



January 19, 2022

A Note from Pastor Brian Maguire

Hello from Fairmont Presbyterian Church ~

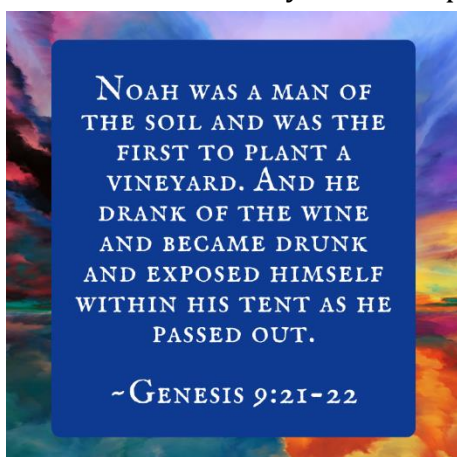
The story of Noah forms the basis for innumerable Sunday school lessons, children's books, and nursery decorations. Like many of the most familiar stories of the Bible, I fear that very few people have actually read it.

If people took the time to consider what it says and what it means, I wonder whether we would still tell the story to children.

The story of Noah begins full of expectation and promise. "Noah was a righteous man, faultless in his generation. Noah walked with God." (6:19).

Nobody else receives such accolades, not Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or even Moses. Noah as a paragon of obedient faith and righteousness is the image that sticks for most people and how we portray him to our children.

But that is not exactly how he is portrayed at the end of the story. The children's story Bibles all end with Noah and his family waving goodbye to all the animals.



The actual Bible story continues: "Noah was a man of the soil and was the first to plant a vineyard. And he drank of the wine and became drunk and exposed himself within his tent as he passed out." (Genesis 9:21-22).

Noah, the great hero of faith in chapter 6, ends our story as a debased and broken man, lost in alcohol,



cursing his grandsons. It is quite a dramatic fall, and it begs the question, why?

We often fail to consider the psychological and emotional trauma of this story. Noah was directly implicated in the greatest act of genocide in human history, the wholesale destruction of humanity and the terrestrial natural order. Noah participated in all of it.

That alone would be ample cause for post-traumatic stress disorder and survivor's guilt. No wonder he tried self-medicating.

But we cannot really know about Noah's internal motivations or his inner demons because Noah never speaks. Across three chapters, Noah never says a single word. Instead, he silently obeys God's every command.

Without questioning, he constructs a vast ark 300 by 50 by 30 cubits (*I presume he knew what a cubit was*).

Without questioning, he collected pairs or seven pairs of all the animals.

Without questioning, he sealed up the ark and waited for the rains to fall and the waters of the deeps to open.

Without questioning, he listened as the rains fell and his neighbors pounded on the hatches begging to be rescued until all went silent.

Through all this, not a single word, but he did everything that the Lord had commanded, to the letter.

Sometimes, I hear people talk about obedience to God as the very essence of faith and the highest virtue. Some religions elevate obedience to God to be the purpose of human life. **In Christianity and in Judaism, it is not.**

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his book *Covenant and Conversations*, pointed out that one of the curiosities about the Old Testament is that despite containing 613 commandments, **there is no word in ancient Hebrew for "obey."** The Torah urges people to hear, listen, understand, respond, and attend, but never obey.

When the King James Bible tried to render it into English they had to invent a new word to cover its absences, so they used "hearken." We don't "hearken" much anymore. When they started writing the Israeli legal code in Modern Hebrew, they had to invent a whole new word for obey.

I don't think that God wants us simply to obey. If God did, I would think that the Bible would say so plainly and celebrate such obedience. It is not that obedience to God is wrong. I just think that obedience, all by itself, is insufficient.

Over and over again in Genesis we are confronted by God challenging us not so much to be obedient, but rather to be responsible, to use our freedom, choice, and judgment, to be mature and deliberative in participating in God's work.

God seems to want us to internalize God's own values, methods, goals, and objectives because we trust God, not because we are merely creatures who obey. God could have worked exclusively through mindless robots, but instead chose to work through us as partners and in doing so seeks something greater than obedience. God seeks responsibility.

Noah is an obedient man, the most obedient of his generation. But I am not sure he is a hero. He does what God commands, but nothing more.

Contrast Noah to Abraham, who we will start hearing about in a few weeks, who is quick to argue, bargain, persuade, and harangue God whenever human lives were at stake. When God threatens to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham starts haggling with God to mitigate the scope of the destruction.

Noah, faced with the destruction of all flesh, says nothing. Always obedient, Noah was the first human in history to offer up the coward's excuse, "I was only following orders."

Noah saves only his own skin and his own family. The story ends with Noah passed out, naked, drunk, a shameful embarrassment to himself and his children.

So, I wonder, if you save only your own skin while doing nothing to save your neighbor or the world, maybe you lose yourself in the process as well.

Faith requires obedience to God, but it is never *only* obedience to God. It requires more of us. It requires our creativity, our morality, our courage, our hope, and love.

Noah has obedience, but he never displays any of these other dimensions of faith.

Perhaps that is why when the ark finally lands, he does not open the door until commanded to do so by God. Noah may be obedient, but he cannot comprehend what God is up to. He cannot envision a new world with new possibilities. He cannot leap at the chance to restore creation and heal a broken humanity.

When it comes to rebuilding a shattered world, you do not wait for permission to start, you roll up your sleeves and get to work to creatively make hope a new reality. Abraham, Moses, and Jesus all could and did.

The question for us when faced with the example of Noah is whether we can do any better...

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