

**6 Easter  
May 21, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

Have you ever noticed that the front doors to this church are painted red? We are not the only church with red doors ... many Episcopal churches ... as well as Lutheran, Methodist and other churches ... paint their doors red. Have you ever wondered why?

There are several explanations I have heard. The first explanation is that the red door indicates that the church's mortgage has been paid off. Another explanation contradicts the first. The red doors indicate that the church's mortgage has NOT been paid off. In some ways it makes more sense since it means the churches financial books are in the red ... so why not the doors. Whatever ... neither is a very theologically satisfying answer, so let's just dismiss them.

I believe a better answer is that red doors indicate a place of sanctuary ... sanctuary as in protection and safety and refuge. Some say that this comes from the story of the Exodus and Passover when the lintels were smeared with the red blood of a lamb to indicate which houses the Angel of Death was to "Passover." Thus the red doors tell of holy ground behind them, protecting people from both physical and spiritual evil. Today many churches proclaim with red doors that their community is a haven for emotional and spiritual healing, and that they are a place of refuge and safety, forgiveness and reconciliation ... in other words, red doors invite the passers-by into a sacred space filled with the Holy Spirit. In some ways our red doors indicate a haven in much the same way as Noah's Ark was a haven for all of God's creatures during the 40 days and nights of unrelenting storm.

We didn't read the full story of Noah and the ark this morning ... it was an optional reading in our lectionary. During the Church's liturgical season of Easter the First Reading can be either from the Hebrew Scriptures, or from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. This year we our First Lesson throughout the Easter season is from Acts. However, we did hear Peter refer to Noah in the Second Reading this morning.

Now, I realize that it seems like a minor reference, and it is a stretch to preach on just a few words, yet I think that the story of Noah and Ark is particularly relevant today, and the story of Noah and the Ark is one of my favorites.

There are many people who read the story of Noah and the Ark as literal, historical fact. Did you know that you can visit full-size replicas of Noah's ark in Amsterdam ... it is an actual sea-worthy ship? There is Noah's Ark under construction on a hillside in Maryland along I-60 ... Caren and I used to drive by it as we traveled between West Virginia and Washington, DC.

There is another in Kentucky that just open last year ... a huge boat in an amusement park. This Kentucky ark is a project of the Creation Museum ... a theme park near Cincinnati dedicated to creationism ... so this Noah's Ark has dinosaurs in it. And the State of Kentucky actually has given the project tax incentives for the tourism it will create.

Building replicas of Noah's Ark is one thing, but there is also the investigations into the many possible sites where Noah landed after the flood. The Bible says he landed on Mt. Ararat ... but is that the Mount Ararat in modern-day Turkey, or is it over in Iran? Will we ever know? I guess the real question for me is "Do I really care?"

In the end, the reference to Noah's Ark in 1 Peter 3 makes a simple but profound point when it compares church baptism to Noah's ark ... the church should be a place of refuge and safety. It is a lifeboat. A shelter from the storm.

Traditional church architecture is, in many ways, an expression of the story of Noah. The main part of the church where you are sitting is called the nave. The word "nave" comes from the Latin word "navis," meaning ship ... a collection of ships is a "navy". The church nave symbolizes a ship with its vaulted ceiling looking like an inverted keel. And so the church is a safe place in a storm. This building is a good example. Take a moment to look up at the ceiling. Imagine it turned upside down and it looks like the inside of a large boat ... at least the way boats used to be made.

When I was the priest at St. John's in Northampton, Massachusetts I had the joy of teaching a class of twelve year olds about the church. I had them lie down in the main aisle of the church and look up at the ceiling and tell me what they saw. To them it looked like the inside of a big boat. There were some parents who accompanied their children and they laid on the pews. Later they told me the ceiling looked like a big capital fundraising project because they could see the stains where the roof was leaking!

I can remember as a youngster ... standing in front of an antique hutch cabinet which was taller than me ... asking my mother whether the story of Noah and the Ark and all the different animals was "true." I'm sure that it was the first question about the Bible that I ever asked. I don't remember her actual words, however, I came away with an understanding that it was a story about God ... but it was a story. You have heard me say many times that I look at Bible stories like Noah and the Ark from a slightly different perspective than many people. For me, it is not whether the story ever actually happened, but how do I know this story to be true in my life today?

Fredrick Buechner is an outstanding author and acclaimed preacher. In his book *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary*, Fredrick Buechner comments on the church as Noah's Ark. As I read this remember he is talking about people in the congregation, not just animals on Noah's Ark.

*"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.*

Buechner goes on to say,

*"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, bitching 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.*

Then Buechner concludes,

*"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 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."*

Fredrick Buechner's description of the church ... using the image of Noah's Ark ... sounds like the church I know ... a church with welcoming red doors. And those red doors are open to everyone. They provide a haven from the raging storm outside. They provide protection from all that assaults us. They provide safety when we feel threatened. They indicate a sacred place of holy ground beyond the threshold. The First Letter of Peter proclaims a truth that we are celebrating this Easter season ... new life ... a new life in the safety of a holy place ... a new life in this community with open red doors.

Amen.