

**THE RAINBOW PROMISE**  
**Sermon for Lent 1B: Gen 9:8-17, Mk 1:9-15**  
LPC, 2/18/18

Here's a question for you: did Noah's ark have a rudder?

I am assuming you are familiar with the whole story of Noah and the ark, of which we heard just the conclusion today in our Old Testament lesson. You know how it goes: dismayed by the wickedness and violence in the beautiful, good earth God had created, God determined to wipe out "all flesh from the earth," sparing only enough breeding pairs of humans and animals to repopulate the world afterwards.

God instructed Noah, a righteous man, to build a huge boat called an ark, in which his family and the selected animals would float out the cataclysm. God specified the dimensions, the materials and the number of decks. Then God told Noah to board with his family and the animals, whereupon the rains began, persisting for forty days and flooding the whole earth, exterminating all life except that which had taken refuge in the ark. Finally the rains stopped, the land dried, and the humans and animals disembarked to be fruitful and multiply.

Today's excerpt comes at the end of the narrative. God casts a rainbow in the sky as a sign of God's covenant with creation never again to allow its destruction. Whenever people see a rainbow they are to remember that they have a relationship with God.

Nowhere in the whole story is there any mention of a rudder on the ark. The great vessel was to be lifted by the rising waters and carried at the whim of wind and current without human agency until deposited when the waters receded wherever the ark just happened to have been floating at the time.

You've seen those post-hurricane photographs of boats that had been moored out in the harbor deposited in city streets by receding floodwaters. That seems to be what happened to the ark on Mt. Ararat.

In other words, the ark had no human direction at all. No rudder, no wheel, no pilot. The ark was completely under the control of non-human forces.

My focus today is this idea of the rudderless ark totally subject to wind and wave, completely without human guidance. I find the ark a powerful metaphor for those times in human life when we feel carried along by forces stronger than ourselves, having no control over our direction, when even familiar landmarks by which we might orient ourselves are absent.

As you probably know, my family is going through a bereavement. This family bereavement follows close on the heels of our community bereavement for not one, but two church members: Bill Hannig and Jessie McClure. The concentration of these three deaths has probably intensified their effect on me.

Now I can't say my mother-in-law's death leaves a hole in my life the way the loss of a spouse or a child would. But Betty's been part of my life for forty-one years, and I called her "Mom" as Rich did, for most of those years. She seemed indestructible to me. So I do grieve.

Even though I have counselled families in grief for years and know the right things to say to myself, I am unnerved. Even though Betty's death put a welcomed end to years of pain and months of decline for her, I am to some extent at sea, now that it has happened.

I am relating the experience of loss or grief to the idea of bouncing along in a rudderless ark. (Grief or loss may not even be the only human experiences that can be compared to the ark.) I am sure the spiritual disorientation I am calling an ark experience is common enough that I offer some reflections on being aboard the ark in the hopes it may be helpful should you find yourself in such a situation.

In an ark experience you feel you are being carried some place and you don't know where, and you can't stop it or control it. There are few familiar landmarks by which to orient yourself. You pretty much have to wait and see where the ark will come to ground.

I imagine things would have been much worse for Noah and his family if Noah had not had some faith in God and in what he had heard God say. The ark-people undoubtedly felt disorientation and anxiety, but they could take comfort in Noah's conviction that they were in God's hands.

Likewise, during our ark experiences, we need to take it on faith that we are in God's hands. If we allow ourselves, we may even find comfort in this, even when we don't know where we are or where we will end up. Furthermore, we have God's covenant, described in today's Old Testament passage and signed by a rainbow, that the earth is the Lord's, and God will not allow its life to be wiped out ever again.

I am reminded of a seminary professor whose wife died during the semester. Understandably, he disappeared from public life for a bit, but I'll never forget what he said when he returned to routine. He stood up in chapel to thank everyone publicly for their support and sympathy. He ended by saying, "The bottom holds." That's God's rainbow promise. The bottom holds.

In Mark's Gospel, you will have noticed, Jesus' temptation by Satan in the wilderness gets only a brief mention, not the three-act detail you get in Matthew and Luke. Mark just says, "tempted by Satan." My commentary claims this is because in being baptized and touched by the Holy Spirit Jesus has already defeated Satan. That Jesus withstood Satan's temptations is a foregone conclusion, a done deal.

This is something else we can take comfort from during the "ark" periods of our lives: Jesus has already defeated the power of evil. Yes, we may have to bounce around on the ark for a bit without knowing for sure where we'll come out, but the ultimate outcome is known. Jesus triumphs. We will be sustained by our heavenly Father. The bottom holds.

You may not be on an ark today, but chances are you will be some day. When that happens, remember the rainbow promise. The bottom holds.