

"The Rainbow Connection"

Genesis 2:18-25

Genesis Series - Week 5

February 2, 2020

When I was in middle school, my church choir did a cantata, a musical about the story of Noah's Ark. It was called "The Rainbow Express", and one of the songs has stuck in my head all these years. It was about procrastination, and featured Noah, having a debate with himself because, even though God told him, a flood is coming, I want you to build an ark--it was such a beautiful day! Noah wanted to take the day off from ark building and enjoy the sunshine. But his conscience had other ideas and urged him, "Don't put off until tomorrow, what you can do today. Don't you know that by tomorrow, all this might float away?" Sometimes, when I'm struggling with my to-do list, I think about that song, and it almost always helps me overcome procrastination.

I say *almost* always, because, like most people, I have been known to drag my feet from time to time when faced with an unpleasant task, no matter what the music in my head says. Lucky for me, ministers have the option to spiritualize this procrastination by saying we're being patient, we're waiting on God, maybe it's not yet time to act but rather it's time to watch and wait. And there are certainly many times when that is the case. Most great things take time to develop and perfect, and I think it's rare that God speaks to us through instant messaging. It takes time to tune in and discern God's voice. I wonder if God spoke to some other people along with Noah about the impending flood, it's just that everyone else was too busy to listen!

When I think about the core values these stories in Genesis have to offer the church today, certainly taking the time to tune in and listen to God is as important for us as it was in Noah's day. Doing what God asks us to do is as important for us as it was in Noah's day. But how often do we get such explicit instructions? Build an ark, make it 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high; build it out of cypress wood, coat it with pitch inside and out; give it three decks, etc. All of us know what it's like to have God ask us to do something big--Jesus said, go into all the world and preach the gospel! That's a big task! But for most of us, God's revelation has not included such specific instructions, we have not been given a recipe or requirements like Noah. Instead, we've been given a relationship through Jesus. God doesn't give us a blueprint, we don't get step by step instructions for saving the world. Instead God gives us the chance to be God's partners and friends.

I say all of this because I'd like to talk today about the rainbow, which is a symbol for friendship and connection. Seeing a rainbow in the sky is also a sign of hope. Things will not always be stormy! God has made promises to us that we can count on. We can trust God to do the things that only God can do. But

that does not relieve us from our responsibility to do the things we have been built to do.

And one thing we have all been built to do is tell our story. Each of us has our own experiences with God, our own testimony to how God has worked in our lives. I shared some of my story recently in our February newsletter. It is because of a local congregation that I came to know about and trust God's goodness. And it is because of a local congregation that I came to know about and trust my own goodness. Not that I am all good, that's not what I mean. But I'm not all bad, either! My local church helped me to see that I am God's beloved daughter, someone God has designed especially, someone God wants to be around, someone God has gifted and is delighted by. They introduced me to my heavenly Father, my heavenly Parent, whose love mirrored the good in my parents, but was of course so much more complete. The church taught me the truth about my own worth and value, and they taught me about God. I was transformed by the renewing of my mind.

What I did not realize is how that God would want me to continue to be transformed by the renewing of my mind, and this process can take a long time. Let me give you an example. I grew up in a dairy farming community, and we always had milk from Fox Chase Farms in glass bottles in our refrigerator. When I got married and moved to the Philadelphia area, I started buying milk in plastic jugs, which felt wrong because it wasn't supporting a local family farm, but it was still milk from Pennsylvania, so I was alright with that. A few years later, our pediatrician mentioned to me that most people in the world do not drink milk as adults. I couldn't imagine life without milk! That violated what I was taught from a young age, that milk is not only good for our bodies, it's good for our economy!

It's funny how our culture shapes us. Until recently, I bought milk almost every time I went to the store. For the last several months, though, I have been buying milk only rarely, and when I buy it, I get the smallest jug I can. I've been trying to lose weight, and I have realized that, if I have milk, I want cookies. If I have cookies, I want milk. I really miss having milk in the house! But I am learning that I can be okay without it. If you would have told me when we first moved here, Dorry, Lima is going to change you! You are going to decide to give up milk, I would have told you, that will never happen. Absolutely not! But guess what? I have not bought a gallon of milk since before Labor Day, and the world is continuing to spin on its axis.

When Paul wrote that our goal is transformation, and that is accomplished by the renewing of our minds, I doubt he was thinking much about how we can lose weight if we examine and change some of our thoughts about food. But that is what is happening for me. And as much of a miracle as that is to me, it's just a tiny echo of the renewing of our minds God began by sending Christ for all

of us! But we believe God's grace doesn't stop with helping us receive Christ. Each of us has beliefs and ideals we absorbed from our families, our culture, and our environment that we have most likely never given a whole lot of thought to. But God is always helping us to learn and grow. We call this process sanctification.

The good news is, learning new things is liberating! But it can also really complicate things! What if God guides us to make changes that we never anticipated? What if God is leading us toward something that goes against what we've been taught in the past, something that feels disloyal? What if God calls us to do something that sounds bolder than building an ark? And what if we didn't hear God right?

If you ask me, those are all good reasons to procrastinate! But eventually the time comes when action is required. God keeps putting things on our radar screen, and eventually we can't ignore them anymore! That's how our church's struggle with human sexuality feels to me. When I started seminary in 2000, I had no problem signing Eastern Baptist Seminary's faith statement, which included language similar to our Book of Discipline, that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. I just assumed that's what pretty much all Christians thought. But our pastor challenged me to examine my beliefs and think for myself. I started to wonder if the ideas I grew up with were where God wanted me on this issue, but I didn't give it much more thought for a while.

After seminary, my first appointment was to Harriman UMC in Bristol. Wouldn't you know, in that small, very traditional congregation, there was a same gender couple who had been members of the church for quite some time. They told me that when they first started coming to Harriman, many people were not welcoming. But over time the congregation grew to know and love them, and they became leaders in the congregation. I was moved by their love for each other and their love for God. I became more confident that I needed to change my views and be more open and accepting.

A few years later, when I got to Newtown UMC, we did a study on the book, "God and the Gay Christian," written by Matthew Vines. I was convinced that the scriptures that talk about homosexual behavior were not addressing the situation in our culture, where we are seeing two people who love each other, who in many cases feel God brought them together, and they want to get married in their church. I became friends with another same gender couple, and was blessed by the ministry of several gay colleagues. I realized that if I wanted to love my neighbor as myself, I needed to hope for and work to see same gender couples enjoy the same blessings of marriage that I enjoyed, which was a big change from how I felt about the issue fifteen years before.

But I had the luxury of keeping my changed opinion to myself. Every year I saw people gather outside the ordination serviced at Annual Conference with their rainbow stoles, peacefully protesting our denomination's ban on gay clergy, but I did not join in. Eventually I started sharing in one-on-one conversations my desire to see our rules change. I do not know if I was procrastinating, or following the lead of the Holy Spirit, but it wasn't until I came to Lima that I was willing to really speak out. In September of 2018 I stood up at a district gathering and told my story to my clergy colleagues, of how I felt God leading me to change my viewpoint. Since then, I have spoken and written about that with you, and how I hope the United Methodist Church can become a place where differing viewpoints can be lived out. Some people have left Lima because of that. Some are upset. This grieves me deeply. But to not openly address this issue would be an even deeper pain. I need to do what I have been built to do, which is to tell others of how God has been at work in my life. I need to be faithful to my own experience.

And that makes me think about Noah. Can you imagine the courage it took Noah—even though he was following God's direct orders—to build an ark? His neighbors might have thought he was crazy. I'm sure they were offended—who was Noah to think he had heard from God? And I'm sure they were angry. Noah is going to get saved but we're not? How dare he think he's better than all of us! We worship every week with an empty cross in front of us, in witness to our belief that there is no salvation without God's gracious action in our lives. But the story of Noah reminds us that it could also be that there is no salvation without courageous and obedient people, who are willing to follow where God leads.

We can trust God to do the things that only God can do. But that does not relieve us of the responsibility to do the things we can do. And one of those things God asks us to do is to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Human sexuality is a hard topic for all of us. I did not come to Lima with the hope of trying to convince everyone to see things the way I do. But I am asking us all to see if we can lean in toward each other. I am asking us to be sensitive to how hard it is for members of our body to make change. And I am asking us to be sensitive to how necessary it is to make changes in order to protect other members of our body. No matter what changes await us, no matter how foreign or even scary they sound right now, we will be okay. God set a rainbow in the sky as a reminder, that it won't always be stormy! And no matter what the weather, God is with us and is at work for good.

For a long time I wondered why the story of Noah's ark is so popular, because a lot of it is awfully violent and sad. But when I think about this story in terms of the core values it has to offer the church today, this story has so much to teach us. Taking the time to tune in and listen to God is as important for us as it was in Noah's day. Doing what God asks us to do is as important for us as

it was in Noah's day. Having the courage to be ourselves no matter what others think is as important for us as it was in Noah's day. And perhaps most importantly is making the rainbow connection: naming all the ways God has been faithful to us, and doing all we can to extend that loving care to others. It is the church's job to show that every single person in the world is worthy of that. Amen.