

**6 Easter
May 17, 2020**

**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.**

Although we just heard a wonderful reading from John's gospel, the sermon this morning is about Noah and his Ark. I realize that the reference to Noah in the First Letter of Peter is rather vague ... and, to me at least, confusing ... but Noah has a special place in my heart and soul. Noah's Ark was a haven for all of God's creatures during the 40 days and nights of unrelenting storm. Maybe ... just maybe ... it has something to say to us during this merciless storm of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic.

When I was seven or eight, I asked my mother if the story of Noah and the Ark was true. Her answer was, "Some of the stories in the Bible are just stories, but they are about God." In many ways, that one encounter ... this curiosity and the beginning of questioning ... has acted as foundation of my life in faith. From then on, I had permission to read the Bible as stories about God, whether or not the stories were factually true. I, for one, believe that this story of Noah and the Ark is not historical, but it still can tell us a lot about God ... about God with Noah during the Flood ... and God today in this COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic.

Of course, there are those who believe that the story of Noah and the Ark is literally and factually true ... that the story of the Flood is an historical fact. You can visit full-size replicas of Noah's Ark in places such as Amsterdam and Hong Kong. There is an 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 Ark in Kentucky ... it is a project of the Creation Museum, a theme park near Cincinnati dedicated to creationism.

Of course, there are also all 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?

In the end ... and after all the complications and confusions ... 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 life boat. The Church is 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 the congregation sits 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. Our 120-year-old

building at St. Cyprian's is a good example. Imagine the church 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. However, there were some parents who accompanied their children and they laid on cushions in the pews. Some of the parents lacked the imagination of their children. One father later told me the ceiling looked like a big capital fundraising project because he could see the stains where the roof was leaking!

Fredrick Buechner is an outstanding author and acclaimed preacher. In his book *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary*, Buechner compares the Church to Noah's Ark. As I read this, remember that Buechner 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 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 [where they are going] and in the meanwhile [they] sit back on their haunches and try to enjoy the ride."

[However,] "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 ... 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 ... even during this crisis. Even as we meet remotely our church community ... St. Cyprian's ... provides a haven from the raging storm outside. Even as we are separated from each other, this faith community is doing its best to provide protection from all that assaults us.

For some in the greater community who come by to sit in our sanctuary and pray, this sacred space provides a safe retreat for those who feel threatened. Our open doors indicate a holy place of hallowed ground beyond the threshold. In spite of the storm raging outside ... this COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic ... St. Cyprian's is a safe ship, even if it is sailing to an unknown destination.

The "Church" is not the building ... although this 120-year-old building is surely a sacred space. The "Church" is its people ... and the connections between them. Fredrick Buechner speaks of "the people in charge must know [where they are going]." In the case of St. Cyprian's "the people in charge" include Bishop Howard and the Diocese of Florida, St. Cyprian's Mission Board, and me and Pastor Deena. However, I'm not so sure that I have the same confidence Buechner has that "the people in charge" actually know where they are going ... when they are going ... and how they are going. I know I am confused, yet I have some ideas and some suggestions.

First of all, Bishop Howard formed a committee of folks from around the Diocese to consider the what, when, and how of allowing churches in the Diocese to "re-gather" for worship, meetings and Coffee Hours. Bishop Howard sent out a letter on Wednesday of this week indicating that there is a "potential" that churches would be allowed to "re-gather" for worship on Sunday, May 31st ... Pentecost Sunday ... two weeks from now. Then, on Friday evening, the "Re-Gathering Committee" issued its report with three phases to the process of re-opening. Each phase must meet certain external criteria to have a church re-gather, and then there are a number of internal factors that must be in place for the church community before it can come back together again.

Let me be clear. As far as I am concerned, we at St. Cyprian's WILL NOT be "re-gathering" for public worship on May 31st ... on Pentecost Sunday. I do not believe that, under any reasonable circumstances, we will not be ready for that. This may be a disappointment for some, and for others a relief. I, personally, would love to have public worship here at St. Cyprian's as soon as possible. However, in the best interest of the people of this community of faith, I do not believe we are ready ... and I don't believe that we will be ready in two weeks.

So, what will it take to be "ready?" First and foremost, a safe environment ... outside in the world, and inside in this building. A safe environment outside in the world means paying attention to the statistics about the COVID-19 infections in our area. A safe environment inside means masks for everyone. Social distancing and limiting total attendance. No singing. No physical contact while sharing the Peace. Hand sanitizer available for everyone. And disinfecting of all surfaces before and after services among other things.

Phase One of Re-Gathering ... when the outside environment has met the criteria specified by the Diocese of Florida ... allows worship, study, and prayer meetings of no more than 10 people at one time ... all with masks ... with social distancing ... with hand sanitizer ... and with and a long list of other precautions. For us ... in this small church of St. Cyprian's ... this means maybe 10 people would be allowed to worship with us on Sunday morning. For reference, on Sunday,

March 15 ... just before everything was shut down ... we had 89 people in the congregation. I hate to say it, but it will be a very long time before we can gather like that again ... if ever.

During this shutdown, we have been recording this worship service on Saturday afternoon, then uploading it to YouTube to be published on Sunday morning. This special ministry by very special folks has allowed the St. Cyprian's community to worship together even as we are isolated in our own homes.

To make this recording possible, we set up a camera tripod between the choir stalls, and use Mary Beth Martin's iPhone to record the service. Usually, there are about 6 or 7 people here in the church ... me and Pastor Deena (when she is with us); Mary Beth who is our videographer; a Lector to read the lessons; and for the past few Sundays we have an organist and several singers to carry us through the hymns. Every once and a while someone stops by the church to pray and finds us in the middle of the service and is an extra soul added to our attendance statistics.

Anyhow, this set up won't work whenever that time comes that we "re-gather." Once we re-gather, the worship service will be held on Sunday mornings. That means we will have to "live-stream" the service if people are to see it in real time, as well as record it for folks to view later. To do so, we will have to upgrade our internet service, purchase appropriate recording equipment, and acquire a new computer and software. Then we have to find someone to operate the new system ... and, of course, there is a learning curve to be considered.

I've gotten a long way away from Noah in this sermon ... and from God. I've gotten into the "weeds" as they say ... too many details. Maybe it is just seaweed from this storm. However ... just to let you know ... the Mission Board and I are actively addressing these issues. Our re-gathering as a community will take a very long time. The well-being of the members of this congregation are foremost in our thinking ... especially those who are most vulnerable. We also recognize that there is no returning to "normal." We are constructing a "new normal."

Noah was in the Flood for 40 days of a raging storm. When the storm ended Noah sent out a dove, but the dove returned to the Ark because it could not find dry land. Noah waited seven days, then sent the dove out again. This time it came back with an olive branch ... it had found dry land. And then God made a covenant with Noah, and the sign of that covenant is a rainbow.

There has been a saying going around, "We are all in this together." Some have interpreted that to mean we are all in the same boat, and the inference from the story of Noah is that we are. However, I saw something on Facebook the other day, "We are not all in the same boat. Rather, we are all in the same storm, just different boats ... if we have one."

Our storm is still raging in many parts of the world. In spite of the appearance that the storm may be abating in some areas, some scientist and doctors are advising that this COVID-19 storm may continue for some time to come. The "boat" that we are in is St. Cyprian's. We are waiting

for the dove to come back with an olive branch telling us that it is safe to put-ashore. And, we do this with God's help.

This isn't just a story of a large boat with all kinds of animals on it. It is about safety in the midst of the raging storms of life ... such as this COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. It is about God's will for us, even as we are being tossed to and fro. It is about our trust in God that will bring us through this storm.

One last thought. Caren and I were in Phoenix a number of years ago and stopped at an art gallery. There was a picture there titled "The Day After." Illustrated in an almost in cartoon fashion, it included animals of every kind ... on hillsides, along rivers, on mountaintops ... every species paired off together ... all engaged in a literal life-giving activity (that is a euphemism) ... all bringing new life to the world. Remember, that is part of the story too.

Remember, God is with us in the storm. And, when the raging is over, there will be new life for all of us.

Amen.