

“Recapitulation, A Sermon in Six Parts: Part Two, The Ark”:
for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for March 17th 2019 (2nd Sunday in Lent)
by Foster Freed

Genesis 7: 1-16

Mark 4: 35-41

There are many ways of reading scripture: many ways of holding together Old and New Testaments. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, we are told that God “gathered together in one, all things in Christ.”ⁱ Based on that bold idea, the Church Fathers developed a way of reading scripture they referred to as “recapitulation”: recapitulation, meaning that the entire work of redemption—including all of the hopes and expectations, all of the trials and turmoil depicted in the Old Testament—have reached their completion in and through the Jesus we meet in the pages of the New Testament.

It will likely come as no surprise...no surprise whatsoever...to discover, as those who have been exposed to the idea of recapitulation...the idea that God has “gathered together in one, all things in Christ”...

..it will likely come as no surprise, that there are echoes—powerful echoes—of the Old Testament story of Noah that register across the pages of the New Testament. After all: the story of Noah is one of the most beloved of any of the stories found in the Bible. No less fascinating is the fact that stories of “a” flood/”the” flood are found across the landscape of virtually every ancient culture. There would, quite simply, be something tangibly missing from the witness of the New Testament...

...something somehow deficient in the New Testament’s witness to the God who “gathered together in one, all things in Christ”...were there no story of Christ calming the raging of the wind and rain and sea, comparable to God’s act first of protecting Noah and his family from the raging of the wind and rain and sea and then—subsequently—beating back the raging of the wind and rain and sea so that Noah and family could return to dry land. All of those elements are found not only in the Genesis story of Noah, but also in the story of Jesus—accompanied by his small band of friends—reaching dry land (reaching terra firma!) in the aftermath of a storm that appears to have terrified all of them with the noteworthy exception of Jesus himself. The echoes are real! The echoes are tangibly real. And yet!

If I am going to be honest with you this morning...the wee problem I have going forward, going forward to present the story of Christ and his disciples weathering the stormy flood-like seas, is that the great tradition of the Christian Church, when it has “pondered” the story of Noah and his Ark, has tended to be chiefly interested not so much in connecting Noah with Christ, not so much interested in seeing Christ recapitulating the work of Noah, but rather has been interested in making a connection between the Ark...the Ark that Noah built...and the Church: the Church that Christ founded. That’s a bit of a twist...a twist that I might have chosen to avoid by choosing a different Old Testament passage on which to focus this morning. I might, in fact, have done precisely that...had it not been for the undeniable reality that we gather, this

morning, in the midst of a congregation that presently has no choice but to wrestle with all of the tough questions about its own identity, its own mission and purpose, in light of the pending retirement of its minister, and in light of the unavoidable challenges of being the Church in Canada at a time that makes being the Church quite challenging.

And yes: in light of those changes and challenges, I think there is something to be gained by thinking about the Church—in thinking about **this** church—in light of the Christian tradition’s tendency to regard the Church in analogy with the Ark: in short, its tendency to regard the Church as a place of safety, rescue, shelter from the storm... much as the Ark was a place of safety, rescue, shelter in the time of Noah. But, of course, that raises the obvious question: are we comfortable regarding the Church in that way? Or does that ascribe to the Church more than we—as United Church Christians—are comfortable ascribing to the Church? Would we dare, in advertising ourselves to the community...in advertising ourselves to potential candidates to come here to serve as my successor: would we be at ease speaking of ourselves as a modern-day Ark? As a place of safety, rescue, shelter...indeed, as a place in which to seek salvation...in the midst of a threatening and confusing and at times terribly frightening world?

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I am going to place in front of you two big, multi-syllabic words, this morning: two words that I think help to explain why it is that many of us...

...speaking personally, why it is that I myself...

...would think twice before inviting you—or anyone else—to regard this or any other congregation, as serving quite the same function in our world, that the Ark served in Noah’s world. And I know this may all seem rather obscure...but **soteriology** and **sociology** are both relevant, both relevant to the challenge mainline Protestant Churches, in particular, presently face in North America and Europe. And yes: let’s start with the first of those two words, **soteriology**...which sounds very fancy, but actually is a pretty basic term which simply means: “doctrine of salvation”. Doctrine of salvation. To ask a person, or to ask a church, to describe its “soteriology” is simply to ask about their teaching vis a vis “salvation”. And the stark truth is that mainline Protestantism has long surrendered the notion that it has a privileged corner on the “salvation” market: has long operated on the assumption that “God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform”, and that none of us dare...none of us dare to presume to define the boundaries of God’s saving-love in such a way as to include only those who find themselves on board our Ark...those who find themselves as members and participants in **our** faith community, **our** faith tradition, **our** denomination, **our** Church.

And you know: as someone who always hesitates to call himself a doctrinaire “universalist”...

...that's the belief that everyone is ultimately **guaranteed** a place in heaven...

...as someone who shies away from a blatantly universalist stance, I also have a hard time embracing the notion of a god who would be at home seeing certain souls, perhaps the vast majority of souls, sentenced to never-ending torment. That there **is** a hell: of that I have no doubt; many of us have had moments right here on this earth in which we have caught a glimpse of hell. That God would permit anyone to be sentenced to that place with no possibility of ever finding their way back out of it...

...even the monster who two days ago made headlines in New Zealand by slaughtering innocent people in their places of prayer...even the monsters who keep planting bombs in Christian places of worship in the Philippines....

...that God would permit even such monsters to be subjected to unending torment for ever and ever and ever with no possibility of reprieve, is something I would be more than a little hesitant to ascribe to the God who came to us in Jesus...the God who was prepared to be known as the God of love.

But that hesitation...some would call it that “wishy-washiness”...poses a hard to deny challenge to the evangelical impulse that ought to be part of the life of this and every other Christian faith-community. As Christians...as the Church...we are called upon not to hoard Christ, not to keep him to ourselves as a cherished private possession, but to offer him to others. We call that **evangelism**: an activity grounded in our remembrance that God's “only begotten son” was sent to us **not** because God so loved a tribe or a clan or a nation or a race...but because “God so loved the **world**.” And there can be no disputing the fact that there tends to be much more energy shown in the work of evangelism, in the work of offering Christ to others, by those Christians whose “soteriology”...whose doctrine of salvation...convinces them that those who do not embrace Christ, those who do not get on board the Ark, are going to spend their eternity in hell. Pretty strong motivation in that! What's **our** motivation? What's the driving energy that motivates us to share Christ with our neighbour...when we are unwilling to use the thought of hell, to scare them on board the Ark? Hang on to that question....hang on to that question as we flip from the first of those big words—soteriology...to the second big word...sociology.

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That, of course, is a far more familiar word: “**sociology**”...the study of “society”. With that word I am referring to the very different role the Church plays in Canadian society in the year of our Lord 2019 than the role it tended to play in the Canada in which most of you came of age.

And last Tuesday we had a fascinating conversation as part of our weekly Grief Group; I warned that group (which takes confidentiality very seriously) that I might mention that conversation this morning, but in a way that would not violate any of that

confidentiality. The conversation involved some childhood memories of what Sunday used to be like in many parts of this country...and in many of the families in which some of you will have been raised. And trust me: this is not an exercise in warm, fuzzy nostalgia, because not all of those memories were warm and fuzzy. On the contrary: those memories include memories of Sunday as the most intolerably boring day of the week: a day filled with not one, not two, but three Church services, side-by-side with a long list of all the things children were **not** allowed to do on Sunday. Hard to imagine a Sunday routine so top-heavy, that it would leave a child longing for school to resume on Monday...but that was certainly the experience of at least some of those who grew up at a time when the Church shaped the entire experience of Sunday—from dawn to dusk—for many young Canadians. And that's the point.

Whether your memories of that time are warm and fuzzy...or cold and hard and “thank God things changed!”...the simple fact is that Church played a role at the heart of Canadian society that it no longer plays. Ironically, and problematically, that is where the Ark-like nature of the Church may have been most fully experienced by Canadians of an earlier time. Long before there was, in Canada, a comprehensive network of social-services provided by government, much of the burden of providing the social-safety-net (including even the creation and running of hospitals) was in the hands of Churches and (to a lesser extent) Synagogues. And no: my intention this morning is neither to defend nor to disparage that arrangement...any more than my intention this morning is to say that the world is, in every regard, a better place because government now administers the social-safety net, rather than private actors such as Church and synagogue. But the bottom line is that it would have been only natural for those for whom the Church was at the heart of Canadian society a few generations ago...only natural to have regarded the Church as serving an Ark-like function in their community: providing all kinds of tangible support to individuals and to families as they struggled to cope with the unavoidable challenges life throws our way. Most Churches, nowadays, lack the opportunity let alone the means and the resources to play that sort of role. Nevertheless: when we find ourselves questioning whether the church has a future...whether **our** church has a future...it's easy to navel-gaze: decidedly difficult to lift up our eyes...to discern whether, in fact, there is a mission that still beckons us...a purpose, a vocation, calling out to us: in short, whether there are unmet needs in our community crying out for us to refocus our hearts and minds, re-ignite our imaginations, and open our doors to a world in which even the best run government agency cannot possibly meet all of the human need that swirls in our midst. Government can do many things. But it can't cure the plague of loneliness that currently haunts so many lives. Nor can it help us to embrace a meaning, a purpose, a higher goal for the lives we live. And so yes!

I suspect that the way forward for a Church, for a congregation such as Trinity, that wishes to rediscover itself, that wishes to embrace its “Ark-like” potential...may well begin precisely there. By getting to know its neighbours. By getting in touch with the hopes and fears of those with whom it shares the neighbourhood. Perhaps beginning by going no further than connecting with that plague of loneliness in the midst of a culture that boasts so much technological sophistication...but that somehow manages

to leave so many people feeling isolated and alone. The Church—this Church—can be a place where such folks find refuge. The Church—this Church—remains a place, where such folks can find a welcome. In short, the church—this Church—remains a place which neither we nor they need be ashamed to regard as an Ark...a place of shelter ...a place of shelter from the storm. Do not think, for a moment, that we have outgrown the need for just such places in a time such as ours!

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A final thought.

Way back at the start to these rambling thoughts, I noted that there was a connection between Noah in his time...and Jesus in the time of the Apostles: a sense in which the experience of Noah and his family was recapitulated in the experience of Jesus and his companions. But there is a key difference, the key difference being: Noah **built** an Ark as the flood-waters gathered. But as the wind and the waves threatened to capsize the boat on which Jesus and his friends found themselves that day, Jesus didn't build an Ark. **He was the Ark.** And he remains the Ark to this day.

And so, tempting as it may be in this day and age, when our Christian brand has come under suspicion in so many quarters: tempting as it may well be to jettison that brand-name as we seek to reach into our communities with a message of welcome, friendship and care, tempting as it is to try to become all things to all people by jettisoning our core identity: please don't do that. Jesus was and remains the **true** Ark: the One who makes it possible for the Church to offer itself as **an** Ark. And yes: at the end of the day, not the Church itself...offering itself, but the Church offering itself by offering to recommit itself to the Way of Christ, which is to say: the Way of sacrificial love. The Way of those who can dare to risk welcoming others because they know that they themselves were welcomed by Christ. The Way of those who can risk loving others, because they have come to know themselves as having been lavishly and extravagantly loved by the God who came to us in Jesus.

May it be so. In Christ's blessed name. Amen!

ⁱ Ephesians 1:10