

Sinking Sand

Genesis 6:11-22; 7:24; 8:14-19

¹¹Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. ¹²And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. ¹³And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. ¹⁴Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. ¹⁵This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. ¹⁶Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks. ¹⁷For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. ¹⁸But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. ¹⁹And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. ²⁰Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive. ²¹Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them." ²²Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.

²⁴And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days.

¹⁴In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. ¹⁵Then God said to Noah, ¹⁶"Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. ¹⁷Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth." ¹⁸So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. ¹⁹And every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out of the ark by families.

Romans 1:16-17; 3:22b-28 (29-31)

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith. For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. ²⁷Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. ²⁹Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of

Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. ³¹Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Matthew 7:21-29

²¹“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²²On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ ²³Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

²⁴“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!” ²⁸Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with Apocrypha

This morning’s scripture reading from Noah is a story that we all know and have heard many times. When I think of Noah’s ark and the flood, I think of a children’s Bible story, sort of a Biblical fairy tale for kids. These books are two that Carol and I bought for our granddaughter, and they show how the story of Noah is usually depicted.

A Sunday school teacher once asked her pupil, "Johnny, do you think Noah did a lot of fishing when he was on the Ark?" "No," replied Johnny. "How could he, with just two worms."

Some of the first memories that I have as a child are of church and Bible stories like Noah’s Ark. When I was small, back in the late 50's and early 60's, our family lived in a town in north-central Oklahoma called Ponca City, where my father taught high school. My parents joined a small Methodist Church in Ponca City called Asbury Methodist Church. (Back then it was before the church became known as the United Methodist Church.) Many of my earliest childhood memories are associated with that church.

Memories like an ice-cream social on the church lawn with all the church families bringing a freezer of their favorite home-made ice cream. One look at me and its easy to see why home-made ice cream made such a lasting impression on me! Memories of Vacation Bible School in the summer. We kids thought that it was a real treat to go to Vacation Bible School, but looking back at is as an adult, the person getting the real vacation was my mother, who got the three of us kids out of the house for a few hours. It was probably in Vacation Bible School, or possibly in a Sunday school class, where I first heard the story of Noah’s Ark.

By the way, the Asbury United Methodist Church is still there. I Googled it one day while I was on my computer, and sure enough, the church shows up on Oklahoma Methodist websites.

When I grew up, the story of Noah's Ark started to seem a little ridiculous. The thought of Noah building an ark big enough to hold all the animals in the world. And gathering the animals from all over the Earth, from the Arctic to the Antarctic, from Africa to China to America. My engineer's mind had a lot of trouble believing the story any more.

I don't know why I should have so much trouble with the story. After all, I believe that God created the universe and everything in it. How hard could it be for God to make the lamb and the lion get along with each other for a few weeks on a small boat? I believe that God raised Jesus from the dead on Easter morning. So why is it so hard to believe that Noah was able to collect and feed and clean up after a floating zoo?

Still I have trouble with the story of Noah's Ark. And maybe you have problems with the story too. When preparing for this sermon, I had to read the story again and try and discover the meanings beneath the familiar tale. For me, it helps that the story of Noah's Ark was paired with these particular scriptures from Matthew and Romans. That gave me some insights that I hadn't had before.

When you get down to it, the story of Noah and the ark is more than a story of a boat, and animals, and a flood. It is the story about a person, Noah, and his relationship with God. It is a story about a man who listened to God and he and his family did what God told them to do. Listen to what it says. After God told Noah to build the ark and gather the animals, verse 22 says ²²*Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.*

Noah did all that God commanded him. That is the point of the story for me - the point that I never heard as a child - the point that I finally have begun to understand while preparing this sermon. The story tellers and writers of Genesis were trying to tell the Israelites something when they included the story of Noah in their sacred texts, and it wasn't necessarily about boats and floods and animals. It was about listening to God, and doing what God wants you to do. It has only taken me 50 years to figure this out.

Thousands of year after Noah and Genesis, this same idea surfaces again in the book of Matthew, in the teachings of Jesus. Jesus is speaking to his disciples and other followers. He tells them:

²⁴*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—*

and great was its fall!”

I particularly like the words in today’s hymn, “My Hope is Built”, that paraphrase this Scripture passage: “On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand”.

The thought of sinking sand reminds me of another vivid memory from my childhood. Back when I was a little boy I used to watch Tarzan movies on television. The movies were in black and white, but even if they had been in color, I wouldn’t have known it, since we only had a black and white TV back then.

The movies starred a former Olympic swimmer named Johnny Weissmuller. Johnny Weissmuller won five Olympic gold medals in swimming in the 1924 Olympics, but he is best known in his role in Tarzan movies. During the 1930s and 1940s, Weissmuller made at least a dozen Tarzan movies, and I probably watched all of them at least once.

All the movies seemed to be based on a similar formula. Tarzan lived in a tree house in the jungle in Africa with his chimpanzee companion Cheetah. Into the jungle where Tarzan lived would come an expedition of Americans or British explorers, dressed in their khaki shorts and pith helmets, looking for treasure, Albino gorillas, or something along those lines. One of the members of the expedition was always a pretty woman named Jane. And they always had a group of black porters to carry their belongings. Back then, there weren’t many black people in the movies, and when there were, they were usually servants, or in the case of Tarzan movies, porters.

After watching a few Tarzan movies, I began to figure out that most of these porters were doomed. By the end of the movie, most of them would be killed in some manner or another, picked off - one by one, two by two, in a variety of ways. One of the typical ways for the porter to die was to fall into quicksand. The expedition would be walking along a jungle path in single file, explorers in front, porters bringing up the rear. Next thing you know, one of the porters would step in quicksand. Slowly he would sink into the sand, yelling and thrashing all the while. The other porters and members of the expedition would be standing around with branches and vines trying to rescue him, but in the end, the porter would always sink out of sight. After a moment of silence, the expedition would move on.

So when I hear the words “sinking sand” I think of porters sinking out of sight in the jungle.

Jesus also used a vivid image to illustrate his parable. The image was of a house built on sand. Jesus was a carpenter, so building a house is likely something that he had a lot of experience doing. And any house builder knows that in order to have a sturdy house that will stay standing, you have to have a strong foundation. A foundation built on something solid, not on sand.

So Jesus uses the metaphor of a house to illustrate the same idea that the writers of Genesis used Noah for - the idea that safety comes from listening to God and doing what God asks of you.

You can think of it sort of like God giving you an instruction manual for operating your life. If you read the manual and do what it says, you will be better off than if you don't read it. The religious writer Dick Donovan explains it this way:

Doing what Jesus tells us is like following the owner's manual for your car. That manual tells you how often to change the oil. It tells you how often to check the brakes. It tells you how much air to put in the tires. That manual was written by the people who designed the car, and has lots of wisdom in its pages. It will save you money if you follow it, but it won't do any good if you never take it out of the glove compartment -- if you don't do what it tells you to do.

Some years ago, I dealt with a young woman who had made a mess of her life. Among other things, she had bought a new car -- more expensive than she could afford -- but she never changed the oil. After a year or two, the car quit running. She had it towed to a repair shop, where she learned that it needed a new engine. It was painful to hear her story, because I wanted her to do well -- to have a good life. It was painful to watch her make one bad decision after another.

Jesus must feel that way sometimes. He loves us. He wants us to be happy. He wants us to do well. And he gives us a good deal of instruction concerning how to live. He says that if we do what he tells us to do, we will be strong like a house built on rock.

The writer Philip Yancey sees another facet of the scripture when he writes: *"Observing the modern world, French sociologist Jacques Ellul noted a striking trend: As the Christian gospel permeates society, it tends to produce values that, paradoxically, contradict the gospel." This has proven true in both the United States and Europe, where Christian faith has given way, in many cases, to "characteristics which run counter to the teachings and example of Jesus, whose life was marked by poverty, self-sacrifice, and purity."*

Yancey says, *"I found a clue in the writings of Gordon Cosby, the founding pastor of Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. He noted that high-commitment Christian communities begin with a strong sense of devotion, which expresses itself in a life of discipline. Groups organized around devotion and discipline tend to produce abundance, but ultimately that very success breaks down discipline and leads to decadence"* (Philip Yancey, "Forgetting God," *Christianity Today*, Sept. 2004). <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/009/21.104.html>

Yancey's observation is that wealth, in many cases, warps character, moving the faithful away from the faith that brought them prosperity. So when Jesus speaks of the wise man "who hears these words of mine and acts on them" and the foolish man "who built his house on sand," we

need to pray for protection against the forces that tempt us to abandon wisdom and to pursue foolishness.

Well, how do we know what God wants us to do? Where do you find the instruction manual? After all, it is easier to do something if you know *what* you are supposed to be doing. John Wesley pondered just that question over two hundred years ago. The answer Wesley came up with was that there are four ways to know what God wants you to do. The four ways are: 1. Scripture; 2. Tradition; 3. Experience; and 4. Reason; and they are referred to as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

Wesley said first to look to the Bible - to study it for answers. Secondly, look to the traditions of the Church - the teachings and insights of Christian theologians and scholars throughout the ages. Then look to your personal experience with Christ in your life. And finally, use the brain that God gave you and think about what the right answer ought to be. By using Wesley's Quadrilateral, stand a pretty good chance of figuring out what God wants you to do.

But even when you know what God want you to do, it is often difficult to listen and respond. And if it is so hard to listen to what God is telling us to, and then to do it, where does that leave us? Are we doomed to sinking sand, sinking to our deaths like the porters in the Tarzan movies? For the answer to that, we can look to the third scripture reading for today, from the book of Romans.

In that scripture, the Apostle Paul tells us: ¹⁶*For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.* ¹⁷*For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith. For there is no distinction,* ²³*since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*

Paul tells us that even though we sin and fall short, we will be saved by our faith in God. We will be saved by God's grace and mercy. The grace and mercy that Jesus gave us by his death on the cross. As Paul puts it: ²⁸*For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.* But then he goes on to say: ³¹*Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.*

So Paul is telling us that we should listen to God and do what God tells us to do. But he is also telling us that sometimes we will fail to do that, and that during those times the grace of God will be there to save us. But even knowing that we will fail sometimes, we must try nonetheless.

Amen.