

“CHARTING A COURSE”
Genesis 6:11-16, 19-22 & Mark 1:16-20

February 22, 2015

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Let us pray: O God, help us to approach this season of Lent with open ears and hearts, that we may be called forth into deeper relationship with You. Amen.

I love the juxtaposition of these two passages: we have Noah being given instructions to build an ark, to leave the safe and familiar for the unknown and Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John responding to Jesus' call to leave their nets, leaving their lucrative fishing businesses behind for an uncertain future with the itinerant preacher who is calling them to follow him.

If you are old enough----and no one is being asked to admit that you are----you may remember when Bill Cosby was first becoming known as a comedian. He did a sketch as Noah being given notice that he is to build an ark: Noah.....NOAH.....NOAH!!! Yes?..... This is the Lord..... (pause) Riiiiggggghhhhhhhhhht. (Oh, sure, God is talking to me.....uh, yeah).

It isn't that hard for us to imagine being as skeptical as Bill Cosby portrayed Noah as being. I'd wager that we all have some bit of skeptic in us if not a full-fledged streak. But our story tells us that Noah listened to these extensive instructions and to the warning of floodwaters coming.

Israel shared with its neighbors the idea that history was divided into two ages. The first age ended with a great flood. Several flood stories from Mesopotamia describe such a flood, with many parallels to the Biblical story. The flood stories reflect an uneasiness about stability in the world and the constant threat of chaos. In the Biblical world, uncontrolled floodwaters were the primary symbol of chaos.

So, maybe there's not a cloud in the sky. The sun is shining. Abimelech the weatherman has predicted there is no rain in the forecast. A flood is coming? Really? Even if Noah were muttering to himself the whole time, what courage to cut that first board, nail that first nail.

Then we have the story of Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John being called by Jesus. This is a fascinating tale as well. For starters, what inclined Jesus to call them? Had he seen them there before as he travelled by the Sea of Galilee, marveled at their skill, the

dedication to their work, the relationships they shared with one another as they fished? I wonder.

And I wonder what possessed them to respond so readily to such an unprecedented call. The Sea of Galilee was a fresh water lake where fish were quite abundant. Their fishing enterprises were established businesses. And the fact that James and John had “hired help” to leave with their father, is an indication they were part of the “one percent” of Jesus’ time, the upper crust, you might say. Why ever in the world would they leave something like that for something that involved little apparent reward and a fair amount of risk, hanging out with a guy like Jesus who seemed destined to run into a lot of conflict?

One might speculate they were young, looking for adventure, something to break the routine of their lives. But I have another idea. I think they were acting out of a counter-intuitive notion that this was a task they were called to, just as our story of Noah reflects acting on a call to do something which doesn’t on the face of it seem logical.

The Bible is just full of these kinds of stories. Remember Naaman in the book of 2 Kings? He is the commander of the army of the king of Aram. He has status! He is important! But.....he has leprosy (or some skin disease.....in Old Testament usage “leprosy” refers to a variety of infectious skin diseases.) The slave girl of his wife tells her that Naaman should see the prophet Elisha. And do you remember what he was told when he arrived with all his horses and chariots, after travelling all that way to see the prophet? Elisha sent word for him to wash in the river Jordan seven times! Unlike the story of Noah, where Noah does just as instructed, or the story of the first disciples who immediately drop their nets to tag along with Jesus, Naaman is furious:

“But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, ‘I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Phar par, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?’

“He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, ‘Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean?’ So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.” (2 Kings 5: 11-14)

I think of these stories in the context of Lent and of the anticipated arrival of the intentional interim. Lent was originally a time for new converts to prepare for baptism at Easter. So it was a time of preparation, a time of seeking guidance for the new responsibilities they were taking on.

Lent offers us an excellent opportunity for self-examination, for preparation for the tasks ahead, for beginning to chart our course. Our stories today are ones that give us the message that the possibilities we encounter in the months ahead may involve choices/decisions that are counter-intuitive, that require us to think outside the box, to be receptive to surprises and challenges that necessitate looking at Pilgrim, our worship, our programs, ourselves from a different perspective.

And our stories today give us some idea of the range of responses we might have on any given day in the months ahead.....the imagined response of Noah made famous by Bill Cosby because it contained some truth.....we all recognize the inner skeptic emerging when presented with something that seems preposterous.....the immediate response by the newly chosen disciples, to leave everything familiar behind to follow a bigger dream.....the anger and frustration of Naaman when the situation begins to unfold in ways totally counter to what he expected. These are all valid responses and we must surely honor them when we experience them. They are all part of a process.

About two years out of graduate school, I came back to visit the school of social work in Knoxville from which I had graduated. I was visiting with some of my former professors. One of them asked me something like "So how has your education here served you?" and I responded that it had really been a wonderful experience, had given me a good foundation. Kidding me, he said in a mock exasperated tone, "Then why did you complain the whole time you were going through it?" And I, responding as a true social worker would, said "It was all a part of the process."

So we are in a process. "Charting A Course," as our sermon title declares, is a bit of an irony, something of a paradox. Charting a course implies a very focused, methodical planning and that is true enough. At the same time, if we are to have a creative, vibrant process, we must remain open to possibilities, open to changing course as the Spirit leads. We do ourselves a grave disservice if we do not remain open.

Perhaps you are familiar with the Andre Gide quote which I adapt to remove the masculine terminology: "One cannot discover new oceans unless one has the courage to lose sight of the shore."which brings me back to where we started with Noah. He had a very definite plan.....but it required letting go of preconceived notions about his life..... taking some risk.... stepping onto the ark.

So, much like the new converts in the early days of Christianity prepared themselves during Lent for baptism at Easter, may we use this period of Lent as a time of reflection and preparation, a time of exploration and examination. This is our taskand also our blessing. May God grant us the wisdom to recognize both.

Amen.
