

Children's Time

June 1, 2008

Before today did you ever hear the story about Noah and the Ark?

A big flood that would cover the whole earth was coming.

God wanted to save Noah and his family.

God told Noah to build a very big boat called an ark.

In the ark, God told Noah to put seven pairs of every kind of animal so they would be saved too.

So Noah heard what God said and he did it.

He loaded the ark with lions and lambs and cats and dogs and giraffes and elephants—and even bugs and snakes—every kind of animal.

It rained for 40 days and 40 nights. I bet it didn't smell very good inside that ark after all that time. But finally it stopped raining and Noah and his family and all the animals came out safe on dry ground.

The End.

Before it got to be in the Bible, this was a story people told about a time long, long ago. It was so long ago, we don't know if it really happened. What mattered was the people who told each other the story wanted to say what God was like. The people who told the story wanted to remind each other and us too that good things happen when we listen to God and obey. They wanted to tell us that God loves all of the animals, even the ones that seem strange or scary to us, and that all of the animals need protection too. They wanted us to imagine that inside the ark the people and all the animals could get along peacefully just like when God first made the world

and everything was fresh and new. But especially, children, they wanted to remind us that God loves us and takes care of us no matter what.

Let's pray. God, thank you for loving us and taking care of us always even when it's stormy or scary. God, help us grow in faith as we learn to listen for your voice and do what you ask us to do. In Jesus' name, AMEN.

Sermon

Hear Then Do

June 1, 2008

Good morning. My name is Gary Brewton and I am Lay Leader here at Bering. One of my duties is to preach in the pastor's absence, and this week he is taking a well deserved vacation.

Today's readings speak to us about hearing and doing: about hearing God's call, then making the faithful response. Let's look closer at the passage from Genesis in which righteous Noah hears God's call to make an ark and fill it with his family and all the animals, and he obeys and he is saved; at Paul's letter to the Romans in which he says the gospel is the power of God revealed through faith for faith; and at Matthew's gospel, in which Jesus says "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Abba in heaven."

The Noah story is one of covenant and response. Covenant is a legal term. It is like a contract but it is between unequal parties. God promises and we humans obey. There isn't any negotiating with the Awesome One. We are created with free will, but our only choice is to obey or not. Noah hears God's call to covenant and he builds an ark.

The Hebrew Scriptures are filled with God's covenantal promises. Not included in today's readings, after the flood God sets a rainbow in the sky as evidence of God's covenantal promise not to destroy the earth by flood again. (Note God does not promise he will stop us from doing it ourselves, if our global warming causes the Greenland ice sheet to melt.) Later in the book of Genesis, God calls Abram and Sarai to covenant, telling them to leave their home and go where God will show them without giving them any more details. God promises them that in return they will have many descendants, that they will have a land, and that they will be a blessing to all the world. In faith Abram and Sarai step out, not knowing where they will wind up, but obeying God's call. Still later, at Mt. Sinai following the Exodus out of Egypt, God gives the Hebrew people the covenant of the law. God says "I will be your God and you will be my people" is the promise and the response. The people's response is heard in the words of the *shema* from Deuteronomy: "Hear O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." And God further tells the people "...put these words of mine in your heart and soul,...bind them as a sign on your hand, ...fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." This law is the basis for the placing a *mezuzah*, a small scroll containing the *shema*, inside a small case on the doorpost of a home by its Jewish occupant. I have one on my front door left by the family who lived there many years before I did. If the people keep God's covenant, God will bless them by multiplying their days in the land God promised to their ancestors Abram and Sarai. And later still, when the people break that covenant and are carried off into exile in Babylon, away from the promised land, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the prophets who speak for God, say God has not abandoned his

people. God will make a new covenant and, unlike the old covenant written on stone, it will be written in their hearts. God's will for us shall be intimately knowable. God is with them and is with us, even in captivity, even in the darkest moments of pain, suffering, isolation, and death.

We Christians teach that God has made a new covenant available to all by faith in Jesus Christ. The promises God made to Abram and Sarai are available to all God's children. This is the gospel message Paul speaks of in our reading from his letter to the Romans. Now gospel is one of those words we hear a lot in church, but its origin is not always appreciated. Gospel means "good news." In the days of the Roman Empire it was used originally for the announcement of a military victory or of the succession of a new emperor. For the Romans, the "good news" was that the people were safe because the emperor, who was worshipped as a god, was in control. In this context, the contrary Christian proclamation that Jesus Christ is Lord is a radical statement, because it denies that the emperor is. Proclaiming Christ is Lord could get you killed—crucified as in Nero's time or thrown to the lions. Paul argues that hearing this good news calls for the response of faith. God's covenantal promises are available to all people by the free gift of God's grace. Our response, like that of Abram and Sarai, is to step out in faith without knowing where exactly God is leading us.

Finally, Jesus throws down the challenge to us would-be followers, that proclaiming Him Lord is not enough; even the demons can say who Jesus is. Rather, when we hear the good news that Jesus is Lord, we have to respond with action that goes beyond words, that goes beyond praise worship. To participate in the kingdom of God, we have to do the will of God. And what is the will of God? Jesus answers in Matthew 25: feed the hungry, give the thirsty something to drink, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the prisoner, and in Matthew 28: go and make disciples of all nations. Remember, Jesus says, I am with you always.

My friend Steve Yocom used to say, faith is a verb. Faith is seen in action. Faithful action reveals God to a world that yearns for wholeness and healing.

While all this sounds good, often in particular cases it's hard to hear what God is calling us to do. We face competing choices for our time and energy. Discernment is the term we use for the process of listening for God's call to us both as individuals and as members of a congregation. Discernment uses the spiritual disciplines of prayer, study, fasting, spiritual guidance, contemplation, and others to open us up to what God is saying. You have the opportunity for a wonderful introduction to the Spiritual Disciplines at the upcoming Bering retreat, and I encourage you to register and attend. Here at Bering our Visioning Community has been charged with the task of discerning God's will for us as a church. We believe that the Spirit had led us in the past and will lead us in the future as we seek to make our faithful response to the gift of God's grace seen in the life and death of Jesus Christ. I ask for your continued prayers and your continued participation in the work of the Visioning Community. We face many challenges. The culture is increasingly cynical about authority in general and church people in particular. For many of us, the connection to church is tenuous because we have not discovered our gifts and graces for service, or because we see church as being solely a Sunday morning activity. The United Methodist Church remains divided about full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer people. Moreover, while we work for full inclusion of GLBTQ people, we have not devoted similar energies to understanding our own exclusion of people because of racism, sexism, classism, homosexism, and other systems of belief that oppress. We pray that God will show us a better way to live together, the kingdom living that God wishes for us. Let us together promise God and each other we will with God's help make this effort.

As individuals, discerning the call that God makes on us can be difficult too. As you may know, I believe God is calling me to ordained ministry. I have experienced this call as a deep longing for many years but did not acknowledge it—in fact I actively resisted it because it seemed to make so little sense. Here I am, after all, now 54 years old, established in my medical practice, taking care of people living with HIV/AIDS for 26 years, doing the work that I know how to do and that I'm good at.

I first began to take seriously this call to ministry in 2003 when I was in class training to be a facilitator for Disciple Bible Study titled *Jesus in the Gospels*. One of the people who sat at the table with me was the pastor of a small United Methodist church in the Oklahoma panhandle. She had come all the way to Houston to take the training too. Waiting for the elevator, out of the blue, with me not even knowing her or having talked to her much, she told me I should be a minister. She discerned that God was calling me. I replied, But I can't, I'm a gay man, to which she responded, That doesn't matter, and with that, like an angel, she was gone. I don't even know her name. In our brief interaction at the training, she saw something in me that I could not see in myself. It didn't matter that I am gay, because when God puts his finger on you, that's it, there's no negotiating. You can try to run away like Jonah, but where do you go?

The hardest part about going into ministry is giving up the relationships I have with the people who have honored me by allowing me to care for them all these years. I am deeply attached to many because we have journeyed so far together. I pray that God will yet show me how I can answer the call without losing these relationships, but ultimately my only choice is to obey, to go where God is calling me. Any other notion of freedom is an illusion.

In all this, notice that God does not promise that we will be successful or that we will see the fruits of our labors. Empire, now as then, denies God's saving grace and crushes God's

people. Violence, as before the Flood, corrupts the land. Dr. Martin Luther King, like Moses, did not get to the promised land. The kingdom of God, however, has already broken into reality in the life and death of Jesus Christ. The kingdom will be fully realized only in God's own time. But as Christians we have the confidence that God is always with us. God loves us. God's covenantal promises can be trusted. God is the solid rock on whom we can build our spiritual home. When we hear God's call then act in faithful obedience, we receive the blessing of participation with God in bringing the kingdom of God here and now.

May this prayer from John Wesley's Covenant Service always be in our hearts. Let this us pray together:

Lord, make me what you will.

I put myself fully into your hands:

Put me to doing, put me to suffering,

Let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,

Let me be full, let me be empty,

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and with a willing heart give it all to your pleasure and disposal. AMEN.