

### *Keeping the Corkscrew Handy*

*Dr. Edmund S. P. Jones / June 30, 2013 / The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill*

*by Dr. Edmund S. P. Jones.*

Once upon a time there was a boy called Jack. And there was a giant who was wont to roar “Fe Fi Fo Fum” - and Jack was a giant-killer. Once upon a time. Which means that the story is not set in ordinary time, in Eastern Daylight time, but in the land before time. So like the story of Cinderella or the Ugly Duckling, it is a time-less story because it is a story of the heart, its fears and hopes, its struggle for faith and its need to be cared for.

Now the ancient Hebrews had their once upon a time stories. We’ve been looking at some of them over the last few weeks - the story of a garden made just for two, the story of a skyscraper taller than city hall, and today the final in this short series the story of the great flood. At first these stories were told by professional storytellers around the various watering holes as the Bedouin tribes moved from place to place. Much of the rest of the Hebrew scriptures were already written down before anyone thought of recording the stories. And because those stories dealt with beginnings they were put at the beginning of the Bible. They are prologue, they set the scene, they pose the questions of science and religion. The questions of science - what is a rainbow, why are snakes sneaky, and why do those French have a different word for everything? And more importantly the questions of religion. Why natural disasters? Can we trust a God who must often be angry with us? Is our frail barque at the mercy of the surging waves which sooner or later threaten to engulf us all?

The stories are not to be taken literally. Mount Ararat is not remotely the highest mountain in the world. The length of the ark is only about two jumbo jets. The elephants and rhinos alone would occupy much of it not to mention two dinosaurs who would fill most of the space without them. The story is a picture story, a parable about all of us grappling with circumstances which we cannot control and struggling to survive in the storms of life.

In the early chapters of Genesis two themes keep coming together. The first is the onward march of progress. Humankind learns to smelt iron, to build cities, to domesticate animals and to make music. Civilisation is on its way.

But the other theme is that as mankind makes progress, the scale of his wickedness increases. Once I learn how to make a rope I can hang a man. Once I learn to make Zyklon B, I can kill 6 million. The first chapters in the Bible are about deceit in a garden, murder in a field, rape in a family and increasing violence. Even God gets discouraged: “And the Lord God regretted that he had made man on the earth. And he said I will destroy humankind”. Listen ye stars, I’m going to cancel creation. I will drown out the past. Let chaos come again. “But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord and he built an ark of gopher wood and the length thereof was 300 cubits and the height thereof was 30 cubits and the breadth thereof was 50 cubits. And the animals went in two by two, the monkey and the kangaroo.

It takes a brave man to build an ark 100 miles from the nearest river. It takes an even braver man to build an ark of timber and bring into it two of every living creature. I love the cartoon of the ark with its bow straight up at 45 degrees and the stern in the sea. Noah is standing there looking puzzled but Mrs Noah is glaring at her hapless husband and saying: “I told you not to bring the termites on board”.

Noah will never forget those dark days when all that stood between him and a watery grave was the magnanimous mercy of God: “For that same day were all the fountains of the deep broken up and the windows of heaven were opened, and the rain was upon the earth 40 days and 40 nights, and all flesh died that walked upon the earth”.

Now Brian is our resident numbers man. But does he know the number of spaces on a monopoly board? Does he know who wore the number 40 for the Philadelphia Eagles, and who wore it for the New York Giants? But his Lordship does know that in the Bible “40” always refers to a spiritual event. So Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai and Jesus fasted 40 days in the wilderness. The flood is about a *spiritual* experience.

The ancient mariners used birds as a compass, just as the famous Kon Tiki expedition did. "And it came to pass that Noah opened a window and he sent forth a raven. The raven said "*Kark, I will not go back to the ark*". The raven's heart was black. He did not go back. It was not a nice thing to do. And after the raven the dove, and then the olive leaf. Seven days later the ark grounded on Mount Ararat.

Of course it is not geography. It is about grace. So speak to me not of fear born of natural disasters, but speak to me of faith born of divine fidelity. Speak to me not of man's foresight, but speak to me of God's faithfulness. For if the first part of the story is about what is happening on the earth, the second part tells us what is appearing in the heavens. If the first part is judgment the second part is mercy. "I will set my bow in the clouds as a sign of an everlasting covenant".

Noah will never forget the terrors that came in the night. None of us can. Childhood's fears stay with us all our lives. They come in our nightmares and disturb our sleep. What if the storm should sweep in again? What if cancer should attack my body or blindness come to my eyes? What if the one who was "my North, my South, my East, my West" should be taken away and I am left alone with none to talk to and no one who really understands? The Bible does not believe in the genial optimism that if God is on our side things will never go wrong again. For after Mount Ararat there will be the bubonic plague when 75 million souls will cough their way into eternity. After Flanders and the Somme there will be a flu epidemic which will lay waste more than died in the previous 4 years of a World War. Noah's new world is not paradise regained. It's a world of Midianite raiders, of bricks without straw, of exile from Jerusalem, of blunt nails driven into screaming flesh and "darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour".

The answer of the Bible to our fears about the future is not touching wood. It is not the genial proposition that if only we were all born again evil would be overcome. It isn't the supposition that if you just love that's enough. Indeed the Bible's consistent note is not love - but justice. It is the faith that we have a God who writes "Never Again" in technicolor across the sky for all the world to see. A God who keeps Noah in the flood, and Jesus in the floodtide and will keep us when the storm clouds come.

And if there is one verse in this story I want you to remember this morning, it is at the beginning of chapter 8 where it says: "God remembered Noah". That is the kernel of faith. God remembers us when the flood is all around. If I should lose my job or my mind - *Lord remember me!* If my children should stray far beyond my care and protection or my husband leave me for another - *Lord, remember me!* If loss and deep sadness seem ready to overwhelm - *Lord, remember me!* If I should become frail and feeble and frightened, and at the mercy of strangers who never knew me when I was in my prime - *Lord, remember me!* If my departing should be a struggle and I can't be at my best at the end - *Lord, remember me!*

But this old story which mirrors the storms of life finishes in a rather strange way. It says that Noah was the first man to plant a vineyard, and it goes on to say that he got sozzled! He drank too much new wine. In the Bible wine is the symbol of the Messianic age. So I look down the long corridors of time and I see there One like unto the Son of Man, and he says that the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went forth in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard.

And if our call is not just to hear the Word this morning but to obey it, we must ask what is our work in the vineyard. It is to be God's kindly presence in a world where chaos is only a heartbeat away. How can we be God's good news to all the people who aren't in the church - but should be - unless we are determined not to be a club, but to be a mission. This church does not exist solely for the people who belong to it. It exists for the people who don't belong to it. For true faith is not believing a list of things about Jesus, but doing a host of things that he did. We are here to reach out with his provocative partisanship for sinners and publicans every last one of them. Yes, and even further than that, for every prodigal and wastrel and pervert. I tell you that is a scandal! O blessed scandal! O amazing grace!

"Come my friends, 'tis not too late to seek a newer world/  
Though much is taken, much abides/  
And though we are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven/  
That which we are, we are/  
One temper of heroic hearts/  
made weak by time and fate/  
But strong in will to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield".