***NOAH: WHY ME?***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

July 10, 2016

Texts: Genesis 6:5-8, 11-22 and Ephesians 4:17-24

Most of us have a love-hate relationship with computers. We love them when they work the way they are supposed to and make tedious tasks simple or arduous tasks easy; we hate them every time they freeze up at an inopportune moment or suddenly go blank in the midst of a project. While the tech gurus among us may be savvier about how to cure the faults and defaults, even they will admit there are times when the only solution to the total depravity of a contentious computer is to reboot – shut it down and start over.

Apparently that was the conclusion God reached with regard to humankind as this story of Noah and the flood begins. The world is a mess and the writers (there are at least two traditions interwoven here) describe the mess in graphic terms – violent, evil, corrupt, wicked! So bad are things that “the Lord was sorry he had made humankind on the earth.” That is a pretty harsh indictment – to be so bad that God regrets the whole human project and concludes that the only solution is a reboot of creation, to blot out from the earth all humans, animals, birds, creeping things and creepy things alike. *Shut it all down and start over* is the divine solution to the mess humans have made of the good world God created!

One hundred years ago at this time the First World War was raging across Europe. The death and destruction were immense – over 9 million combatants and 7 million civilians killed in just over four years with countless others permanently wounded in body, mind or spirit. I am currently reading a book about theological themes in that war. Many people saw the titanic struggle taking place across Europe as a struggle between good and evil, a cosmic struggle in earthly space. Others saw the war as evidence of a world gone badly awry, a world approaching that point of no return of Noah’s day when violence and evil ran rampant across the face of the earth. There are those who look at events in the world today and wonder whether God is again sorry that humankind was ever made in the first place. Just this past week we saw bombings in Bangladesh, two more black men killed by police officers in Louisiana and Minnesota, and five police officers killed by a shooter intent on killing white people in Dallas. As one commentator phrased it yesterday:

*[I]t’s easy to understand why people in 2016 feel an undercurrent of ruin. WTF (instant coverage of events on Twitter, Instagram, and the like) leaves us hyperinformed and exhausted with despair.*[[1]](#endnote-1)

There seems to be a never-ending cycle of violence from which we cannot escape. Perhaps every generation has such moments, times when the world seems to be in such a mess that not even God can redeem it without pushing the reboot button and starting anew. Which brings us back to the story of the flood and Noah, for the gist of that well-loved story is that creation is never beyond God’s redemption, and the reboot button has been removed from the divine keyboard.

The form of that reboot in the Noah story is forty days of rain that creates a flood that sweeps across the earth destroying all animal life except those tucked safely away in the ark. It is a story that most of us have heard from our earliest days, a story full of animals that capture a child’s imagination, flood waters that carry the wrath of God, a rainbow that holds God’s promise that it will never happen again, and one man – Noah – who is at the center of the story and the leader of God’s plan to preserve a remnant of humans and animals alike.

The first inkling that Noah is to be the hero in this tale comes on the heels of God’s proclamation of death and destruction. “I am sorry that I have made humankind,” says the Lord. “BUT,” says the text (and it is a significant *BUT*), “Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD.” Just when it seems there is no hope for humanity, just when it seems that divine wrath is about to come raining down upon all people literally and figuratively, just when all seems lost in this divine relationship with humankind, a big BUT appears and a glimmer of light shines, a ray of hope peeking out from under the rain clouds in the person of Noah. The text does not tell us what Noah had done to find such favor in God’s sight. It tells us nothing about his gifts for leadership or record of accomplishments. Noah is pretty much a one-dimensional character in this story, for the text says only this about him:

*Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.*

In the person of Noah we find the new starting point for creation in God’s reboot – a righteous man who walks with God.

To walk with God is to follow God’s commandments, to be obedient to God’s voice, to live and act as God wants you to live and act. Abraham and Isaac are described as men who walked with God. By contrast, the Israelites in the day of the Judges are described as “turning aside from the way in which their ancestors had walked, those who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD; they did not follow their example.” To walk with God is to follow the righteous path of God, a path that is marked by justice, kindness, love, and obedience to the Lord. As the prophet Micah so succinctly states:

*What does the Lord require of you? Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.*

Who then is the god with whom you walk humbly or not so humbly day to day? With whom do you keep company on the road of life? Do you walk with the God of Abraham or do you keep company with lesser gods who promise wealth or creature comforts or power? Do you walk with Jesus or with idols of hedonism, racism, nationalism or any other ism that tickles your fancy and leads you away from the way of the Lord? You cannot keep company with both God and those lesser gods who are no gods. You must choose with whom you walk.

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul urges Christians to abandon those other paths and to walk in the way of the Lord , to put away the old self corrupted and deluded by lusts for people, power or wealth, and embrace a new self, created according to the righteous, holy likeness of God. It is the way of Jesus whose followers in the first century were called simply “the Way”. It is a Way that is God’s way, a way of obedience to God’s commands including that great commandment to love God and one another.

As one who walked with God, Noah was obedient to God and God’s way. That is the recurrent theme in the story. God tells Noah to do something, and Noah does it without question or dispute. He builds an ark of cypress wood covered with pitch to the specs God has given him even though there is not a raindrop in sight. He gathers into the ark two of every kind of animal (male and female) and samples of every kind of food just as God has commanded him. He welcomes aboard his whole family and no one else, just as God instructed. “Noah did all that the Lord commanded him,” says the text again and again and again. In Noah God chooses a leader who is obedient to God’s every command, a leader wholly devoted to God’s way, a leader who walks with God without deviation.

Not many of us are Noahs – blameless, always obedient, always righteous. We are more likely to be treading water in the story. We are more combative with God, more doubting of God, more hesitant to do whatever God asks. We walk with God until we get distracted and wander off down some other path on our own. We walk with God until we get an offer that seems better, an offer that promises us a path to make our journey more comfortable or less difficult. We walk with God intermittently at best. But when we find ourselves alone or lost or treading water, we long for God to be by our side even if we are hesitant to race to God’s side. We want to walk with God without giving up our sinful ways to embrace God’s way; we are slow to abandon our old sinful selves in order to embrace our new righteous selves in Christ, to use Paul’s terms.

“You cannot determine the kind of leader you are without first figuring out who you are,” writes Harry Kraemer.[[2]](#endnote-2) Or to put it another way, you cannot determine the kind of leader you are without first figuring out with whom you will walk. So who are you? With whom do you walk day to day? Are you one who walks with God and Jesus each step of the way or are you walking with some other god to the cadence of your own drummer? Are you a fair-weather disciple who walks with Jesus as long as all is okay or a foul-weather disciple who walks with Jesus only when the going gets rough? Or are you a disciple who walks with Jesus on good days and bad, even on those days when the storm clouds roll in and the waters begin to rise?

Had God called us to build the ark and reboot creation, we might all be treading water for a long, long time! But God didn’t call us; God called Noah – the faithful, righteous leader who always walked with God. Maybe we can be a little more like Noah and walk with God more faithfully. Then God might be able to use us too – if not to build an ark, then at least to build a rowboat to help out those who are drowning in our midst. There is a song from Swaziland that captures well that commitment. So, I invite you to open your hymnals and sing with me Hymn 742 not just as a song to sing, but as a promise to make:

*We will walk with God, my brothers; we will walk with God.*

*We will walk with God, my sisters, we will walk with God.*

*We will go rejoicing till the kingdom has come.*

*We will go rejoicing till the kingdom has come.* Amen

1. Hank Stuever, “The News Team of Today Has 3 Call Letters”, *The Washington Post*, July 9, 2016, p.C-1 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Harry Kraemer, Jr., *From Values to Action*, Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 2011, p.14 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)