

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 8:13-18
SECOND LESSON: 1 Peter 3:13-22
May 10, 2020

“Do Not Be Afraid”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

At this point after 8 weeks of shut-down and panic we all need a little light relief, so here’s a true story from Kentucky. Last May the owners of Noah’s Ark sued their insurance company over rain damage. One Baptist minister described the suit as the case of *Irony v. This Has to Be Joke*. But it actually happened. Ark Encounter in Williamstown, Kentucky, is suing its insurance carriers, not only for compensation, but for punitive damages, because people are making fun of them! They want a jury trial. They’ll have to find twelve people with absolutely no sense of humor.

The circumstances of the real Noah’s ark weren’t funny at all. When we finally come out of this pandemic we will probably feel like Noah and his family emerging from the ark. The world will have been devastated. New growth will just be beginning, and we may feel like strangers in our own land. While this ancient story has acquired a lot of skeptics along the way who question if it ever happened, there is geological evidence of a massive flood in the entire Mesopotamian region, which at that time did constitute “the entire world.” Further verification is found in the fact that there is another Noah story. It’s a little different and his name is Utnapishtim, but we still have an ark and a cataclysmic flood. There is a historical root here—a genuine experience of a world-shattering flood and a new beginning. It had to have been terrifying.

We’re all a bit on edge right now. As the quarantine extends, the economic crisis worsens and cases of the coronavirus are still on the rise in many areas of the country we don’t know what is going to happen next. We don’t know if there will be school in September, and if there is, what it will look like. A simple trip to the store has changed drastically. We put on a mask as we walk out the door of our homes. Those of us who are able to work from home hope we’ll be able to continue to do so until the crisis is over. Those of us whose jobs have disappeared don’t know how we will manage. People who have to work outside the home are extremely stressed, especially those in the medical profession. If the coronavirus can even penetrate the White House, who is safe?

Peter was addressing people who were also afraid, but for a very different reason. They were afraid of rejection and persecution. Peter asks, “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?” The answer to that question would be, “A lot of people.” He knows that, so he continues, “But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats; **do not be frightened**. But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that

you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.”

Peter’s hearers were afraid of being attacked, of being verbally ripped to shreds and humiliated. They were afraid of being rejected by their families and ostracized by their communities. But he told them to refuse to give in to this fear and to not allow others to set the agenda. Be prepared to give an answer, said Peter, and give it with gentleness. The word for gentleness is sometimes translated as humble, but it does not mean a timid or weak person. Peter is encouraging them to be quietly self-assured. When we have nothing to prove it is impossible to push our buttons.

And then Peter refers to Noah, and if we’re honest, it’s hard to figure out what he’s talking about. Martin Luther was completely stumped. Theologians all have different ideas, but no one can actually say for sure what Peter meant. What most scholars agree on is that Peter and the people he was writing to likely had a common background we don’t. They read the book of Enoch, a book written two centuries before Christ that did not ultimately make it into the bible, but was considered authoritative by many at the time. Enoch is even quoted in the book of Jude in the New Testament. The book of Enoch has a lot of strange explanations about human and angelic sinfulness before the flood. There are angels seducing women producing giants who then become demons. If you ever want a nice intellectual discussion on the subject I’d be happy to talk to you about it at another time. You can probably even find a copy of Enoch online. But Peter’s real purpose in mentioning these things is to point out that God is able to stop evil. Discussions on whether or not Jesus visited hell to preach to lost humans or fallen angels are beside the point, because not only do we not know, we’re probably asking the wrong question to begin with. What we’re told is this: Noah and his family were saved through the waters, and we are saved through Christ, symbolized in the waters of baptism. Furthermore, Christ has authority over all principalities and powers because not only could he travel anywhere, he is now at God’s right hand with “angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.”

The message is simple. We do not need to fear evil. Jesus is more powerful than any demonic force. Every horror movie featuring malevolent spiritual forces is nonsense. Not only is their power exaggerated and distorted, if we stand firm in Christ no real spiritual power of evil can touch us. And when we begin to appreciate the protection and authority we actually have in Christ we can turn the tables in prayer very quickly. Spiritual evil cannot kill us. It can confuse, distort facts and oppress us if we don’t know how to fight back in Christ, but it cannot kill. But evil incarnate is another matter. Evil that takes human form can kill us. Even evil in the form of a virus can kill us. And Peter knew that the people he wrote to were up against human evil. It was physical, concrete danger. But he still said, “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.”

When it comes to dealing with fear the bible is consistent. We are told: **don’t**. But from the human point of view the only way I am NOT going to be afraid is if I am *guaranteed* everything will be fine. No one wants to be told,

“You’re going to die, but don’t be afraid.” We all want to be told, “You’re going to live till you’re 100 and everything is going to come up roses.” And some scriptures seem to promise this. Psalm 91 says, “A thousand may fall at your side and ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.” Isaiah 41:10 proclaims, “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” We all want God to keep us safe. This is really not all that unreasonable considering that God gave us the will to live in the first place. But we all also know that while *sometimes* we are protected from harm, other times we are not. Life is far more complicated and nuanced than we would like it to be.

In this mixed reality Peter encouraged people to be active in the face of evil. He did not say, “*Don’t be afraid. Just sit around and do nothing.*” He said, “*Don’t be afraid. Follow God’s lead. Speak and take right actions.*” God wants us to use the skills God gave us and to do so in a way that is honoring to God. Navigating difficult circumstances is one of the ways that we mature spiritually. Sometimes God allows obstacles in our lives, not to destroy us, but to strengthen us. What is essential is that we seek God’s guidance and strength each step of the way and not try to do things in our own strength. Our job is to keep our eyes focused on the end goal, walk closely with our savior, and not give in to fear, because ultimately God will have the victory. No matter what is going on in your life right now, God says, do not be afraid. Amen.

Genesis 8:13-18

13 By the first day of the first month of Noah’s six hundred and first year, the water had dried up from the earth. Noah then removed the covering from the ark and saw that the surface of the ground was dry. **14** By the twenty-seventh day of the second month the earth was completely dry.

15 Then God said to Noah, **16** “Come out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and their wives. **17** Bring out every kind of living creature that is with you—the birds, the animals, and all the creatures that move along the ground—so they can multiply on the earth and be fruitful and increase in number on it.”

18 So Noah came out, together with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives.

1 Peter 3:13-22

13 Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? **14** But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” **15** But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, **16** keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. **17** For it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. **18** For Christ also suffered once for

sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. **19** After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— **20** to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, **21** and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ,**22** who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.