

On a Wing & A Prayer

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Genesis 8:1, 6-19

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A woman was shopping one day at a local health food store. As she placed a container of fresh tofu in her basket, a well-dressed man approached her and asked politely what she did with the tofu. With a half-smile, she replied that normally she put it in her refrigerator, looked at it for several weeks and then threw it away. The man replied, "That's exactly what my wife does with it. I was hoping you had a better recipe."¹

The Old Testament reading for today comes from the story of Noah and the Flood. I could focus on the beginning of this story with its unsettling details of a massive flood that covered the mountains and destroyed all life beneath its relentless waves. Or I could talk about the end of the narrative where everyone exits the ark and a rainbow is placed in a bright, blue sky as a promise that such destruction will never descend upon the earth again. One option describes a human race that is utterly corrupt and that has ruined creation itself; the other reinforces the tendency to make this Genesis story into secular kitsch, a sanitized tale of cute animals and cheerful rainbows useful as décor for nursery rooms or gift ideas at baby showers. Like the man in the health food store, I was hoping for a better recipe.

I want to focus this morning on the most dramatic part of the Noah story. It is not the beginning of the story, where it says all the earth was corrupt and filled with violence and God told Noah to build an ark. Nor is it at the end of the story, the denouement when the ark door opens and all the animals and Noah's family step out onto dry land again. No, the dramatic part of the story is in the middle, when it's not entirely clear whether Noah is going to survive the flood or not; when he's floating in a dark, rain-soaked ark and food is in short supply and all he's heard for night after night after night is the sound of water lapping against the cypress wood while all around him, everything he's ever known is being utterly destroyed. The dramatic part is in the center of the story, when the skylight window is pushed open and Noah releases some birds to the outside world, literally sent forth on a wing and a prayer.² It is then, for the first time in this bleak tale of destruction, that hope enters the scene.

For weeks now, Noah had been floating on waves of destruction until he felt the ark lurch heavily and come to a creaking stop on top of Mount Ararat. According to legend, the window in the ark was up high, allowing light in but not allowing people easily to look out. Noah opened that window and sent out a raven. It was a pragmatic choice, since the raven feeds on carrion, something that would have been in plentiful supply after a devastating flood. It was a practical act, an act shaped by human reason. Noah said to himself "I need to know if it is safe to come out, so I'll send out a bird that can survive in

a landscape of death to see if I can eventually join it in a world so utterly marked by violence and death.”

But just as Genesis 8 says that God remembered Noah and all the creatures in the ark, at some point Noah remembered God and moved from pragmatism to hope. Instead of sending out a bird that survives on death, Noah releases a plant eater, a bird that lives on the green bounty and gracious providence of God. As if offering a prayer, Noah released the dove to see if God would provide once more for humans and animals to live on earth. The dove circled and flew, but found no place of rest. And in a beautiful detail of the story, Noah put out his hand and brought the dove back into the ark. The prayer went forth; the prayer returned. “No” is also an answer from God.

Eugene Peterson has said, Prayer is a joining of realities, making a live connection between the place we find ourselves and the God who is finding us.³ Many Jewish scholars stress how prayer is mostly meant to have an effect on us rather than on God. By praying we contend with the fact that there is a Supreme Being above us.⁴ That awareness should lead us to amend our ways, to step aside and look at ourselves objectively to see where we have come from and where we are going. Elie Wiesel tells the story of Rabbi Levi-Yitzhak, who every night before falling asleep would review how he spent his day. In his prayers he would often say, “I, Levi-Yitzhak promise not to do it again. I made the same prayer yesterday? Yes, but tonight I really mean it.”⁵

Prayer is not wishful thinking. Prayer is a breaking of silence, a joining of realities, a time of honest reflection before and with the God who is our Maker and our Savior. Prayer requires persistence. Noah’s first prayer, the first release of the dove, came back with the answer, “No.” A week later, Noah offered up his feathered prayer again. This time it returned with a freshly plucked olive branch in its beak. The world was not to be a place for ravens and violence and carrion-eaters surviving on the carcasses of life. The world would again be a place of God’s loving care, of rainstorms that stop and rainbows that forever remind us of that promise.

George Buttrick has said, Prayer is not a substitute for work, thinking, watching, suffering or giving. Prayer is a support for all our other efforts.⁶ Another week went by on the ark and a feathered prayer was sent forth again. This time the bird did not return because it didn’t need to. The prayer had been answered. It was time to go forth. Noah and all life could live again on earth, sustained by God’s love and covenant and grace.

In Emily Dickinson’s famous poem, she writes: *Hope is the thing with feathers/ that perches in the soul/ And sings the tune without the words/ and never stops at all.* Pragmatism is a human creation, done by mortals rummaging around in the cluttered attics and backrooms of their own little worlds, trying to build a future out of the discarded bric-a-brac of the present, trying to make things somehow work out despite our lack of preparation, lack of compassion, and lack of faith. It is the act of sending forth ravens to make do out of the wreckage of broken lives and broken promises. Hope is a thing with feathers, a dove released from a high window, a flash of white wings against a clear blue sky. As the bird flies out of our hands, we are left with empty palms

upraised to the heavens. A prayer goes forth and yet it will return. The answer may be No or Yes, Wait or Act, the comfort of Be Not Afraid, the warning of Be Not Misled, the command to Get Up and Go Where I Will Lead You.

Though Noah lost so much in the flood, the one thing he gained in the end was hope. In time, he opened the ark door and stepped forth onto dry land. He watched the animals prance, slither, gallop, crawl and fly their way into a world of second chances. He watched his family walk down the planks and stand with him, as a group knowing better than anyone ever did before or since how utterly dependent we are on God.

We too stand with Noah, enjoying a world not of our making. We can either try to muddle through it all, getting by on our own abilities, on wishful thinking and human plans. Or we can empty our hands and hope, living on a wing and a prayer as the white dove swoops and soars in the sunlight against a rainbow-decorated, bright, blue sky.

AMEN

¹ New York Times, "Metropolitan Diary," April, 1999.

² The source of the phrase "on a wing and a prayer" comes from a 1943 World War II song of the same name written by Harold Adamson and Jimmie McHugh.

³ Eugene Peterson, The Contemplative Pastor, p. 52.

⁴ Schmuel Himmelstein, The Jewish Primer, p. 31.

⁵ Elie Wiesel, Souls on Fire, p. 97.

⁶ George Buttrick, The Living Pulpit, July-September 1993, p. 29.