



Dr. James C. Howell
Genesis 6-8, selected verses
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This week, I was trying to come up with a sermon on Noah's Ark that would not leave me totally penniless. You may know that part of the Howell family deal is that if I mention one of my children by name in the sermon, they get 5 bucks per mention. My son is named Noah, and so he's going to be loaded by lunchtime today, there's no way around it. It was interesting when he was born, you can't believe all the Noah's Ark stuff that we got. We got piggy banks, I guess that was for him to save his preaching money in, and all sorts of wall hangings. Noah's Ark...Noah, there it is. I couldn't really settle on which sermon to preach about Noah's Ark. There's always music. You know the little kid's song, "The Lord said to Noah there's going to be..." We could sing that for a while, that would be fun. There is always levity around Noah's Ark; it invites humor for some reason. George Carlin, Bill Cosby, I love the bit by Eddie Izzard. Eddie Izzard, you know now is the voice for Reepicheep in the *Prince Caspian* movie. Izzard does these stage routines of comedy. They are ridiculously funny and in one he's imagining Noah's Ark and he says, "There is a problem with the ark." He said, "Noah begins gathering the animals and there are cats and there are dogs and the giraffes and then there are ducks, and the ducks say "We're not coming" and Noah says, "Well there's going to be a big flood," and the ducks say, "So..." When Eddie Izzard does it, it's really funny.

Tuesday night, I was part of a program over at Temple Israel, it's kind of the classic humor thing. There was a Christian and there was a Jew and there was a Muslim and they were on this panel and we were talking about difficult texts of our faith. Very interestingly, the Rabbi said that the story of Noah's flood has an obscure item at the end that we call the Noahide laws, and the way the Jews think about salvation of people who are not Jews, we can spend some time on that. Think about this great piece that Frederick Buechner wrote, where he talks about – I think you know this – architecturally the name for this part of the building in which (Eusa) is called the nave, the nave. It derives from a Latin word that means ship. There is always been this image of the church as a ship or even as an ark, if you think about it architecturally. If you imagine yourself in a boat that has been turned upside down, you can see the ceiling as an inverted keel. We're in a ship here. We're in Noah's Ark here, and here is what Frederick Buechner has to say about that: "You find just about everything imaginable on board, the clean and the unclean all piled 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 sly young foxes and impossible old cows. There are the catty and the piggish and the peacock proud. There are hawks and there are doves. Some are wise as owls and some are silly as geese. Some meek as lambs and other fire-breathing dragons. There are times when they all cackle and grunt and roar and sing together and there are times when you can hear a pin drop. Most of them have no idea just where they are supposed to be heading or how they are supposed to get there. There is jostling at the trough, there is growling and grousing and some whining. But even at it's worst, there is at least one thing that makes it bearable within the ark and that is the storm outside the Ark.

The wild winds and terrible wave, at its best, there is shelter from the stormy blasts. A sense of somehow heading in the right direction in spite of everything. A ship to keep us afloat, like a beacon in the dark. The hope of finding safe harbor at last. Noah's Ark. We're in it...Last time I took a group to Israel, we visited Nazareth. It was a cloudy, rainy day and just as we drove away from Nazareth down into the plain of Mageda, the sun broke through the clouds and there was a perfect

rainbow all the way across the sky. Everybody thumbed through and found their Bibles. God's promise through Noah put a rainbow in the sky as a pledge of God's covenant to us. There are lots of directions that we can go this morning, thinking about Noah's Ark. Are you counting, how much money am I up to already, Noah? That's what I'm saying, on Tuesday night we were asked what are some hard texts that you find in the Bible. I said, "They're all hard if you think about living them out, none of them are easy." I said the Noah texts are particularly hard because – how should we say it? – it is geologically impossible, and the story says that it rained and it rained and it rained for 40 days and then the entire earth, including the tallest mountains, were covered with water. Well this is a geological impossibility. There couldn't be that much water. If there were, where would it go later? It's just a mess if you have a scientific mind at all. I never actually had thought about this in my life and I grew up pretty much a heathen person when I started college. God was not on my mind, and religion was not on my mind. I was having fun trying to learn a little on the side, but I had these religious friends and they started inviting me to church, and the church that I went to, to which I owe my life, was, in fact, a fundamentalist church. Well they were big on Noah's flood and said the world was really flooded, it really did happen. The world is really 6,000 years old and I remember this friend he said, "There's this TV special I want you to watch with me." So I watch this TV special with him and it was about some Russian aviator who had flown a plane over a mountain in Turkey and he saw something dark on the ground so he organized an expedition, went up on this mountain and found all this petrified wood up there. And he got to thinking about and I said, "It's Noah's Ark." It was making the pages of the paper, that Noah's Ark had been discovered. Now actually later, they did carbon-dating on this wood and it's about 1,000 years old, which is old wood indeed but it can't be Noah's Ark. I began to reflect on the meaning of this, I mean I thought, What if they really found Noah's Ark?

What if they found a boat somewhere? What would the impact of this be? Would the churches be filled next week when people give up their decadent lifestyles and suddenly become very holy and faithful? I don't think so. It would be mildly interesting, a big splash in the news for a few days. But I don't think this kind of proof would mean anything much to anybody. God does not mind if we say something like the flood is geologically impossible. The Bible was written for people in pre-scientific times. God gave you a brain, you don't dishonor God by using your brain, you honor God by using your brain, by studying geology, by studying the extent and scope of the universe. It is the glory of God that we get a glimpse of when we use our God-given minds to the fullest. It's not doubt in God when we do so. Another sermon I thought about working on with us today, this would be a good one indeed in our society. It's striking in this story, the people are sinful. All people are sinful. They have an evil inclination in their heart, they are decadent. They really indulge themselves at every turn, they do not think much about God. In the midst of such a perverse generation that does not think much about God, people live only for themselves. Amid all this pleasure, there was one guy who stood out, who was unusual, who dared to be different. His name was Noah as we heard in the text. Noah was righteous, and this is important because what it suggests is that goodness is possible. I think we have decided that goodness is not really possible. We have low expectations, but we have high expectations about life, don't we? We have high expectations when it comes to how high shall I ascend on the corporate ladder, how much shall I own, how much fun and pleasure shall I have? We have very high expectations indeed, but when it comes to being holy, when it comes to being godly, when it comes to being pure, when it comes to being intimate with God, we have very low expectations indeed. Often, people come in my office and they tell me about some misdeed that they've been part of, and they'll just say, I'm only human, I'm only human. We've decided that to be human means to be full of foibles, and we are full of foibles. We are sinful, we do turn away from God. We've even gotten cynical, haven't we? When we see people who seem to be holy, because we've all had somebody in our lives who is holy, they wind up disappointing us. Don't you wonder sometimes as if there's some kind of

exterior piety that actually cloaks problems inside. And those problems get squashed down into some subterranean basement and they fester there in the dark and then pop out in inappropriate ways.

We become cynical about the very possibility of goodness and holiness. But what the Noah story tells us is that goodness is possible. If you're good, you may be as odd as Noah. I mean he's got to be the biggest weirdo in history, strange as he could be. A laughing stock to his neighbors. But goodness is possible. And what we believe is not that we have the ability within us to go out and be good and noble and holy and pure just by gritting our teeth and saying, "I shall be good." We believe in the church is that on your own, you are unable to do that. But God is able. God is able to be good in you. God is able to be holy through you. Our job is to pray and to open ourselves to the descent of God's spirit upon our souls. We call this the doctrine of sanctification. We pray for God to come down and to possess us. To be in us. To guide us. To heal us. To make us whole. That's probably an important sermon, that goodness is possible.

But I think the sermon that I want to focus on today is this one. It's a peculiar thing in this Noah story, we think back to the days of Noah. People who lived in the world in those days believed in many Gods. If we come to the time when the Bible is written, people in the world in those days believed in many Gods. If we come to the time of Jesus, people in Jesus' day believed in many Gods. If you were an Egyptian, you believed in Ra and Horus and Osiris and a whole pantheon of Gods. If you were Babylonian, you believed in Marduk and in Ea and in Ishtar and the Canaanites. We're all about El and Baal, and the Romans had an Athena and so we just go on in this pantheon of Gods. What's interesting if you think back to elementary school, middle school, high school or college, where you read about such things, these Gods are moody. They are sophomoric. They sit up in heaven and they look down at us and they have arguments among themselves about what to do. They look down at us and God says, "Aren't they wonderful creatures? Just look at them. They're just so lovely, they're so good. I love them so much." And another God says, "Have you been paying attention to what they're doing down there, they cross me and that guy in particular did something, I'm going to hurl down a lightning bolt!" But another said, "No, no don't throw down a lightning bolt, let's do something else!" And they are always arguing with each other over what to do with people down here. And people down here find themselves to get caught in the crossfire of what these warring Gods are about, and they get caught in the heat of their argument. But by the time of Jesus, Jews believed there was only one God, and if there is only one God, there is not a war among the Gods. That's actually a pretty convenient explanation for the problem of evil in the world.

We ask questions like, "How can there be a good God when there's evil?" Well if you have a lot of Gods up there, there's no problem at all. You've got a good God, you've got an evil God. But in the Bible, the crazy idea that nobody else in the world believed except the Biblical people is that there's one God. And if there's only one God, all of those emotions have to be in that one God's one heart. God looks down and we disappoint God terribly and God bears that grief and says, "I am sorry that I have made these people, they bolt and run from me at every opportunity!" But then in that same heart of God, God looks down and says, "But I have pity on them, I love them. I have compassion on them." And the other God says, "But we've got to deal with them, we've got to teach them!" And then the other part of God says, "But they're not able, we've got to empower them!" And this debate goes on within God's own heart. Isn't that interesting? Think about Jesus. Jesus walked around and he started connecting with people that nobody else would touch. They were shunned, they were ostracized and the way we spoke of it when I was in elementary school was that they had cooties. Do they still have that in the world today, cooties? Jesus saw people with cooties and Jesus saw the untouchable people and it broke Jesus' heart, and he would go and not only touch them, but put his arms around them and embrace them and love them. But then Jesus turned around and he saw the very

religious, pious people who were supposed to be God's ambassadors on earth, but when they went to the untouchable people, they said, "They have cooties, we are morally superior. They are unclean, they do not know the things of God as we do!" And they passed harsh judgment on those people. Jesus didn't look at them and say, "Hey, good job." Instead, Jesus looked at those people who were so holy and so pious and so close to God and Jesus said, "Woe to you, you Pharisees!" He unleashed his anger against those who were supposed to be good but only vaunted themselves as superior to others. Jesus saw people who were sick and it made him sick in his soul, and he reached out to heal them. Jesus saw people who were broken-hearted and it moved him to tears and he loved them and he healed them. But then he came one day to that ark, that place that was supposed to be a shelter from the stormy blast, and he came into that place and he saw that the holy place had become a den of iniquity. He saw that in that place, people were just wheeling and dealing trying to get ahead in the world, and Jesus was enraged. He overturned those tables, he ran those people out of the building and said, "My house shall be a house of prayer!" Jesus went up through the garden of Gethesemane up in the Mount of Olives and he knelt and he prayed to God his Father. One part of him said, "Please Lord, let this cup pass from me." But then from the other side of his heart, he said, "Yet not my will, but your will be done."

They nailed his pure, holy, good, loving, divine body onto a shaft of olive wood, and from that cross he looked down at the perpetrators who had just cruelly executed him and he said, "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing." But then the pain became more intense and he looked up to heaven, he felt the darkness of separation from God, his Father, and he said, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" You see, that whole range of emotions in God's heart is in one God's heart. God isn't just one small, narrow, mood. God bears it all within the heart of God. God looks down at us and God is grieved and God is annoyed. God is compassionate. God regrets that God ever made us. God makes a plan to save us. God is frustrated. God continues to love, and the delight for us is that we explore that range of emotions within the heart of God, and the question that we have above all other questions is, "What is at the epicenter of God's heart?" Yes that entire swirl of feelings is born in the heart of God. But what is at the center and the answer is at the center of God's heart is all love. God is love. You have pained God. You have broken God's heart. You have aroused compassion in God, all of that. What is at the heart of it all is that God is love. It is if there is some divine square dance of love going on in there, and there is a space at the middle, and God invites us into God's heart. There is room at the center of God's heart for us and we are drawn to it. And as we are drawn to that open space in the heart of God, what we discover is that open space becomes like a prism. The brilliant light of the glory of God is reflected through that space that is love, at the heart of God. And as we draw near, it looks for all the world like a rainbow. The whole breath of color and light and joy of God's created world draws us toward God, and we can trust that God will not smite us. God will not strike us or drive us away because at the heart of God, there is love. At the heart of God there is room for all of us, for the hawks and for the doves. For the proud peacocks and for the shamed creatures. There is room in God's Ark for all of us, and when we realize that, we want above all else to do what? To please God. To be good. To be holy. To say, "God, I am tired of getting my way and living the same two-bit life that everybody else lives. I have fit in. I have conformed for all of my life, but I am going to let that be washed away in the flood of your wrath. It really is mercy – I want to be healed. I want to be cleansed. I want to be good. I want to be holy. Heal me, draw me into your heart. Fill me. Cause me to be a light reflecting your love to others. This is our prayer. This is our destiny. This is our delight.