“Time to Build an Arky, Arky”

Genesis 6:11-22, 9:8-15

Rev. Rebecca Weaver Longino

First Presbyterian Church, Luling, TX

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It’s funny how a particular smell can send us into a tailspin of memories or emotions. Our noses pick up a familiar scent and our mind kicks into gear, remembering another time when we encountered that smell. Our bodies have a way of reminding us of important things.

For me, the combination of sawdust and Peppermint gum brings me back to elementary school when my dad would drive straight from work, pick me up at the house, and then take us to the soccer field where he would coach my team two days a week. He would always smell like sawdust, after working on houses all day, and he’d be chomping on peppermint gum, his favorite flavor. In those rare instances I actually smell those two things together I am immediately taken back to those days of soccer. It’s as though I can feel the shin guards strapped on my legs, and my walking becomes wobbly, as though I’m wearing cleated shoes.

Other smells have a similar effect on me. This probably won’t come as a surprise, but there are a lot of smells that have associations with churchy type things. Perhaps my olfactory system played a role in my path to ministry. Pollen makes me think of Easter Lilies lining the front of the sanctuary. Grape juice, communion. Of course.

And then there’s manure, oddly enough.

I don’t recall a lot of the details, but when I was very young I went with a friend to her church for a special event. They brought in dozens of types of animals, but this wasn’t a petting zoo. We kids sat in a field and watched as the animals were guided, two by two, up a ramp and into a pretend ark. There were cows and horses, chickens and ducks, cats and dogs, plus an assortment of others. The man playing Noah narrated the story. That God was saving these animals and setting them aside for a very special purpose. I suppose this was my first exposure to the scent of manure, thus the permanent association with Noah’s Ark.

As I was telling a friend about this, she remarked how funny it is that even bad smells can make us recall such good memories. For me, the story of Noah’s Ark was always a happy tale. One that we learned in Sunday School, celebrating God’s love for us and all of creation.

But as a child, I somehow missed the other aspect of this story. The destruction part of it. Our Sunday School teachers didn’t tend to offer the backstory – the reason why Noah had to build an ark. I suppose that part it isn’t much of a kid friendly story.

I hate to be a Debbie Downer, but there’s a side this story that is pretty brutal. If we gloss over it, we lose sight of the meaning behind the story, the reason God sent that flood and called Noah to build an ark.

The truth is, the world was broken. If we go back a bit, to the Garden of Eden, things were perfect, until that fateful day that the apple was eaten, humans were enlightened, and sin entered in. It was all downhill from there.

Adam and Eve’s son Cain killed his brother Abel. Just five generations later, we find another murder in the family. Lamech. He killed a man because the man struck him. Hardly a fair response. Who knows what happened in the generations between Cain and Lamech. We don’t get many details, but no doubt there were more murders. More destroyers.

These were very broken people. Imagine if this early family were filled with soldiers from the ISIS regime. Those men who have been beheading foreign journalists on camera. This is the sort of horrifying act that must have been common during those early days after creation. Humanity became sinful and went way overboard with it. Destroying each other, destroying creation. The days of harmony in the Garden of Eden were but a distant memory.

And then Lamech the murderer had a son named Noah. Noah was a man of righteousness and one who walked with God. He was faultless compared to the rest of his family tree. Finally, somebody good after generations of so much bad.

Perhaps Noah brought to mind what God had originally intended for humanity. He displayed goodness and faithfulness. God may have said “Oh right. That’s what I had hoped for. Just look at how far off base my children have strayed.”

And so God decided to destroy the earth. God decided to call for a redo. Reset everything and start all over.

This is the part of the story we don’t really like to think about. We prefer to jump ahead to the salvation part. The lovely scene where the dove brings back the olive branch. We don’t want to think about our God, causing so much destruction. We don’t want to think about why God went to such an extreme, without giving the people a warning. Trying to steer them back on course. We don’t like to think about our creator changing his mind and causing destruction of everything.

Those aren’t pleasant thoughts to linger on.

I have to wonder, though, if God was just speeding up a process that humanity had already put into motion. Everyone was destroying and corrupting the earth. They were killing each other and the environment. Is it possible that God was acting mercifully in wiping everything out? Just hurrying along the inevitable? Doing the destruction in one fell swoop, so the generations of people could be saved from their own destruction? Sounds like an extreme measure, but maybe God didn’t have any other options. That’s how bad things were here.

Now, God certainly could have gone back to the time before humans were created. God could have wiped all of us out and gone back to that old hobby of creating stars and planets. Watching supernovas burst throughout the Universe. I’ve been reminded by Neil deGrasse Tyson on my new favorite show *Cosmos*, that the universe is billions of years old. It is a complex tapestry woven together. I happen to believe that God is the weaver of the universe.

I can just imagine God delighting in the wonders of space for all those years before humans were created. Why not go back to that time when humans didn’t complicate things so much?

It seems God’s heart was changed. It could be that Noah made quite an impression. This man of righteousness may have reminded God of humanity’s potential for good. Perhaps God’s heart swelled, in the memory of these creatures created in God’s image. Something changed. God was so grieved through love for humanity. And so God allows a remnant to remain. Rather than start from scratch, God invites Noah to stick around.

God makes a covenant with Noah. All Noah has to do is build that ark to specification, load up the animals and food, and make sure no one dies. God doesn’t give any other stipulations. God doesn’t say, so long as you are faithful to me, I’ll be faithful to you. God doesn’t say, you have to behave well in order for this covenant to be valid. All God says is to load up those animals and take care of them and each other. God will take care of the rest.

In this way, God starts again with a new creation. The ark become the Garden of Eden. It must be paradise if all of those animals somehow get along with each other. Noah’s family manages to survive 40 days and 40 nights in a confined space without killing each other. The rains subside and dry land is found. Creation has a chance at a fresh start. A new beginning.

We know that this harmony didn’t last long. Sin and evil entered back in. Noah himself made some mistakes and hurt his own family.

This pain and destruction fills our world still. We still hurt each other. We still destroy and corrupt. And yet God sticks with us. God has promised to never wipe us out again. God’s covenant with Noah remains intact. We are heirs to this promise that God will love us even when we mess up day after day. God won’t abandon us.

When God sets that rainbow in the sky, it signifies a soldier hanging up his bow and arrow, retiring from battle. God won’t battle us anymore. God isn’t going to fight us. Even as we carry on with our ways of sin, God promises not to fight back. God allows us the freedom to act as we see fit, suffering our own consequences. Without the threat of God’s consequences.

What greater love is there, than a God caring for each of us. Promising to let us carry on. Refusing to give up on us.

This promise continues on in the greater narrative. When God sends Jesus Christ into the world, we see the very embodiment of that promise. We see God incarnate, making a claim upon the world that we are still worthy, that we are still loved.

May we be reminded of this every time we smell a fresh rain, and see a rainbow in the sky. Let our senses guide our memory to this promise made from God. May we remember this tremendous love story. Let us pray.