

“Unlikely Saints: Noah”

Genesis 6:9-22; **Hebrews 11:1-7**¹

It must have started as an ordinary day. We don't know where it happened, exactly, but it probably happened somewhere in the Euphrates River basin—the area we know today as Iraq. As I'm sure you know, the area between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers was the cradle of the civilization that gave birth to the Bible and to the three great monotheistic faiths of the world. It was there that God spoke to a farmer named Noah and commissioned him to become the captain of the most famous ship and of the most famous voyage of all time.

We don't know when it happened, either. If we take the genealogy of Genesis 11 at face value, it appears that the Great Flood took place about 400 years before God first spoke to Abraham, which would be about 2200 B.C. The truth is that we have more questions than answers about the whole affair.

So far, only four pages into the Bible, we don't know a whole lot about God. We've been told that God created all that is. We know that God spoke repeatedly to Adam and Eve and to Cain and Abel. We've been introduced to Satan. We've heard about the first murder. We know that Enoch “*walked faithfully with God*” (Genesis 5:24); and we've been told the same thing about Noah (Genesis 6:9). We've also been told that Enoch and Noah were pretty much the only people in their generations who lived in relationship with God. Everyone else was “*consistently and totally evil*” (Genesis 6:5).

Nor do we know how God communicated with those who “*walked faithfully.*” The text leaves the impression that God spoke with those humans who followed God's will in normal auditory conversation such as we have with each other, and the fact is that a great deal of the conversation with God recorded in the Bible leaves this impression.

It seems to me that the way you and I recognize anyone's voice is through having listened to them often. If you were in a crowd of people and your Mother or your best friend called your name loudly, would you recognize that voice? Of course you would. And so it was that on one day long ago, a familiar voice came to Noah, saying, “Noah, I want you to build a boat. I want you to build a REALLY BIG Boat.”

God gave Noah specific dimensions for this boat: it was to be 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high from the keel to the main deck. These dimensions form the same ratios used by shipbuilders today, and they would have made the Ark about the size of a large destroyer in today's Navy, although, of course, it was made of wood. We don't know what the boat looked like. I'm sure you've seen representations of various sorts. What you see on the screen is how the film makers of last year's *Noah* film imagined it.²

I can imagine that Noah was rather confused by all this. Noah apparently lived a long way from any body of water that could float such a boat. Noah had never seen nor even imagined a boat such as this. Indeed, he may never have seen a boat at all. Further, such a boat had never existed before, and none would exist again until the age of steam.

The comedy film, *Evan Almighty*, although silly in some ways, did a pretty good job of illustrating what this assignment must have been like for Noah. It did a good job of pointing out how crazy everyone else must have thought he was.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 19, 2015.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noah_%282014_film%29

And for us, too, God's word is sometimes confusing, because we see only the underside of the tapestry, not its complete pattern. We see only the nearest parts of eternity, not the cosmos as a whole. Many manufacturing processes these days bring together parts from all over the world just in time for their assembly, and God's plans frequently seem to come together in the same way. It's rare that we "see the end from the beginning," and Noah didn't, either.

Noah had three sons who were already grown and married, so the construction crew had at least four members. Noah may have been able to hire other help, but we're not told that. As time went by, God apparently gave more detailed instructions for the construction than what we have in Genesis, and we're told that "*Noah did everything just as God had commanded him*" (Genesis 6:22).

It probably took a long time to build a vessel of such size. The text would permit perhaps as much as eighty years. And we don't know how all the animals were gathered up. Perhaps that was God's doing; perhaps Noah's family built the very first zoo! It seems to me that the sheer size, complexity, and expense of this project is nearly as impressive as the pyramids, given the fact that it appears to have been accomplished by one family . . . plus God, of course.

The Bible tells us that "*in the six hundredth year of Noah's life, on the seventeenth day of the second month—on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights*" (Genesis 7:11-12). We're told that as the water rose, it eventually reached a depth of more than twenty-three feet above the highest mountains, and that "*every living thing on the earth was wiped out—people, animals both large and small, and birds. They were all destroyed, and only Noah was left alive, along with those who were with him in the boat. And the water covered the earth for 150 days*" (Genesis 7:20-24, NLT).

As I've mentioned, we don't know exactly when this happened. We don't know how it happened. But what we do know is this: while we do live in a universe of cause and effect, we do not live in a closed system. The God who spoke incredibly vast galaxies into existence with a single word had no difficulty with what was, relatively speaking, a thimble-full of water! The water is really not the hardest part of this story. No, the hardest part of this story is that, after all the animals had been loaded on the boat, "*God shut them in*" (Genesis 7:16).

I'm glad Noah didn't have to shut the door. I don't see how he could have done it. Mercifully, God didn't ask Noah to be an agent of judgment, but to be an example of righteousness. The time did come, though, when God shut the door. The opportunity to be saved was ended.

Although God shut the door to the Ark in judgment of human wickedness, God opened another door through Jesus. The door Jesus opened is still open, but Jesus gave us a strong warning that the door will not be open always: "*The door to heaven is narrow. Work hard to get in, because many will try to enter, but when the head of the house has locked the door, it will be too late*" (Luke 13:24-25, NLT).

"*When the Son of Man returns,*" Jesus said, "*it will be like it was in Noah's day. In those days before the Flood, the people were enjoying banquets and parties and weddings right up to the time Noah entered his boat. People didn't realize what was going to happen until the Flood came and swept them all away. That is the way it will be when the Son of Man comes*" (Matthew 24:37-39, NLT). Jesus told us to be ready for the day of His return, because "*no one knows the day or the hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows*" (Matthew 24:36).

Even to this very moment, God's heart still yearns to gather up every human soul in protecting love. God's persistent love continues to pursue us, inviting us back into fellowship and friendship, but Noah and Jesus are solemn witnesses to the fact that God's patience is not without end. There comes a point of no return.

Well, you know the rest of the Noah story. As wild as the instructions were, Noah, like Abraham after him, "*believed the LORD, and the LORD declared him righteous because of his faith*" (Genesis 15:6). Let me briefly note ten things we can learn from Noah:

The first thing we see in Noah's life is **the importance of faith in a family system**. Noah's grandfather was Methuselah, the longest-lived person in the history of the world, and his great-grandfather was Enoch, who was one of the only two people who ever lived who was taken directly to heaven without passing through death (the other one was Elijah; Genesis 5:24; 2 Kings 2:11). Noah learned to know God because his family taught him how to know God.

Second, we see that **it's possible to live a life of obedience and faithfulness before God even in wicked and ungodly times**. Could it be said of you and me, as it was of Noah, that he "*was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God*" (Genesis 6:9). If that's not true in your life right now, what would need to happen in order for it to be true?

Third, **we're never too old for God to use our lives for his purposes**. Noah was more than 500 years old when he started building the boat!

Fourth, although God seldom tells us all we would like to know about the future, **God does tell us what we need to know to fulfill His purposes for our time**.

Fifth, **the lives of godly people offer protection to their neighbors, though not forever**. God told Abraham that Sodom would be spared if as many as ten righteous people could be found there (Genesis 18:32); the world's destruction was delayed until Noah had finished the boat; and the Bible suggests that our lives may be "standing in the gap" for the lost today (Ezekiel 22:30).

Sixth, while God seldom speaks today in audible ways, **God does speak quite frequently through spiritual promptings** to do or say certain things or to go to certain places. When someone or something comes to your mind—especially if it happens more than once—it just may be that God is sending you on a mission . . . if you choose to accept it. And as it was with Noah, such promptings usually come with both challenge and blessing.

Seventh, **God's timing is not our timing**. I imagine that Noah got pretty tired of building that boat and of being ridiculed by his neighbors, don't you? I imagine that he got pretty tired of paying the lumber bill. But he kept on keeping on. When God gives us an assignment, our task is to keep at it until more instructions come. As Paul wrote, "*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up*" (Galatians 6:9).

Eighth, **God's assignments and God's timing require us to live by faith**. "*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. . . . 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 is in keeping with faith*" (Hebrews 11:1, 7).

Faith is not a denial of our ability—indeed, our responsibility—to think; nor is faith believing something that isn't true. But faith is being willing to do what God tells us to do even when it doesn't make sense to us at the time. Someone has said that having faith means believing God in spite of the evidence, and watching the evidence change.

Ninth, **if God is in your boat, there's always a rainbow out there somewhere.** As the Statler Brothers famously sang, "Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord, Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord, Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord, and he landed high and dry!"³ That's a catchy tune, and it can remind you of God's faithfulness . . . even as it makes you smile.

Finally, **the quality of our obedience has an effect not only on the future, but also on the past.** After listing "the roll call of the faithful" in Hebrews 11, including Noah and Abraham, the writer ended the chapter by pointing out that "*All of these people we have mentioned received God's approval because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised. For God had far better things in mind for us that would also benefit them, for they can't receive the prize at the end of the race until we finish the race*" (Hebrews 11:39-40, NLT).

My friends, Noah was an ordinary guy who loved God with all of his heart. "*He consistently followed God's will and enjoyed a close relationship with him.*" And that's what God wants from you and me, too.

Toward the end of one semester, Professor Leonard Sweet overheard a soon-to-be-graduate complaining to another student about the assignment he had received as his first placement after seminary graduation. The other student responded, "You know, the world's a better place because Michelangelo didn't say, 'I don't do ceilings.'"

Dr. Sweet later wrote, "That student's comment stopped me dead in my tracks. I had to admit she was right. If you and I are going to be faithful to the ministry to which God is calling us, then we had better understand that. . . .

- The world's a better place because Noah didn't say, "I don't do arks."
- The world's a better place because Abraham didn't say, "I don't do sealed orders."
- The world's a better place because Moses didn't say, "I don't do Pharaohs."
- The world's a better place because Ruth didn't say, "I don't do mothers-in-law."
- The world's a better place because David didn't say, "I don't do giants."
- The world's a better place because Mary didn't say, "I don't do virgin births."
- The world's a better place because Peter didn't say, "I don't do Gentiles."
- The world's a better place because Paul didn't say, "I don't do correspondence."
- The world's a better place because Jesus didn't say, "I don't do crosses."
- And the world will be a better place only if you and I don't say, "I don't do . . . whatever God has told you to do."⁴

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAZSs4Hz_Fs

⁴ Leonard Sweet, United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio. *Leadership*, Vol. 15, no. 2.