

Noah and the Ark:

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WE are accustomed to hearing the story of Noah and the ark as an escape story, wherein he and his family are spared the judgment of the flood because Noah was righteous in God's eyes. This emphasis, however, overlooks the significance of the ark experience itself as the time and place in which Noah could develop and demonstrate his character as a righteous one, as one who stands properly and authentically before God. We need to consider that the ark experience might be the interpretive key that shows us why Noah was considered righteous in the first place.

According to Rabbinic tradition, the ark was a laboratory experience in which the lessons of attention and care for creation were to be learned. The miracle isn't simply that Noah built the ark when there were no signs of rain, but that he spent an entire year taking care of the animals. Some rabbis note that during the 12 months in the ark Noah was so busy with the animals that he did not even have time to sleep! Can we conceive, let alone appreciate, the wisdom of attention, sympathy, and nurture such care-taking would involve? **Noah emerged from the ark bearing all the concrete marks of a righteous one, as a sustainer of life, for as the midrash Tanhuma has it, the "Righteous One" knows the needs of others, even the needs of animals.**

Part of our difficulty in appreciating this dimension of Noah's story stems from the fact that we do not read Genesis 2-9 as a coherent whole. The second story of creation, which begins with Genesis 2:4, specifies the creation of humanity in terms of a divinely appointed task: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (2:15). The work of care-taking of the earth is not an incidental part of human life. It goes to the heart of what the divine intention is, for, as 2:5 seems to suggest, the existence of life on earth goes hand in hand with its need to be nurtured. Nurture, in other words, is the quintessential human vocation.

As subsequent chapters of the story make plain, the lessons of nurture and care-taking were not immediately learned. Disobedience and violence took their place. The most egregious example of violence gone wild was found in the life of the Nephilim, the "people of renown" who lived a rapacious and arrogant life, a life that clearly

ignored the limits and boundaries of the created order. Noah represents God's hope for creation, and this is why Genesis 2 must be read through to chapter 9, when we have the chance to see not only why Noah was spared, but how Noah represents in himself the full meaning of humanity's role within creation.

When we consider Noah's ark experience, several character traits emerge that show us what it means to be created by God. Among these we have to include as foremost the attention and responsibility with which Noah carried out his work. Noah "walked with God," which meant that he did not see or engage the world in terms that would be to his advantage. Had he entered the ark thinking in terms of his own benefit, the experience would surely have been a disaster. What we need to imagine here is the difficulty and patience involved in caring for the diverse and unending needs of the noisy, though nonetheless mute, life teeming within the ark.

The full sense of creation becomes manifest in terms of the issue of care. To a large extent, western culture, even Christian culture, has gone wrong on this point because of its emphasis on the first creation narrative, and its misreading of the mandate to subdue and have dominion over the earth. We have failed to see that the goal of creation is not the creation of humanity on the sixth day. Rather, the summit of God's creative activity is the Sabbath, the seventh day, when God rested and took delight in the good work that was made.

Care of the earth is inextricably tied to our ability to delight in its goodness, to delight in its having been made by God. We cannot care for that which is not worthy of our delight, whereas to practice delight is to take pleasure in the life of that which is. The automatic response to delight is to want to see the flourishing of life wherever it appears. If we are to stand before God as righteous ones who reflect in our own lives the divine intention (the *Imago Dei*), the first requirement is that we humble ourselves to find the world worthy of our care and God's delight. This is precisely what Noah demonstrated in the ark. It is also what our history of environmental degradation and economic violence denies.

The story of Noah and the ark ought to make plain for us that our creaturely status is not a given, that it is instead

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something that can be distorted, disfigured, and denied. **Creation is something we are to become, a process that requires of us that we walk with our creator in delighting in and taking care of the good things that are made. In this work we promote relations of joy and peace with the rest of creation and with our God. Moreover, in our nurture of the earth we reflect and embody God's presence on earth.**

We have grown accustomed to thinking of ourselves as separate from creation, standing in a position of mastery. From a biblical, but also from an ecological, point of view this position cannot be sustained. As Genesis 2:7 makes plain, we are tied to the earth; since we are but a delicate mixture of soil and divine breath, a deluge of water can suffice to turn us to mud. We do not simply live on the earth, but from it and within it. The biblical assumption is that as we take care of the earth, we ourselves are taken care of; as we promote our well-being at the expense of the earth, we and the earth suffer. The ideology of mastery needs to be replaced by a much more humble understanding of ourselves, for there is more than a merely etymological connection between our humanity, the humus of the earth, and the call for humility.

The forces of our political and economic life are all about the exploitation of the earth. Our consumption habits that feed on extractive production methods make a life of delight and nurture all but impossible. Where shall we begin? I don't think there is an easy answer to this question, but a clear beginning is to be found in the acknowledgment of how far we have strayed from the righteous path first walked by Noah.

We can encourage each other to take responsibility for the life around us, whether that be the life of plants, animals, or humans, and learn to see in the flourishing of another life God's own delight. Could not the church play a prophetic role in the nurture of creation?

The work of creation is an exercise in humility and delight, for it is the concrete expression of God's unfathomable love. Since we are created in the image of God, it is our divine mission to carry on the divine care to which the earth already bears witness. In this work the example of Noah stands as a sure, if difficult, guide.

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IN the final contemplation of his Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius Loyola asks the retreatant to consider how God, specifically the risen God-man Christ, "works and labors for me in all creatures upon the face of the earth, that is, he behaves as one who labors."

Consider how Christ labors for me in all creatures. How is it 200 billion billion stars (yes, billion billion) can fly the heavens more speedily than light, the Rockies still rise in breathless splendor, oil gush from the fields of Nebraska? Because an all-powerful risen Christ gives them *being*. Not once for all; each moment. How is it more than 4,000 varieties of roses can grow and perfume our earth, giant redwoods stalk the California sky? Because an imaginative Christ gives them *life*.

How is it your Irish setter can smell the game beyond your ken, gulls scavenge your seas, the shad ascend the waters? Because a sensitive Christ gives them *senses*. How

is it a student can shape an idea, a surgeon transplant a human heart, an architect send a skyscraper soaring, a man and woman live intoxicatingly in deathless oneness with each other? Because a still human Christ gives them *intelligence and love*.

How can I believe the Son of God died an excruciating death for me, confidently expect to live for ever, give myself unreservedly to God and my sisters and brothers? Because a living Christ infuses faith in me, fills my flesh with hope, inflames my very bones with a unique love not of this world.

Christ reminds Ignatius of a skilled, enthusiastic worker—very much alive, always in touch with his creation, ceaselessly concerned, today more imaginative than yesterday, terribly in love with all he shapes. Indeed the world is charged with the presence of God, with the labor of Christ. —WALTER J. BURGHARDT, S.J.