

"Laughing Out Loud? or Is It a Laughing Matter?"

A couple of weeks ago I finished the assembly of a 1,000 piece jigsaw puzzle featuring Noah's Ark. During assembly my attention was drawn to the rough hewn nature of the wood of the ark depicted, which surely is somewhat commensurate with the end product of the original. Who would ever envision Noah taking the time, labor, and materials needed to smooth, sand, and polish this once in all history water craft? Such a mental image makes me chuckle. As I was thinking of the rough hewn wood depicted in the puzzle it occurred to me that it would be fitting to frame it (for hanging in my office) using rough hewn wood. This past winter I salvaged the rough cut boards from a couple of pallets of which I realized would be just perfect! After completing the framing process I posted a picture of the framed puzzle on FB. One person indicated this framed puzzle might be a suitable basis for a devotion. Duly noted.

Last Sunday, after we canceled church due to the blowing and drifting snow, I encouraged our members to engage in some sort of spiritual exercise in lieu of corporate worship here. I decided to read and consider the story of Noah. Though this is one of the most well known stories of the Bible I think there is always meat and drink awaiting those who embrace and immerse themselves into the story and theology God has given us. I offered the following information in response to the responses the picture elected. "The wood was clean and rough cut so it made perfect sense. I think, since church is canceled today, I will spend some time with the Noah story, the story of a man and his family who obeyed God and were saved from the destruction to come, all as conveyed in Scripture, not from a movie that wrongly portrays him."

It may or may not be apparent but my final comment stems from having gone to see the movie *Noah* a year ago or so. My read of the Biblical story last Sunday brought to mind a major conflict resulting from my frustrated hope that the movie would be faithful to the Biblical witness. As I've been burned before with such hopes [it seems few are able to faithfully depict a Biblical story] I was afraid this would be just one more disappointment. In this fear I was not disappointed. This remembrance came back to me as I read again the Biblical witness regarding Noah. Consider the following 4 verses: 1) "Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God." (Genesis 6:9, NIV), 2) "The LORD then said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation." (Genesis 7:1, NIV), 3) "Noah did everything just as God commanded him." (Genesis 6:22, NIV), and 4) "And Noah did all that the LORD commanded him." (Genesis 7:5, NIV).

It became clear early in the movie that Noah was being wrongly portrayed as doubting, insecure, not very obedient, and needful of encouragement from others to do as God instructed him, something very different than the specific and clear portrayal God has given us in Scripture. It's not a central point of this meditation but why does the world feel or find the need to wrongfully portray Biblical characters?! [A rhetorical question obviously.] It unavoidably is nothing other than telling a lie, an untruth if you'd rather, to impugn and disparage a true

man of God as the expression goes. In case it isn't obvious, to me it was and is no laughing matter.

With that in mind, as I was doing study and prep for this devotion I opened my commentary of Genesis whereupon I found a *Mother Goose & Grimm* comic strip from Sunday, August 21, 2011 I had clipped, saved, and inserted for whatever future use might come about. Noah's wife is shown handing Noah a fly swatter, saying, "Here, Noah, swat those two mosquitos while you still have a chance." In not so much deference to mosquito-eating critters everywhere [such as bats], I had to laugh, for all reasons obvious and more. [I've sometimes felt the same toward gnats and snakes.]

Some years ago I first learned of the now ubiquitously used acronym "lol", particularly through Facebook, though not at first understanding what it meant. Inquiring early on I was given several possibilities. Research yesterday seems to indicate that "laughing out loud" is the predominant meaning intended. This dovetails into a remark my commentary made regarding the people who undoubtedly made great sport of Noah at this monstrosity of a boat, many times over the size of any water craft known to have been built at that time. "True sailing ships, with a length of 170 feet, are first depicted in Old Kingdom Egyptian art (ca. 2500 BC)..." According to Scripture the ark was approximately 450' long, 75' wide, and 45' feet deep. "If it had a flat bottom, the total displacement would be about 43,000 tons." [The NIV Application Commentary, Genesis, Walton, p. 312] In any event, it doesn't take much of an imagination to envision the people laughing hysterically at the laughable enterprise. "What kind of monstrosity is this?! God (supposedly) told him to do what because God is going to do what?! Ha, ha, ha!!!!!!" Etc., etc., etc.

The only thing is, it was no laughing matter.

Sin is no laughing matter. Neither is disparaging God and rejecting God's most wonderful plan and will for the human race and the human person. It has not gone unnoticed that God, for all the heartache he suffered at such an egregiously out of control human race, could very well have just as easily, and perhaps more easily been expected to, dismiss the whole human race thing. Theologians seem pretty unified in the theological proposition that God did not create man and the cosmos because he was either bored or lonely. God didn't "need" man's existence to be. And yet, God didn't undo creation ("It is finished. Be gone."), which he could just as easily have done as by saying, "Let there be light." Etc., etc. The LORD was not starting from scratch but engaging in a reset, in what some call a return to Eden.

The depravity of man. The authority I consulted noted that there is no clearer OT depiction of what is known as "total depravity" (the doctrine that sin touches everything man does, not that man doesn't do good things [many people DO good things, without a doubt] but that sin somehow is and has been involved in every human enterprise since the Garden) than as seen in Genesis 6. "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt

the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways."  
(Genesis 6:5, 11-12, NIV)

Perhaps one reason, although a very flawed and failed reason, Noah was depicted negatively in the movie is an application of Romans 3:10 (NIV) which reads "As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one...'" which echoes Psalm 14:1-3 which reads "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good. The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one." (NIV)

One reason this possible application of Scripture to Noah fails is found in God's own testimony, not the testimony, deduction, or conclusion of any fallible human person.

The LORD tells us in Genesis 6:8-9 "But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD..... Noah was a righteous man, *blameless among the people of his time*, and he walked with God." (NIV; emphasis mine) That qualifying clause was not incidental, accidental, nor without great significance. Scripture does not claim that Noah was perfect nor for any such related notion. That being said, and with no contradiction allowed, by comparison with all the rest of "the people of his time", he was far, head and shoulders, above the rest of the human race which had become so infected with sin and evil that they lived out those realities to their ultimate conclusion and consequences. This was absolutely no laughing matter but of a most grievous nature.

Thus, as a side but not my primary point, I vent my utter frustration with the false portrayal of Noah, the only human being specified by name in our text as having found favor in the eyes of the LORD because of the incredibly high level of righteousness the LORD saw in and attributed to him.

One of the serious realities of modern society is that a seemingly increasing number of people laugh at the seriousness of sin by which many of us openly speak to. Thus, we have seen the arrival of the Marshmallow Jesus in our era that is served up to the delight of many.

What follows now are all the NT references (there is a Lucan text which mirrors the one from Matthew) and applications of our subject matter for us to consider.

"As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man." (Matt 24:37-39, NIV)

"By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith." (Heb 11:7, NIV)

"...God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water..." (1 Pet 3:20, NIV)

"But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even

denying the sovereign Lord who bought them-- bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping. For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment; if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others; if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)-- if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment." (2 Pet 2:1-9, NIV)

As pastor, I am called, among other things, to tend to two serious matters. First, to give proper warning about the things God warns us about. And second, to encourage us positively in the ways and means by which God has provided for us. Please never forget that we are saved "by grace", not by works of righteousness we think we inherently possess. Neither do we have to attain the level of righteousness that God ascribed to Noah. Shudder the thought that I have attained or could attain such a thing! The bar is too high for us, thus Jesus Christ, in our stead, who has cleared the high jump set impossibly high for us by God's holiness and will. And yet God himself has established the remedy for, in the words of my Mom, "that which ails us!" When Mom would tell us kids that we needed to do thus and such and we'd throw a fit and ask why, after a few futile attempts at rational explanation she would finally say in exasperation, "Because it's good for what ails ya!" [I love my Mom!]

And lastly, next week we begin the season of Lent.

From my heart to yours.....