?

In contrast to that is the dove, our true nature which can only find rest in the ark, in Jesus Christ, until a new world is made ready for it. This is exactly the experience we are going through now, isn't it? We have a new nature within, a nature imparted by Jesus Christ; his life joined with our life, his Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, born again, waiting in the ark for a new world to arise. That new spirit bears witness within of life and peace in Jesus Christ. It brings to us the olive leaf. This is truth we need to know to cope with the world in which we live, just as this was expressive of truth Noah needed to know to live in the world of his day.

Now the next step is God's:

In the six hundred and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried from off the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and behold, the face of the ground was dry. In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. Then God said to Noah, "Go forth from the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring forth with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh -- birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth -- that they may breed abundantly on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply upon the earth." So Noah went forth, and his sons and

his wife and his sons' wives with him. And every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves upon the earth, went forth by families out of the ark. {Gen 8:13-20 RSV}

Again, the date of this act of Noah's is significant. We are told it was the six hundred and first year (of Noah's life), in the first month, the first day of the month. Those of you who are familiar with the Scriptures and its use of numbers know that the number six is the number of man. Noah spent his six hundredth year in the ark, as symbolic of what man alone produces -- nothing but a hiding from judgment. But at the very beginning of the seventh century of his life (seven is the number of perfection), the first year, the first month, and the first day, he left the ark to go out into a new world, a new beginning. This is symbolical of the beginning of a Christian life. It marks the end of the old; the end of our dependence on man, on ourselves, and the beginning of our dependence on God. It is to be lived in a world which is yet a mixture of good and evil, truth and error, but it is a new beginning. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away, behold, all things become new," {2 Cor 5:17 RSV}.

Then comes God's command, "Go forth from the ark." It is striking throughout this whole story the way God directs the activity of Noah. He is the one who says, "Make an ark for the saving of yourself and the animal world." He is also the one who says, "Come into the ark." Now he is the one who says, "Go forth from the ark." The timing is God's, and the initiative is God's. For Noah there is nothing but simple acts of obedience. Safely, securely, through all the difficulties and problems, God's word leads him to do the right action at the right time. Isn't this exactly what we are called to? We make the ark, like Noah, when we learn of Jesus Christ. We are commanded to learn of him. When we expose ourselves to the Christian message we learn of Christ, and thus make an ark for ourselves. We come into the ark when we trust the grace of our Lord Jesus, when we trust his Word, believe him, and rest upon what he said. Then we go forth from the ark when we act as redeemed men and women in a lost world, when we act as forgiven sinners, living by the grace and constant presence of God in our lives, in the midst of an ungodly generation.

It is fitting, therefore, that the chapter should close with a scene of thanksgiving and of promise:

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth, neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." {Gen 8:20-22 RSV}

The striking thing is that the first thing Noah does when he leaves the ark is go give thanks to God. Wouldn't you think he would at least have stopped to build a fire and cook a meal? No, this man knows how to put first things first. The first thing he does is to give thanks to God. What a scene, as they knelt down in the mud and gave thanks! It is the constant call of God to man, "Give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you," {1 Th 5:18b KJV}. It is because, of course, giving thanks means we recognize reality. When you give thanks you are recognizing the undergirding of God, the presence of God, in the midst of life, and his control over the affairs of life. Thus you cannot give thanks without recognizing the situation as it really is. In Romans 1, God's charge to a false and godless world is that, "although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him," {Rom 1:21a RSV}. They did not recognize the basis upon which their life depended. Though they would not hesitate to thank someone who so much as picked up a handkerchief for them, they could find no time to stop and give thanks to the God upon whom their life depended. But Noah built an altar and he gave thanks to God for his deliverance.

God said, "Never again will I send a flood upon the earth, because the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." There's nothing that a flood can do to change the heart. Destruction does not change it, so God does not send a flood again. Another means must be found to change man. Thus God lays the groundwork for a fresh proclamation of the message of redemption to a new world. We read that Noah's thanksgiving was a sweet savor in the nostrils of God. Do not read this crassly. It does not mean that God smelled a barbecue over the fence, as you do sometimes, and his mouth began to water. Some of the old Babylonian accounts which parallel the Flood story say that the gods had grown ravenous because of the lack of men's offering during the

days of the Flood, and, when Noah offered his sacrifice, the gods gathered like vultures above it. That, of course, is myth, but it does catch one great note of truth: that God delights in man's thanksgiving and praise. It is a sweet savor to him of Jesus Christ.

That is the point of this account. God saw, in this act of Noah, the total givingness of Jesus, the fact that here was One who, like these sacrifices, yielded up his life for the sake of what would be accomplished thereby, without reluctance, but gladly, willingly. As God saw that reflected in sacrifice, it was to him the fragrance of Christ. That is what God is after in our lives. How do you glorify God? How do you live for his honor? By giving yourself, that's the way. That is what true love is.

The world is constantly talking to us today about rights. "Claim your rights, demand your rights, stand for your rights." That is exactly the opposite of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. "If you lose your life, you will save it," he said {cf, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24}. If, in selfishness and greed you demand your life and try to hang on to it, you will lose it. God has written that across the pages of history, and he writes that across the page of every individual life. "He that saves his life shall lose it, but he that loses his life for my sake shall find it," {cf, Matt 16:25}. To "lose" your life is a sweet savor of Jesus Christ.

God's response is to give man a promise. We read, "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." The revolution of the earth around the sun, the rotation of it upon its axis, will never stop again, God says. The laws of nature will remain steady and dependable. If man plants seed there will come a harvest later. It all rests on the faithfulness of God. God's word declares this, and thousands of years of human history testify to the truth of this verse. Never again has God allowed these things to cease. This verse implies that part of what caused the Flood was some hesitation in the revolution of the earth, or in its rotation. But never again, God says, shall that happen. It is because that does not change the nature of man. World catastrophe will not change man. There is only one thing that changes man: the grace of a living God revealed in Jesus Christ. "I am the way, the truth, and the life," says Jesus. "No man comes to the Father but by me."

Prayer:

We are sobered, Father, as we think how our very lives depend upon your faithful word; how the existence of this planet, its place in the galaxy, its revolution around the sun, its rotation around its axis, the production of flowers and grain and food and fruit, all rest upon a faithful God. We praise you, Lord, that our redemption, our deliverance from the sin that eats away at the vitals of humanity, also rests upon that same faithful word. We pray that as we come to this Lord's table there may be a sweet savor of Christ going up to you from this place; that here you may sense a willingness of men and women to give themselves -- husbands, to give themselves to their wives; wives, to give themselves to their husbands; parents, to give themselves to their children; children, to give themselves to their parents; friends, to give themselves to each other; men and women to give themselves for their enemies; to love, to honor and to obey your word. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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