

Trinity Church
June 1, 2008

Third Sunday after Pentecost
RCL, Year A, Proper 4

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

*The earth is moved.
The mountains topple into the depths of the sea.
The waters rage and foam.
The mountains tremble at its tumult.
Lord of hosts, be with us.
God of Jacob, be our stronghold.
Amen.*

When Jesus says, “The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house,” his words take on a dramatic, cataclysmic, and urgent meaning when we hear them in the context of the story of the righteous man, Noah. Put these stories together and it becomes crystal clear how important it is to get it right — to build your house on the rock — and the rock, says Jesus, is “to hear these words of mine and to act on them.” To get it wrong is to really get it wrong. “I have determined,” says God, “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.” And God was as good as God’s word. The waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days. Everything perished. Jesus’ judgment on those who get it wrong is just as severe. “I never knew you; go away from me, you evil-doers.” Clearly, Jesus is not fooling around. When you hear God’s Word, you are supposed to do it. Everything depends on hearing and doing.

With all the Hurricane Katrina stuff going on in the Noah story, it is easy to miss the important bit. The judgment of God, indeed, the wrath of God, is nothing compared to God’s love and compassion. God tells Noah to be the instrument of God’s love and redemption. Noah will gather the creatures of the earth and his family, like seeds in a pod, and they will be carried through all tribulation until the rainbow appears and the earth is dry, when the pod of the Ark will open, and life in covenant with God is renewed on the earth. This little thing, hardly noticeable in the midst of so great a storm of destruction; this little thing, this little ark, makes the critical difference. This little thing is Noah’s trust and faith in God’s Word to him, and that he acted on it. He did God’s love, and the creation was saved.

Jesus tells the parable of the houses built on rock and sand at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. The 6th and 7th chapters of Matthew contain Jesus’ profound ethical teaching. This sermon is just like God’s words to Noah. “I have told you that I love you, and I have shown you how to love one another, and I have told you what to do. I have told this to you because I am counting on you to be instruments of redemption in my world. I am counting on you to carry the creation and the human community through the follies of their ways – through their blundering ignorance and their consuming pride and their deadly self-centered ness. You know my word of love, you have received it in faith, you trust me, and you will do it.”

Knowing God’s word puts a huge burden on all who hear it and know that it is true. Their faith gives them no choice but to do it or be damned. The cost of this knowing and doing God’s love in the world is huge. It inevitably brings down on you the rejection and ridicule of those who are perishing. Noah was ridiculed for building the ark. Jesus was crucified for living God’s Word; thereby Jesus became, for all of us, God’s living Word and redemption for all.

So, here we are in this ark of a church on Sunday morning. God has spoken to us. Jesus has given us the Sermon on the Mount. We have declared our faith in him and promised to follow him as our Lord. The service ends and we go out into the storm, where the rain falls, the floods come, and the winds blow and beat against our faith. There is so much greed in the world, so much violence, so much grasping after fame and power, so much pain and anguish, so much disaster and so much just plain folly. What difference can one life of faith and compassion make? What effect can a ransom act of kindness accomplish?

Loren Easley tells the story of walking on the beach after a storm. The beach was littered with hundreds of starfish washed up by the storm. Trapped on the beach and dying in the sun. There on the beach a young man was throwing starfish into the sea one after another, as fast as he could. Loren came up to him and asked, "What difference do you think you can make amid hundreds of starfish?" The youngster picked up a starfish and threw it into the sea, and said, "It made a difference to that one." Noah and Jesus show us that salvation is not grand. It is a small thing, a love thing, a discipleship thing, the mere act of which makes all the difference. The rain may fall, the floods come, the winds blow against this house, but it cannot fall; it is built on the rock.