

THE STORY OF THE FLOOD

INTRODUCTION

This morning we're going to set to one side, at least temporarily, our own immediate problems and concerns and go back - way, way back - to the very first book of the Old Testament, to the book of Genesis and the Story of Noah and the Flood. Most of you are familiar with the story so I won't take time at this point to describe it to you in detail. However, it is interesting to note right here at the beginning of this sermon that this Story of the Flood follows almost immediately the Story of Creation. This in itself serves to remind us that in life as we know it, creation and destruction often go hand in hand. There are, to be sure, great dynamic forces that are continually building things up, but at the same time there are also those other forces that are continually tearing things down, wiping them out, wearing them down.

In the month of September 1165, one-seventh of the total population of London was wiped out by the bubonic plague. Similar things have happened in other cities, and we know that there have been times in history when whole populations have been destroyed by fire, flood, earthquake or epidemic. And not only are people as a whole subject to that kind of danger, but all of us individually are constantly exposed to disaster. In the twinkling of an eye a man's total lifetime earnings may be wiped out in one financial crash. Or a man's family travelling down the highway may in a matter of seconds be destroyed. Things like this happen. Not only on a Labor Day weekend, but all the time.

Therefore it's only natural that we read this story of the flood with considerable interest and as we do, we find in it certain insights that help us to meet this destructive element of life. I'm not suggesting to you that all the things that I am going to say to you concerning Noah and the Flood are actually implicit in the story or in the mind of the man who wrote this story. What I am attempting to say is that as we read this story in the light of our own modern day experiences, refreshed and reinforced by assurances that have come to us through the years, we find certain insights that help us to meet the destructive element in our own lives.

NOTHING ORIGINAL OR UNIQUE ABOUT YOUR DISASTER.....

The first insight suggested by this old, old story is this that there is nothing unique or original about your disaster. If you read the story of the flood in Genesis very carefully you will notice that you are reading two stories that have been put together by an editor. One story says that Noah took into the ark a pair of every existing animal. The other story says he took seven of some animals and two of others. One story says that the flood lasted forty days and the other says it last one hundred and fifty days. The stories do not stand parallel to each other. Clumsily and naively they've been woven together. First you get a section of one story and then a section of another indicating that this Story of the Flood was not an original story of something that happened in one place, but that there was a story of it up north perhaps and a story of it down south. As you go on and explore a little further you find that the flood story in the Bible came originally from a Babylonian story about a flood that occurred between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, a disaster that wiped out a large part of the land, and that this flood was not unique with the Jews at all. And carrying all of this a bit further, we discover similar folktales about floods coming

to us from Greece, India, Polynesia, Australia and South America, stories of similar disasters, all of which suggests that our disasters, whatever they may be, may not be original or unique.

✓ Think for a moment or two of some of the disasters that have come to our ears. Think of the ones associated with the city of London: the black death, the bubonic plague, the fire of London, the blitz of London in 1940. Think of the earthquake from San Francisco, the flood from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, the destruction of old Pompeii, the loss of life in the sinking of the Titanic, the Coconut Grove fire in Boston. There are stories coming in all the time, stories of destruction and disaster in all places, at all times, among all sorts of people. I think we're often tempted, at the time of our own flood experience, to feel that there's something unique about it, that nobody else has ever had to face such a difficult experience. And let me say this to you: don't think of it in that fashion if you can help it. Don't say to yourself "Well no one else has ever suffered like this," or "that no one else knows what I'm going through". Don't ever say to yourself: "Well I feel it more than other people" thus making yourself feel better by feeling superior in sensitiveness to other people who are suffering just as much as you are. When you feel the floods of life coming over you, and you feel in danger of going under say something like this to yourself: "This has happened over and over again. Others have gone through experiences like this and have managed to come through it. And if other have done it, so then can I. I'll work my way through this, so help me I will". This is the first insight that grows out of this beautiful story. There's nothing unique or original about your disaster.

THERE'S ALWAYS SOME
REFUGE FROM IT.....

The second insight is this: there is always some refuge from it. We know that Noah built an ark as the refuge from his own particular disaster. We have to smile as we think of Noah constructing a huge ship in which he could house not only himself and his wife and his sons and their wives, but a pair of every living creature and the plants of the universe. It all presents a rather amusing and somewhat naive picture, and I'd venture to say that it's brought a great deal of amusement to children and adults ever since. I remember as a child the great thrill I use to receive from going through Noah's Ark at the amusement park at Old Orchard Beach in Maine. As a matter of fact, I still get a kick from going through it. The point however is this, as we think of Noah and his ark, we find something of an instinctive response to disaster, namely this that while Noah could not avoid the flood, he could at least attempt to ride it, and he had the wits and the will to provide the means by which to do this. It really is amazing as you look at humanity down through the ages to see with what ingenuity they have been able to defend themselves against adversity. The dykes of Holland have held back the pounding pressure of the invading sea for years. The drugs of modern medicine have held back the invading army of disease. Just last week we were informed of a new drug that will provide close to 100% immunity to the polio germ, a vaccine that's even an improvement over the Salk vaccine. We think of the dugouts, the dungeons underneath the city of London where the government met all through the war in order to protect themselves from the bombs bursting above.

Of course, it's not in those particular ways that we find our real defense and our real refuge. You ask, where then have we a right to look for anything like an ark when the waters of life begin to rise? I can only tell you where I find it most frequently. I find it

of course in the people I love and the people who love me. Sometimes when I get under a great deal of pressure in my work, and begin to have the feeling that everything's going to cave in, and I wonder how I'll ever manage the burdens that I have to carry, I turn to the person that I care a great deal about (that is, my wife) and I guess because she understands me so well, and because I know that I can depend upon her through thick and thin, she supports me and helps me, and lifts me right along. I know there are nights when I come in rather late from church meetings - discouraged and tired, and ready to pack up and head for the hills, and take a little country where where things would be much easier and less demanding, and she's apt to tease me and lift my spirits by saying something like this "Come on now, you know real well if some one were to tell you that they're going to join the church, or if some one were to say something good about your sermon, you'd come in saying 'Why that's the greatest church there is. I don't think I'd ever want to be minister of any other church'.....you'd feel wonderful. And so you might say that I ride the flood in the ark of her love, and I'm sure that many of you have had the same experience, although perhaps you don't stop to think about it in this fashion.

Sometimes too you find it in people you have never seen before. There are people who are filled with anxiety when they travel in strange places and perhaps they think "Oh whatever will happen to me if I should get sick or break a leg or fall down and faint away in this place where nobody knows me". Never think things like that. There is always someone who will help you. There is something so common to humanity that it flows like a current all through us and when one is in trouble, there is someone else, even though he has never seen him, who is always ready to stretch out a hand and help. If there's nobody around, there may be a place - a place like this perhaps. I know looking back on some of the experiences I've had, there have been times when things seemed a little beyond my control to manage, and I have come across a church that I've never seen before or been inside of, perhaps a church of another denomination, and I have gone in and there have been the familiar patterns - the cross, the lights, the word of God on the lectern, the table of the Lord, and it seemed as though in that quiet place God's presence made itself real to me, and I said to myself, it's no wonder that people have come to call the church the ark of salvation.

And in yourself, sometimes in the very stubborn resistance of your spirit to disaster, your refusal to be defeated, you'll find something like an ark that will enable you to ride over the waves, and above all, of course, you find the ark of your salvation when after all helpers have failed and there seems to be no other support left in life, then it is as though God himself came along side of you and supported you and held you up. The everlasting arms of God will carry you through anything. This is the second insight growing out of this story; there's always some refuge from it.

THERE IS ALWAYS SOME CREATIVE
POSSIBILITY WITHIN THE DISASTER

possibility within the disaster. The story of the flood began with the raging of the sea and it ended with the shining of a rainbow. After the floods went down, after the dove came back with the olive branch, after the ark came at rest on top of the mountain and Noah led his family and all the created things out of the ark on to dry land once again, he looked up into the clouds. He saw the rainbow of God, and it was as

Finally one other insight which I'll mention only briefly. It's simply this: there is always some creative

though God were saying to him: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be there as the promise that total destruction will never come to you, for life is greater than death.

Therefore we try to meet the floods that come upon us bravely, always remembering that ultimately there is some creative possibility in the disaster which has overtaken us. I have said this so many times before that I find it difficult to say in a new way, but perhaps by repetition you may begin to grasp it, if you have not already. It's based upon the experience that there is nothing in life that can happen to a person in which there is not some potential blessing, that there is nothing that can come to you in which you cannot find some ultimate good and that in turn is based upon the fact that the God of the universe is the God of life and not death and that life is ultimately stronger than death.

To be sure, there are times when the rainbow gets all twisted up and it looks like a cross, but even so it emphasizes and makes all the more clear the fact that no matter how men distort life and twist it, no matter how life may be torn and worn and wasted, there is always some ultimate possibility that out of it will come some new understanding, some new undreamed of power, some relationship that nobody ever dared hope could be so pure, some knowledge of God that we wanted but never had.

Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote a sonnet some time ago with which I would like to close. She wrote it apparently about a man living in one of the low countries. The dykes had broken and everything he had was washed away, wiped out.

"The broken dyke, the levee washed away,
The good field flooded and the cattle drowned,
Estranged and treacherous all the faithful ground,
And nothing left but floating disarray
Of tree and home uprooted - was this the day
Man dropped upon his shadow without a sound
And died, having labored well and having found
His burden heavier than a quilt of clay?
No...no. I saw him when the sun was set
In water, leaning on his single oar,
With garden faithfully glimmering yet...
There bulked the plow, here washed the updrifted weeds..
And scull across his roof and make for shore,
With twisted face and pockets full of seeds."

Pockets full of seeds. And so the floods may come and the waves may go over us. If they have not already, there may come a time in your life when they will. Remember these three insights from this old story of Noah and the flood. There is nothing unique or original about anything that we may suffer. Others have been through it and emerged victorious. Second: there is some refuge from it. And third: if we look hard enough, we'll see that there is some creative possibility, some opportunity resting to be developed.

PRAYER: Fix our steps, O God, so that we stagger not at the uneven motion of our world. Help us to go steadily on our way, neither censuring our journey by the weather we meet, nor turning aside for anything that befalls us. Amen