

Shelter From The Storm
Genesis 8:1-5
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*Lo! in the burning west, the craggy nape
Of a proud Ararat! and, thereupon,
The Ark, her melancholy voyage done!*

- William Wordsworth, "Sky-prospect"

When I first entertained the possibility of serving at Ridge Road Baptist Church, one of the admittedly superficial things that captured my attention was the word Ridge. I've always been drawn to ridges, to mountains. I spent most of my summers as a child and teen at Ridgecrest, and I still love returning to the mountains whenever I can. The ridgelines of mountains are where my most spiritual experiences have occurred. Here at the start of my time with you, I wanted to take a few Sundays to reflect on what the Bible's mountains illustrate about our faiths. (So, of course, I therefore find myself starting today with a story that is about as far away from the mountains as you can get.)

In the summer of 1996, I was extraordinarily lucky. I had the opportunity to live for three weeks with a dozen other teenagers...on a sailboat... amidst a fleet of other boats...in the British Virgin Islands. Getting to do this at any point in your life would be incredible; getting to do it as a 17-year-old was beyond astonishing. For three weeks, I learned how to sail and to scuba dive, skied over crystal waters, and fell asleep under a sky full of stars unmitigated by earthly light. It was wholly spectacular and spectacularly holy.

As the end of the camp approached, we began hearing about some storm that was brewing off in the Atlantic. It was June, early for hurricane season, and we didn't expect the storm to amount to much, but we learned it had grown forceful enough to merit a name, Bertha. Days went by, and Bertha drew closer and closer. Eventually, the managers of the camp told us that we had to abandon ship because Bertha had grown to a Class III hurricane and was headed straight for us.

We docked on a small island in the Caribbean. Clutching a small overnight bag and leaving the rest of our possessions on the boat, we were bused to a one-room church and huddled in the sanctuary, a room smaller than the Ridge Road chapel. The winds grew quickly, loudly pounding on the walls outside and deafening us inside. We spent about 40 hours in that room while Bertha had her way with the island, only escaping outdoors when the eye of the hurricane passed directly over us. Then the winds and the rain returned.

The windows were shuttered with heavy wood, so when the power inevitably went out, we were left to stumble around the sanctuary with flashlights. There was only one window that offered any light, a small stained-glass image of Jesus that shone above the pulpit in the center of the sanctuary. As people started to turn off their flashlights and curl up on the floor to sleep, the Jesus remained shining, something of a sanctified nightlight watching over us during the storm.

That is as close as I ever got to Noah's ark. There were no animals, and 40 hours is a lot less than 40 days and nights, and I never felt like God was wiping out the world for its sinfulness...but I remember clearly, even 25 years later, what it felt like to huddle in a small space while the deluge pounded around us and to hope that we would be able to emerge and walk on dry land again.

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The story of Noah's ark has been used to teach a slew of different things, some of them directly contradictory. I feel like it's one of the early Old Testament examples of God's wrath (since God sends a flood to wipe out most of the planet) and of God's grace (usually symbolized by the ark, the rainbow, and God's promise at the end of the story). It's a story with ecological underpinnings, and it's a story about humanity. When I read it these days, it stands out to me primarily as a story about refuge.

A little over a year ago, an image circulated around the internet that depicted Noah's ark with the caption "first quarantined family."¹ In those first few months of the pandemic, our homes began to function as our arks. We sought refuge in our bedrooms and basements, escaping to walk the dog during hours when we hoped we wouldn't cross paths too closely with our neighbors who were also out walking their dogs. With the exception of FaceTime and Zoom, we spoke only with those in our households while the storm of sickness beat against our walls. We sought shelter in our homes.

That is what the ark became for Noah and his family: an enclosed space that offered protection from an unfathomable disaster that consumed the whole world. It became their refuge, their sanctuary.

If you Google "Noah's refuge" today, most of the results are basically zoos for abandoned or injured animals. They are organizations that provide food and shelter, medicine and rehab, all noble and admirable pursuits. The animals that need these zoos are ones who can no longer make it on their own. They are wounded, scared, helpless. They are broken.

We as humans, perhaps more often than we would like to admit, also find ourselves in a similar situation. We, too, need sanctuary, almost constantly. We need a community that cares and provides when we cannot, because each and every one of us is, in some way, wounded or scared or broken. Part of the reason why the Noah story is included at the start of our holy scriptures is that the theme of sanctuary that it addresses is absolutely universal.

The problem is that Noah and his family and the rest of the ark's inhabitants aren't just saved by the ark—they're also imprisoned by it. As we learned from our own quarantines, it doesn't take long before you're done being boxed in, before you're sick of talking to the same people all the time, before you're willing to take greater risks to escape the very sanctuary that is protecting and rescuing you in the first place.

This is why it's so critical that Noah and his family discover a second refuge, one that comes in the form of Ararat.

¹ <https://www.dayspringchristian.com/blog/noah-quarantine-and-salvation/>

Our scripture today picks up the story right around this point, where the waters are abating and the ark comes to rest “on the mountains of Ararat.” The water keeps ebbing, and more mountaintops appear. It’s likely you know the rest of the story: Noah sends out some birds as scouts, the water level keeps dropping, and eventually Noah and his family are able to leave the boat and walk on dry land under a beautiful rainbow that will be captured in children’s Sunday school drawings for millennia to come.

Despite the fact that this beauty and freedom is still a ways away, I think the moment from this morning’s scripture is particularly interesting and important. Surely it felt like a huge turning point for Noah and his family: they were drifting, but now they’re solid. They were living at the mercy of the flood, and now there is a mountain that offers stability. They are still imprisoned on the boat, but they have a new form of refuge, one that offers something different, something more.

* * *

It’s worth examining the two sanctuaries in this story in comparison. First, both the ark and Ararat come from God. God gives Noah clear instructions about how to build the ark, its measurements and materials. God directs Noah to include his family and the animals, again with remarkable specificity. God tells Noah to gather provisions. Noah does the legwork, but God is responsible for this ark.

And God is responsible for Ararat. In fact, when we contemplate God’s creation, the first two images are almost always an ocean and a mountain. The mountains tower above us, conveying magnificence and mystery, colorful trees and stone twisting toward the sky. If we want to understand that Noah’s ark landed on a place that God created, a mountain is the best image we could hope for.

Because both ark and Ararat are God’s doing, they are also both refuges that Noah and his family didn’t choose. My guess is that Noah would have preferred to have gone on living his life instead of learning to build a ship while his neighbors mocked him and then moving into a floating zoo. The mountain, likewise, wasn’t something that Noah steered toward and beached upon. He simply ended up there. We don’t choose our makeshift shelters—even though they are protective and holy—unless we absolutely have to. We have limited control over our safe havens, no more than an animal has control over its cage.

It’s important to note that the ark and Ararat both function as sanctuary because they are able to rise up over the drear and sludge of life. God does not instruct Noah to build a fortress, a tower that will keep the garbage of the world out. God tells Noah to build a boat that will remain in the world but rise above the danger that has the potential to take him under. When we contemplate sanctuary or refuge, we often end up trying to fashion a box that will keep out the things we wish to avoid. That is not the model of asylum that our Bible suggests.

The similarities between ark and Ararat mostly end there. Beyond that, they are remarkably different, and their differences are rooted in the fact that the ark is built by human hands while the mountains of Ararat are crafted exclusively by God. Because the ark is constructed by Noah, it drifts on the water. Meanwhile, the mountains are fixed, sturdy, stable, unchanged, even as a flood covers the whole earth.

In its drifting, the ark becomes a prison, much like our homes became prisons to us a year ago. I suspect that Noah and his family reached a point where they didn't want to speak to each other for days on end, maybe just muttering something like "stay out of my way" when they crossed paths on the open deck. There would have been a monotony of routine, a lack of fresh air, a stark boredom, a loss of the sense of time, and the overwhelming sense of feeling trapped. But when the rains stopped, and then the ship stopped, Ararat would have offered a sense of freedom, an opportunity to reach out beyond the all-too-familiar walls of the boat.

In other words, the ark may offer protection, but Ararat offers hope.

In this story, Noah doesn't get to choose both. Mountains are many things, but they aren't exactly safe. They're jagged, steep, and treacherous. The boat is the safe choice...but, eventually, it will no longer be a sanctuary. The mountains can offer a refuge that, because it is filled with hope, will function as sanctuary in perpetuity...but it will not necessarily be the safer choice. We can't have it both ways.

* * *

Growing up, we would occasionally visit my great-grandmother's house for Thanksgiving or Christmas. Beulah, my dad's grandmother, was one of those women who could command scores of people with one intimidating look. I knew her only the last 12 years of her very long life, and I was honestly always a little scared of her.

She had the most pristine house I have ever seen. Everything in it was white—not just "semi-dingy, had once been" white but "continued to shine like the teeth in a toothpaste ad" white. Crystal and china and glass candlesticks perched on shelves in multiple rooms. The upholstery on the furniture was pulled tight across the cushions, almost as if no one had ever sat down on the couches and chairs. I know for a fact I never sat down on them because I was terrified to do so. It looked like the display in a furniture store...or maybe in a museum.

She must have loved having the house this way, because she chose it. And while I loved my great-grandmother and know of many admirable things about her, I'm a little surprised she let me and my cousins inside. She might have preferred to keep the house safe from us...that's sort of how it felt. She built her own sanctuary to protect her from outside forces like rambunctious children.

We do this in our own world: we create places that feel safe to us because they keep the things out that endanger us. Our malls have signs that say "no unaccompanied teens." Our parks have signs that say "keep off the grass." Our schools have more signs than I can account for. And to some extent, they should—we want safe malls and parks and schools. After all, the ark wasn't a bad refuge; it was sent from God. But it was a temporary solution, and the need for sanctuary is a permanent need that we attempt to address in permanent ways. When we seek to create safe havens, we should be mindful of the fact that we as humans have a tendency to construct boxes that keep out everything we don't like ...and that doing this limits the freedom of any who find themselves inside. It limits the promise, the potential, the hope.

When Jesus was in need of refuge—of quiet, of meditation, of something that would renew him—he did not seek a temple, or a fortress, or an ark. He went to the mountains. He went there after he fed the 5000,² he went there after he predicted his death,³ and he went there after clashing with the Pharisees.⁴ When he was exhausted, physically or socially or emotionally, he retreated to a mountaintop to find solace and to become reinvigorated. He traveled to these peaks to rise up above the world, to settle the turbulence in his life, to draw close to the Father, to pray. His sanctuary was a mountaintop: one that was open and free and that offered hope...even if it was not protected.

When it comes to shelter, we have a tendency to create arks instead of pursuing mountains...but I would rather try to be like Jesus. I would rather experience the refuge of a mountaintop, one that is precarious but still offers a sense of rising up over the floodwaters and not just boxing them out.

* * *

The night I spent in the Caribbean one-room church 25 years ago was, like most other experiences in that camp, extraordinarily memorable. I still think about it often. I was extremely grateful to find a place that was dry and protected from the winds and the rain that shelled the outdoors that night. But I was even more grateful when I was able to step outside those walls.

A church tries hard to serve as a sanctuary. That's the word we use for the most prominent room here; this is our sanctuary. We want all who come here to feel safe—and not just to feel safe but actually to be safe. We yearn to offer the peaceful and restorative nature of Christ to any and all who set foot in this building. We yearn to offer it consistently and eternally.

And we yearn to offer Christ's hope. We can only achieve that goal if we present a refuge that is like the mountains of Ararat: open, grounded, and soaring above the dreck of the world. That is the permanent shelter that God provides Noah, that Jesus sought for himself, and that we and our church should insist upon.

² Matthew 14:23 et al.

³ Matthew 17:1

⁴ Luke 61:12