

January 12, 2003
Sunday After Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Noah's construction of the ark represented his faith, the foundation of his righteousness. According to the Epistle to the Hebrews, "By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith" (11:7).

But Noah not only lived in righteousness; he also proclaimed righteousness. The Apostle Peter referred to him as "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5), and late in the first century Clement of Rome wrote that "Noah preached repentance, and those who heeded him were saved" (First Epistle 7.6).

This picture of Noah as a righteous preacher of repentance came to the early Christians from Jewish lore about that famous builder of the ark. Flavius Josephus wrote of Noah's relationship to his contemporaries in this way: "Noah was most uncomfortable with their actions, and, not at all happy with their conduct, he persuaded them to improve their dispositions and their actions. Seeing, nonetheless, that they did not obey him but remained slaves to their own wicked desires, he feared that they would slay him, together with his wife and children, as well as the spouses of the latter, so he departed out of that land" (Antiquities 13.1). Unable to convert his contemporaries, Noah then followed the divine leading to build an ark for the delivery of his family. He knew that God intended to flood the earth and destroy its wicked.

In the New Testament both the ark and the flood are understood as having to do with the mystery of baptism. Thus, St. Peter, writing of Christ's descent into hell after His death, proceeded immediately to treat of Noah, the flood, our own baptisms, and the Lord's resurrection. For the early Christians, these were all components of the same mystery of regeneration: "For Christ suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the

days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us-baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:18-21). If we are to understand the story of Noah as the early Christians understood it, then, we must examine its relationship to repentance and baptism.

We may start by considering the symbolism of water itself, especially water as threatening and destructive. The water in the Noah story is not the great life-sustaining fluid; it is utterly menacing, rather, and it is specifically menacing to sin. Like the flood of Noah, baptism is destructive. Baptism has been given to the world, because the world is full of sin, and through this water of baptism we are delivered from the sinful world. To be baptized means that we deliberately drown our sins in repentance. Whether we speak of the baptismal type in the Deluge, therefore, or of the fulfillment of that type in baptism itself, we must start with sin.

Thus, the Bible's flood account begins with a description of a world full of sin (Genesis 6:1-5,11-13), ending with God's sorrow at having made man and His resolve to destroy man from the earth (6:6-7). God does not destroy the world in wrath, but in sorrow, and only our repentance at Noah's preaching can spare us this great sorrow of God

We are baptized, therefore, because we are sinners, and our sins are destroyed in the mystery of baptism: "Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). Or earlier, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins" (2:38). Unlike Noah's contemporaries, we ourselves hearken to his preaching. That is to say, we submit to this new baptismal flood because we repent at the witness of Noah. Baptism presupposes and requires this repentance of our sins, this conversion of our hearts to the apostolic word of Noah. In repentance we plunge ourselves into the deeper mystery of Noah's flood, which is the death and resurrection of Christ our Lord. (Romans 6:3; Colossians 2:12).

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