

Living on an Ark

A Brief Homily on Genesis 6:11-22

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When I was a boy I lived on a farm in southern Alberta. We had lots of animals: cows, chickens, pigs, cats, dogs, and rabbits. One of my jobs was to help feed them. I had to get up early in the morning, *before* going to school, and drag heavy bales of hay or carry big buckets of water. Sometimes I had to milk our cow. If we forgot to milk her she got really cranky hauling all her milk around. If we forgot to *feed* her, she got even crankier! I also had to take care of the fields that grew the hay and the wheat that eventually made its way as food to the animals. That meant getting up with the sun to move irrigation pipes, and working by moonlight to bring in the harvest or plow the fields. It was a lot of work. Sometimes I liked it, especially when the weather was cool and there were not too many mosquitoes around. Being with the animals felt good. Watching little piglets wrestle each other to get to their mother's milk was really fun. Piglets are hilarious! But more often, I wanted to stay in bed, lounge with a good book, or play basketball. I wished that I could be released from all these farming and feeding responsibilities, and instead go play with friends.

I don't suppose many of you have been on a farm lately. How about on an ark? This is a strange question, I know, because I have not seen any arks around here. But isn't an ark something like a floating farm, a place where people are charged with the responsibility of taking care of God's creatures? In the Genesis story God approaches Noah. This is important. Have you ever noticed that some people are really good at hiding when someone comes around asking for help? Noah stands out because he's approachable. He doesn't hide when God comes around. He is said to be one of the only people of his generation who wanted to "walk with God." God says

to him, “Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark . . .bring along your family . . .and of every living thing, of all flesh, birds, animals, and creeping things, bring two of every kind into the ark, male and female, *and keep them all alive.*” Isn’t this what farmers do when they fill their barns and granaries with food? Think about it. God says to Noah, “Bring into the ark every kind of food that is eaten, store it up, and then serve it to all the animals when they need it.” The remarkable thing is that Noah did it. He and his family did all that God commanded him. My guess is that there were some kids on the ark too, and that Noah said to them, “Time to feed the animals again.” Time to milk the cow. What do you suppose Noah’s kids and grandkids said? Do you suppose they wanted to stay in bed, maybe play X-Box or do Facebook? Did they jump up and say “Me first!” or did they hide?

Now, imagine that God comes to you one day and says, “I need you and your family to gather all the animals living in North Carolina. I need you to feed them and protect them. I need you to build a floating farm and make sure they stay alive because the world around them is crumbling and dissolving. The places these animals have called home are disappearing, and I need you to make a home for them.” What would you say? Have you noticed that the homes for animals *are* in peril and *are* disappearing? Would you even know what all the species of animals are? Would you know what they like to eat? Would you have the stamina and the patience to stay with them, serving them and taking care of their illness and need?

How should we picture the ark? I grew up thinking it was an escape vessel, God’s way of saving a remnant of all the animals so that when the flood was over there would be representatives of all the species to repopulate the earth. Maybe we need to rethink this idea. Some of the Jewish rabbis, reflecting on the story, said the ark was so important because it was where Noah and his family learned to practice the same kind of love and care that God shows for

all of creation's creatures all the time. The ark, in other words, was not an escape vessel. It was a school for the learning of compassion and genuine hospitality. It was the place and the time where humanity participated in God's own farming work of feeding and attending to the needs of all the animals. We need the practice because taking care of each other and the creatures of the world is not easily or automatically done. We also need to know that when we exercise such care we are bearing witness to God's nurturing and sustaining ways with the world. God did not create a world of animals only to watch them suffer and die. God wants the animals to thrive. God wants us to help make sure that the animals of our world are healthy and well.

I wonder if Noah and his kids relished all the work on the ark. Did they like dealing with animals that smelled a bit, or maybe bit or kicked them? Did they like serving critters that never said "thank you?" Did they complain because the work seemed never-ending and with no vacations in sight? Did they delight when baby monkeys and zebras and puppies were born? The remarkable thing is that some of the rabbis believed that Noah did not stop to sleep the many months he was on the ark because he took such joy in the care of the animals. He was like the host of a great party. Everyone was having such a good time that Noah did not want it to end. Noah did not want to go to bed because he saw how his service of the animals brought them gladness and life. What could be better, more exciting and more rewarding, than to contribute to the health and happiness of God's many creatures? Isn't this what God does all the time?

We don't often think of God as a farmer or a gardener growing food for creatures. Psalm 65, along with other passages in the Bible like Genesis 2 and Job 39, suggests that we should. God is taking care of us and all the animals all the time. *The whole world is God's ark.* Don't you think God wants us to join in? It's time to get on the ark. Maybe we need to think more carefully about how our homes, neighborhoods, cities, and farms can serve an "ark-like"

function, so that the animals of the world can experience the love of God through our love of them. Would that not be a wonderful blessing to the animals?

AMEN