

A Sermon by the Rev. Roger Wm. Smith on the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 2, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

A sermon about Stewardship

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks. For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive. Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them.' Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.

Then the LORD said to Noah, 'Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth. For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.' And Noah did all that the LORD had commanded him.

Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters came on the earth. And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood. Of clean animals, and of animals that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground, two and two, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God had commanded Noah. And after seven days the waters of the flood came on the earth.

In the six-hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth and the windows of the heavens were opened. The rain fell on the earth for forty days and forty nights. On the very same day Noah with his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons, entered the ark, they and every wild animal of every kind, and all domestic animals of every kind, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every bird of every kind—every bird, every winged creature. They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life. And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him; and the LORD shut him in.

The flood continued for forty days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. The waters swelled and increased greatly on the earth; and the ark floated on the face of the waters. The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered; the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep. And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings; everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark. And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred and fifty days.

But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, and the waters gradually receded from the earth. At the end of one hundred and fifty days the waters had abated.

– Genesis 6:11 – 8:3

On May 31, 1889, In Johnstown, PA a neglected dam and a phenomenal storm led to a catastrophic flood in which 2,209 people died.

One old gent—let's call him Ned—survived the Johnstown Flood, and from then on he could talk of little else. Wherever he went and to whom he ever met he would tell the story. It got to be a little boring, and when people saw him coming, they would try to avoid him. Still, he persisted and for the rest of his life Ned continued to talk about the Johnstown flood. When he died, he was greeted at the gate of heaven by his guardian angel. "Welcome to heaven, Ned," said the angel. Tell me what you would like to do first. What can we arrange for you? "Well," said Ned, "I'd like to tell everyone here about my experience in the Johnstown Flood." "No problem," said the angel. "I can arrange that. We'll set you up in the heavenly stadium and everyone will be there to hear what you have to tell us." Ned was ecstatic. "Oh thank you," he cried. "I can hardly wait!"... "There's just one thing you ought to know," said the angel. "What's that?" asked Ned. "Noah will be in the audience."

Since the end of June, Headley and I have been in upstate New York at our cabin in the Adirondack Mountains. We had one of the most beautiful summers we can ever remember. The days were cool and sunny and we were able to enjoy being outdoors most of the time. That is until Sunday, September 3rd when Hurricane Irene arrived.

It began to rain early that morning, and the rains came with such force, and continued for so many hours that we all thought of Noah and his ark. The rain continued through that night. We could hear the river that runs through our village making such a roaring sound that we thought it might be a tornado. The next morning, our valley was a disaster. There are lots of rivers and streams in those mountains, and they all turned into great rushing torrents. The water undermined the highways, causing the macadam to heave up and leave great fissures in the roads. Bridges were washed out. Some people had 8 feet of water in their houses. Some houses collapsed. The local hardware store had 4 feet of water, nearly destroying thousands of dollars worth of merchandise. The local farmer lost all of his harvest. I could go on and on. I could be like Ned when I recall the great flood of 2011.

Governor Cuomo made three trips to our town. Took up a shovel and helped clear the mud. He got the NY state highway crews, and crews from neighboring states, in to fix our roads and bridges, and within 10 days they were passable again. If nothing else, that was good politics. Everyone up there loves the governor!

And, like Ned, everyone up there can talk of little else. They were still talking about that flood when we left last week, and look at me, I'm still talking about it.

Like most such natural disasters, there was a good side that came out of it. Great numbers of people rallied 'round to help their neighbors. They prepared meals for the workers that came to town. They offered their homes to people who had lost theirs. They put on barbecues to raise money and they started a community rescue foundation, and they raised a lot.

I can still see all of those good people sitting outside the hardware store, drying, dusting, and polishing all of the damaged merchandise; children scouring the woods behind the village recovering items that had floated away. As one person said, "This flood may have been bad, but it sure brought out the good

side of the local people.” David McDonough, the owner of the hardware store, marveled. “There were people that I didn’t even know, in my store helping us clean up the mess.”

There are a lot of people out there that we don’t really know, and there’s a lot about each of us that we don’t really know, until a surprise like a flood comes along and washes away what is on the exterior, exposing that beautiful interior put there by God.

This all reminds me that several weeks ago, I received an e-mail from Scott Shaffer asking me to use the sermon time in October to talk to you about Stewardship. What better example of Stewardship could I find than what those people in upstate New York did after the flood. They gave their time, their energy, and their money to help their neighbors.

On the Sunday after the flood, we all gathered in the local churches to pray for the victims of the disaster, asking God’s help in our efforts to recover, but, above all to thank God for the love, the compassion and the goodness revealed in people, from the governor on down to the little children.

And, I happen to know that on this very morning the minister in our Adirondack church is basing his sermon on the story of Noah and the ark.

Of course, part of the story of Noah is about punishment. The writer tells us that in those days God saw that the earth was corrupt and filled with violence... “And God said to Noah, ‘I have determined to make an end of all flesh...I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which there is the breath of life.’” (Genesis 6:11ff) A lot of the stories in the Bible are about punishment. When Moses came down the mountain with the Ten Commandments, as we read in the 20th chapter of Exodus, he said to the people “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.” And throughout the first 5 books of the Bible we learn that God would punish the Israelites if they failed to keep his commandments.

In today’s Gospel story (Matthew 21:33-46) we learn that, speaking of sinners, “God will put those wretches to a miserable death”. Not just any old death, but a *miserable* death!”

There is a lot of stuff in the Bible about punishment. That’s probably why that great Bible reader Michelle Bachman has declared that all of these natural disasters we’ve experienced this year are punishments for our corrupt and evil ways.

You are welcome to read the Bible that way if you want to. Personally, I *don’t* want to. I would prefer to focus on the love and generosity of God. If there is any message in the teachings of Jesus it is that God would rather forgive than punish.

Sure there will continue to be floods and other natural disasters, but, thanks be to God, when it happens, they bring out the best in us. They can reveal that divine spark in each of us, which a gift from our generous and loving God.

That is Stewardship revealed.

O merciful Creator, your hand is open wide to satisfy the needs of every living creature: Make us always thankful for your loving providence; and grant that we, remembering the account that we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your good gifts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*