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Genesis 6:14-16, ESV.

¹⁴ Make yourself an ark of gopher wood. Make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. ¹⁵ This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark 300 cubits, its breadth 50 cubits, and its height 30 cubits. ¹⁶ Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above, and set the door of the ark in its side. Make it with lower, second, and third decks.

Only one rudder, only one sail.

In Genesis Chapters 6 to 9 we hear the biblical story of the flood. Here is Genesis 6:9-13; it gives us God's motivation in bringing about the Great Flood:

⁶ ⁹ These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God. ¹⁰ And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. ¹¹ Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. ¹² And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. ¹³ And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth.

God seems to almost regret creating human beings because they have turned out to be so completely evil. Despite us being made in God's image, there is total separation between humans and God. In fact, people have so irrevocably contaminated Earth that God decides to not only get rid of people, but almost all other living creatures as well. People have thwarted God's original plans for Earth. But there is one major exception to the total depravity of humanity. Although people of the age of Noah are lawless,

corrupt, and sinful, Noah, his wife, and his offspring are righteous, innocent, and godly. They have maintained their relationship with God. It's important to note that God's decision to destroy all life isn't based on hatred or malice. It's not an angry whim. It is based on justice. This is a major theme in the Old Testament: God is always just in his actions, and God always seeks to submit humanity to the full consequences of its actions. So, God has every right, and in fact, a duty to reclaim what he has created. As it turns out, though, God is also merciful – another major theme of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. Noah is instructed to make a boat out of gopher wood and pitch. The Ark is about 500 feet long and 75 feet wide and 50 feet high. It could hold about 400 or 500 modern semi-trailers. Although this is about as big as a ship made entirely of wood could be, ships of a size close to this were known to exist in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. There were probably tens of thousands of animals on the Ark. Noah is told to take two of every kind of animal, along with his family.

Of course, not everyone today is sure that the Ark really existed and that there was a global flood. There is a pre-existing flood story in the two ancient Mesopotamia flood stories of Atrahasis and Gilgamesh. In these polytheistic stories, there is a chief god who becomes angry at mankind, and after unsuccessfully trying to fix the problem by punishing Earth with drought and disease, the gods as a group decide that it is time to eliminate mankind with a great flood. Interestingly, one of the gods happens to warn a king who is

instructed to build a boat that will preserve him and his family, along with some number of skilled craftspeople. The older of the two tales, the Atrahasis story, is dated to the early second millennium B.C., and the Gilgamesh Epic, as the second story is called, dates from some hundreds of years later. And interestingly, there is indeed some geological evidence of a great flood in ancient times, and it would have included much of the known biblical world. In what was Mesopotamia, archeologists have found a layer of mud about a dozen feet thick. Under the mud are the ruins of a very ancient city. To people of the day, it would have appeared that almost all life was indeed drowned. So, due to an oral tradition of an ancient flood that resulted in vast death and destruction, people reading this story in Hebrew Scripture would have found this story far from fanciful. It would have had a ring of historical truth to it. And our flood story probably describes the same historical flood as is told about in the Atrahasis and Gilgamesh tales.

Remember that 40 is used in the Bible to describe the duration of the flood, and that's because it represented in biblical language a sense of completeness, a full cycle of suffering and revival. The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years before entering the Promised Land. Jesus prayed for 40 days in the desert before beginning his ministry. After 40 days of rain, God has finished cleansing the world. Here is Genesis 9:8-12:

9⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again

shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”¹² And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations.

It was time for God to show grace and mercy, as God always does when dealing with the imperfections of humanity. Olive trees do not grow at high elevations, and so, when a dove plucks an olive tree leaf and brings it back to the Ark, it shows that low-lying areas have been drained. People and animals leave the Ark. It is at this point that God issues a blessing and a command. God says that life on Earth has been cleansed, and that people and animals alike are to be fruitful and multiply. Noah now sacrifices some of the animals from the Ark in worship. God accepts this offering.

But critically, the flood has not inherently changed people. We are still the source of evil on Earth. Yet God decides that never again will there be such destruction on our planet. Noah and his family carry the seeds of hope for the future of humanity. We are to make a fresh start under the hand of God. And indeed, we still carry that ability to be sinful and to disobey God, and the cycle of punishment and revival will continue. This new covenant, under which humans will still do great harm to each other, but where God will never again destroy life on such a grand scale, is symbolically guaranteed by the presence of a rainbow. Noah and his family settle down to a life of worship and agriculture.

There was another flood, one that happened in September of 2013 and wasn't quite as big as Noah's flood. It happened in Boulder, Colorado. When I first moved to Boulder in 1982, I was warned about buying property in the flood zone in Boulder. There

was a concern that an unusually heavy snowfall in the Winter followed by a sudden and strong heatwave in the Spring could lead to so much snow melting over a short period that water could rush eastward out of the mountains and across the Boulder Creek system. Then the creek system would overrun itself; and it would then spread outward and flood the city. But when the big flood finally happened in 2013, this wasn't the scenario. It was simply a strong, sustained rainstorm in the Fall that did it. The ground simply couldn't soak up all that water quickly enough. I remember nervously watching our dirt crawlspace all day and all night. Little by little, I watched the water rise up and over our furnace. It made it to just below the ground floor before the rain finally let up and the water began to soak into the soil. Ours was the only dirt crawlspace in the neighborhood; almost all our neighbors have finished, cement basements. They were all badly flooded, and when debris clogged the Boulder sewer system, nasty stuff backed up into people's basements. People pulled carpets, furniture, artwork, books, and electronics out of their basements and piled it all up in their driveways to be trashed. One of our neighbors became dangerously ill from carbon monoxide poisoning after using a generator to pump out her basement. Many of our neighbors had no flood insurance and suffered dramatic financial losses. It was many months before our neighborhood was back to normal.

The night that the flood happened, I happened to be in our garage without my

contacts in, and I am very, very nearsighted. Without them, I have very limited vision. I noticed at some point what seemed like dirt on one of the walls of the garage, and it seemed to be in motion. I thought that perhaps water and mud was moving in from somewhere, and so I held my face up against the wall to try and see what was happening. Then, I realized that my face was inches from hundreds of giant wolf spiders that were fleeing our crawlspace and crawling up the wall of the garage. It was as if our garage was some sort of Ark that was there to save a big spider colony from drowning. Let's just say that I retreated quickly.

In the end, nobody in our neighborhood died. Nobody lost their home. There was no need for us to build a big boat and collect up a bunch of animals and wait for the water to recede. We did not send a dove out to find an olive leaf. But it was a reminder that God is in charge. We can mold the face of the Earth with giant machines. We cover the ground with cement, wood, and steel. We build structures that seem to poke through the top of the sky. We can seemingly conquer the Earth. But God can always reclaim what God has created, and acts of nature remind us of that. That's what happened during Noah's flood. God said, *"Hey, you've made a mess of the home I gave you. You are corrupt. You live for the things of the Earth, the things that you make, not the things that I have told you are important. So, I'm going to take back what I have given you."* This symbolic act was meant to make people realize what happens when you drift away from God.

Noah and Noah's family weren't saved for no reason at all, though. The animals were not saved for no reason. Humanity wasn't given another chance just because God was blindly merciful. God had a reason for his actions. Let's step back. Noah's flood is often seen as a symbolic story, not something to be taken literally. I remember wondering as a boy how the entire Earth could have been covered by water. Where did all that water come from? I remember wondering how the fish managed to drown. I remember wondering how Noah and his family managed to save animals that didn't live in their part of the world, like elephants and penguins. The flood is a metaphor for God's justifiable anger at humans when we don't live the way we're supposed to. And the new agreement that God made with Noah and his family represents God's willingness to be merciful. But mercy comes for a reason. God wouldn't take something that is permanently and completely useless and keep it around. God isn't stupid. God kept humanity alive because there was something worth saving. God did create us in his image, and there was still something holy in that image. But why does God repeatedly show mercy in the Old Testament, particularly in the story of Noah's flood?

That reason for God's mercy involves another metaphor, and that is Noah himself. Remember that our passage tells us this: *Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.* In fact, all of Noah's family were good people. Noah and his family, as the only non-corrupt, non-hopelessly sinful people on Earth, represent

the innate goodness that is inside all of us. There is always a blessed core within us.

Noah represents the saving grace that all of us embody, as having been made in the image of God. God is willing to be merciful with all people, as it turns out, because all of us have a bit of Noah inside of us. We are all redeemable. We can all be made whole again. That is a major lesson that Jesus Christ preached. Here is what Noah did, and what all of us need to do if we want to see God's mercy. We need to do three things. First, we need to listen. We need to read and study God's word, the teachings of the Gospels. If you read the Gospels, if you study what Jesus taught us, there isn't much of a mystery. It's not very difficult to see what we must do. Second, we need to trust God. We must believe that God knows what is right for us, and that there isn't anything else we need to know to not only be godly, but to also be happy and secure. And third, we need to obey. We need to do what God teaches us. Listen. Trust. Obey. It's as simple as that. For us as Christians, when we look at the life of Christ, listening, trusting, and obeying means that we will be gracious, have empathy, and be forgiving, and treat the lowest person in society as if they are the most important person alive.

I see in God's promise to Noah to never again flood the Earth a hint of the new Covenant that Jesus Christ would one day bring to this world. We have a new relationship with God, and now faith replaces the need to constantly prove that we are living by a system of laws. There is a trust between us and God that allows us to live without constantly fearing that somehow, we are breaking some obscure law of God's.

During that flood in Boulder, there were neighborhoods that were much harder hit than ours. There were streets where the houses were under water. But Boulder has done a tremendous amount of flood mitigation since the flood of September 2013. They've engineered ways for water to spread out quickly, so that it doesn't fill in basements and flood streets again. Still, though, we need to be careful about thinking that we are in charge. This is at the heart of corruption, the belief that we make the rules, that we are the ones who decide what is right and what is wrong. We must pay attention to that Noah inside of all of us, that connection to God. Only if we do this, only if we honor the image of God within us, will God show us mercy.

There is a subtlety in the story of Noah and the Ark that is often overlooked. We looked at the passage giving God's motivation for drowning everyone, and we looked at the passage describing God's grace with his decision to never again destroy all of humanity. But let's look at the part where God tells Noah how to build the Ark. This is from Chapter 6 of Genesis, verses 14 to 16:

6¹⁴ Make yourself an ark of gopher wood. Make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. ¹⁵ This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark 300 cubits, its breadth 50 cubits, and its height 30 cubits. ¹⁶ Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above, and set the door of the ark in its side. Make it with lower, second, and third decks.

God tells Noah to use gopher wood. We are not sure what this is, but some scholars believe it refers to cypress wood, which was commonly used by shipbuilders in the ancient Near East; it was known to be strong and durable. God

not only tells Noah just what kind of wood to use: he dictates precisely what its dimensions in 3-space should be. He describes how the roof should be built, how many decks there should be. There is some very important information, however, that is noticeably lacking. There are sophisticated sailing ships depicted in ancient Egyptian art dating back to 2500 B.C. Even if you believe the literal version of Noah's flood, and the very ancient timeline that would go with this theory, these Egyptian ships predate the Ark. But certainly, by the time the biblical account was written, probably in the 5th century B.C., the construction of sailing ships was well understood. So, notice that nowhere in this description in Genesis does God tell Noah to build a rudder or a sail for the Ark. Or for that matter, how one might row the thing, but of course, there wouldn't have been a big enough of a crew to row such a large ship. The fate of humanity, with its tiny remnant floating in the Ark, was left totally up to God: Noah was to have no way to control the Ark. The Ark would simply go where it was going to go – and land where it was going to land.

Perhaps a major point of the story of Noah, one that we tend to not focus on, is that God alone is meant to be our rudder and our sail. We can never fall to the silly belief that we are in charge. Especially at the critical decision points in our lives, we must always remember that with God we only have one rudder, and we only have one sail. As Christians, this total dependency on God is fundamental to our faith: our faith is our Ark on Earth, God is our rudder and sail.