

The First Week of Lent • March 16, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Hebrews 11:1-7 (Genesis 6)

"By Faith: The Faith of Noah"

Someone might approach you and say, "Hey – come to dinner with me!" Your reaction to that invitation is largely going to depend on your relationship with this person. If you're walking down the street and a total stranger did that, what would you do? Run away? Look at the person and see if you can tell what's wrong with them? Most people would not accept an invitation from a stranger. You learn to keep away from strangers. You don't know a stranger's intent: this person might be looking to trick you, kidnap you, or do you some kind of harm. But what if that person wasn't a stranger? What if, out of nowhere, your lifelong best friend calls you up and says, "Hey – come to dinner with me!" Would you still run away, or would you respond, "Sure! Let's do it!"? You don't wonder if your friend is planning to kidnap you. You trust them. **You've got a relationship; you know your friend and your friend knows you.**

If you want to know more about the faith of Noah, the first of the Old Testament figures that we'll be visiting this Lent, you've got to look at Who Noah has faith *in* – and to do that, we need to look back to this man's story, recounted in the book of Genesis. In Genesis 6, we read that God decided to wipe out humanity and all the creatures of the earth, because "every intention of the thoughts of [man's] heart was only evil continually." "But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. ... Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God." (Gen. 6:5b, 8, 9) **Noah and the Lord weren't strangers who had never interacted with each other prior to this whole "Make yourself an ark" thing. God knew Noah, and Noah knew God.** Noah's faith, knowing Who God is, was passed down from his parents, and their parents before them, going back to Adam and Eve, who walked with God in the Garden of Eden.

Even though God was about to deliver His judgment against mankind and the wickedness that they had embraced, He was faithful to His friend Noah and decided to save both him and his family.

To be fair, God didn't come to Noah and say, "How'd you like to go on the cruise of a lifetime?" He told Noah directly: "I'm going to destroy things. Build an ark, take all these animals and your family, and get in." That's what Noah did. In reverent fear of the Lord, Noah built the ark, not knowing when the great flood was going to come, but believing God's promise that it would. We can imagine what Noah's friends and neighbors might have thought, what they said, how they acted towards him; they didn't believe the unseen threat of God's judgment. But the faith of Noah is revealed in his willingness to trust in God's promise over and against the pressure of the entire world. **Why? Because he had friendship with God.**

Lent's a proper time for asking yourself this question: Is God a stranger to me, or is He a good friend? I don't know if any of us could claim that we're like Noah, righteous people and blameless in our generation. I know I'm not. Truth is, we don't walk with God as we ought. If God is a stranger in any way in our lives, it's not because He's remote and inaccessible. In other relationships, you'd keep in touch with good friends: return their calls or texts, welcome them into your home, take them up on their invitation for dinner. Your relationship with God is kind of like that, too. You get to know Him better by spending time with Him. We ignore Him when we say that we don't have time for prayer or Bible study or fellowship with other Christians. **And when we make choices that neglect our time with the Lord, we're treating Him like a stranger.**

But God is always close at hand, wanting to spend time with you – in the conversation of prayer and worship, in the power of His Word in the Scriptures. **God is here, for you.** We know that God wants to be in that kind of friendship with us because He decided to save us, even going to far as to become one of us. Noah and his family were saved from the destruction of the flood by God's grace,

separating them from the wickedness that was drowned in the waters that covered the face of the earth. In the baptismal rite that we use here at St. John's, Martin Luther's "flood prayer" reminds us that God saves us through water, too, **separating us from the world that acts like He's a stranger.** As you leave the sanctuary after this service, take a moment to dip your fingers in the water of the baptismal font to remember that God has called you His friend.

In one of his early solo albums, Sting recorded the song *Rock Steady*. It was something of a retelling of Noah's story and the flood; however, in this version, the singer and his lady wind up as Noah's help on the ark after answering a newspaper ad ("*Volunteers wanted for a very special trip, to commune with Mother Nature on a big, wooden ship.*"). Once the flood sets in, they get to their work looking after all the animals onboard. The woman starts to wonder if Noah has been straightforward with them, but the singer assures her, "*He's God's best friend, he's got a seat on the Board. Life may be tough but we're sailing with the Lord.*"

The faith of Noah is faith that both comes from and calls back to God. This Lent, God is here for us – not as a stranger giving odd commands, but as a friend, inviting us to get to know Him better every day. As He calls us to follow His plan for life instead of the world's, life may be tough. **But we're sailing with the Lord.**

Amen.