

"WHEN THE WATERS BEGIN TO RISE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
February 16, 1997

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INTRODUCTION

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But then his wife...who was unaware of her husband's ingenious security measure, needed to run an errand which required the use of the car to which the rope had been tied and she did not see the rope tied to the bumper and pulled out the driveway. You can picture the result. The man did survive, but the minister reported that in hearing of this adventure pictured the man soaring over the peak of that roof like Evel Knivel over the Snake River Canyon.

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He was having to start all over and indeed, this does happen to people...the world as they have known it suddenly disappears. I think of a widow whose husband has recently died. She has never worked outside the home and her husband always managed their financial affairs, but he didn't manage them very well. Now, in addition to the grief she's feeling she is trying to cope with their financial matters and is going to have to go to work for the first time out there in a world for which she's totally unprepared. It happens.

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This is Noah's story. But it is also our story, too. What do we do when the waters are rising and the world around us is rapidly changing and life seems dreadfully frightening and uncertain.

For one thing, we would do well to recognize that beyond the rising water is a rainbow. Storms do not last forever. Grief subsides. Time helps to heal. The pain softens. The light shines once again. Those who lose their jobs find another. Single moms make it through...somehow.

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"Now that I'm an adult, I've noticed 'blackberry winters' in other areas of my life, too. I save for a vacation, but have to spend the money on a new washer. My 'Meaningful relationship' with my two teenagers is splintered by those occasional spats. I want that recognition for my hard work on the local School Board....but am passed over. Sometimes I'm tempted to give up...to surrender to the cynicism that surrounds me. I feel things will never get better."

"And that's when I begin to think of Grandma...sitting in her rocker, her hands stitching quilting pieces. 'It'll never get warm' I use to whine. 'Course it will, dear' she'd laugh. 'Blackberry winter is a short season, child...real short.'"

"And that's the way I try to think of my set-backs" Ms. Carney concludes. "Inevitable. Short-lived. As natural as the seasons....the 'blackberry seasons of life.'"

Most of our troubles are temporary. Somehow we muddle through. Oh, it probably seemed like a lifetime to Noah being cooped up in that ark, but eventually the waters receded. They do. And a rainbow appeared in the heavens...the rainbow was a symbol of God's promise to Noah that never again would the waters overwhelm him...or us. We share also in that same promise of God. After the rain, the rainbow. Oh, it doesn't always happen right away and sometimes our trials do not lead to triumph : that you and I can readily identify, but still, I believe, that God's promise is with us. The waters will not overwhelm. I, for one, believe that the God who created us will be with us through the storms of life. And this leads me to the last point of this beautiful story...

GOD IS WITH US

God is with us through the storms. On the night of February 3rd, 1943, a loaded troop transport was torpedoed, without any warning by an enemy submarine in the North Atlantic and began to sink rapidly in the icy waters....

So begins the citation to four men of different religious backgrounds on a chapel wall on a college campus. George Fox, a Methodist preacher from Vermont, Alexander Goode, a Jewish rabbi, Clark Poling, a minister of the Reformed Church and John Washington, a Roman Catholic priest. That night, on the troopship, Dorchester, these four chaplains gave up their life jackets and their lives. The four fighting men who wore their jackets...and the hundreds more...who were aided and encouraged by those four heroic chaplains...watched the waters rise about them as each stood firm and in the tradition of his faith, prayed.

God was with them as "one in service and in sacrifice and in death they gave their lives"...reads the inscription. I was about 13 years of age and I remember hearing about it and what an impression it made on me. George Fox, the Methodist minister, was a member of the Troy Conference of the Methodist Church, which was my "home" conference upstate. Somewhere in our land there is a chapel dedicated to their memory...on a college campus...that keeps their memory and their heroism alive.

When I studied in Scotland many years ago I first heard about a man named Joseph Craik. He was known all over Scotland as "the man who turns inkblots into angels". He was gifted as an artist and was a creative and talented pen-man who could write and draw beautiful. He was appointed as writing master in a small village in Scotland. Often, as children will do when they are learning, his young students would leave messy inkblots on their pages. While most teachers would reprimand the students, circling the inkblots in graphic red and taking away points for sloppy penmanship, Joseph Craik would do something quite different and most delightful. Taking his talented pen in hand and beginning with the blots made by the children, he would add a line here and there and out of the inkblots would come pictures of angels.

So when the students were given back their papers, they weren't all marked up with harsh criticisms. Rather, they were wonderfully decorated with exquisite angels! The children, of course, were delighted, encouraged, please. And so it was that Joseph Craik became something of a legend in his own time in his native Scotland, a man known throughout the British Isles as the man who "turned inkblots into angels".

CLOSING

I know Another who turns inkblots into angels, who turns rain clouds into rainbows....yes, who can take a life that has been nearly beaten down, swamped, drowned by life....and bring joy and new life into it. That "Other" is the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Noah and Moses....the God of Jesus, of Paul and Peter...and of many, many others across the centuries.

If the waters around you are rising this day, may I invite you to bring your concerns to the One who has put a bow into the heavens as an eternal promise that the waters will never overwhelm us. Oh, how we need to trust that One far more than we do with our lives. For the God who created us will be with us through the storm. Take the leap of faith and believe.

LET US PRAY

And now make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence, O God, in these quiet moments. Let the story of Noah speak to us. If the waters of life are rising around us...causing us to be anxious and fearful and without hope, remind us of your promises made to us in the rainbow....and that you Who have created us will be with us always...through the storms of life, beside the still waters, and in the valleys where doubt and discouragement sometimes disturb us. Renew our faith and our commitment to Christ as we enter into this soul searching time of Lent. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.

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So when the students were given back their papers, they weren't all marked up with harsh criticisms. Rather, they were wonderfully decorated with exquisite angels! The children, of course, were delighted, encouraged, please. And so it was that Joseph Craik became something of a legend in his own time in his native Scotland, a man known throughout the British Isles as the man who "turned inkblots into angels".

CLOSING

I know Another who turns inkblots into angels, who turns rain clouds into rainbows....yes, who can take a life that has been nearly beaten down, swamped, drowned by life....and bring joy and new life into it. That "Other" is the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Noah and Moses....the God of Jesus, of Paul and Peter...and of many, many others across the centuries.

If the waters around you are rising this day, may I invite you to bring your concerns to the One who has put a bow into the heavens as an eternal promise that the waters will never overwhelm us. Oh, how we need to trust that One far more than we do with our lives. For the God who created us will be with us through the storm. Take the leap of faith and believe.

LET US PRAY

And now make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence, O God, in these quiet moments. Let the story of Noah speak to us. If the waters of life are rising around us...causing us to be anxious and fearful and without hope, remind us of your promises made to us in the rainbow....and that you Who have created us will be with us always...through the storms of life, beside the still waters, and in the valleys where doubt and discouragement sometimes disturb us. Renew our faith and our commitment to Christ as we enter into this soul searching time of Lent. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.