**Failing? Build an Ark!**

This is the first Sunday of Lent and we have a journey before us. The destination is Easter, but until that time we fast, we reflect, we repent, we once again wait in expectation. Just like Advent really.

So it is fitting that we think about Jesus in his role of redeemer: vs 18…For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring us to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit… It is right that we reflect on the suffering of Christ for our sake…. As Peter puts it so powerfully in what we call a purpose clause, in order to bring us to God.

First let’s deal briefly with the elephant in the room then I’ll come back to vs 18. This passage in Peter is one we love to avoid. In biblical studies we refer to passage like this as “problem passages” because they are obscure, even disturbing really, and we don’t know what to think about them. This passage talks about what happened when, as the creed declares,[[1]](#endnote-1) Christ “descended into hell” during his time in the tomb, which comes from this text.

…in which [i.e. in the spirit] also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

Remember the phrase ‘genre drives reading strategy’? In the English Bible vss 18 and 19 are in narrative, but in the Nestle-Aland GNT they are in verse form. That means that the editors think it was hymn. It has rhythm and cadence, dikios hupēr adikōn, righteous for the unrighteous.

I’m with Martin Luther on this one, who said this is perhaps the most obscure passage in the New Testament and admits that he does not know for certain just what Peter means.[[2]](#endnote-2) And I’ve been liberated by Job of late to admit that some things are too wonderful for me… and as God himself says to the mortal, Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? It’s a rhetorical question.

To return to vs 18, if I read it as a hymn, it is the most concise, potent expression of the essence of the Christian gospel. You have heard me talk about Acts 10:34-43 as “the gospel standing on one foot.”

If that is a concentrated expression of the gospel, this is an espresso shot – even a ristretto (a 15 second pull of the sweetest part of the bean)!

vs 18…For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring us to God. It expresses

* The sacrificial nature of Christ’s death
* The substitutionary atonement - dikios hupēr adikōn, righteous for the unrighteous
* The purpose of which (“in order that…”) was to redeem a lost world and bring us to God

That is all you need to hear this morning! The ristretto of the gospel. End of sermon! Not really! : )

On of the main points is that “… Christ bore witness through his suffering and was vindicated, we too, can bear witness through suffering and trust God to vindicate us.” [[3]](#endnote-3) This is the context Peter places this in, if you read all of chapter 3, it is parenesis - moral exhortation. ***For Christ also suffered***…. We should live this way because Jesus did. Again, basically the message of Job!

I’m not really preaching on Noah today, but it is referenced in 1 Peter so let’s build some context. When humanity began to multiply “on the face of the ground” as the Bible puts it (Gen 6:1), God soon came to regret what he had done. When he saw the wickedness of humankind, the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

So what do you do when there is a failure, a mistake and misfire? You build an ark. Your start over, you redeem it![[4]](#endnote-4) You redeem the mistake!

For Peter, this is a metaphor for Christian baptism, a radical rebirth from the womb of the deep. From lostness to redemption. If the ark is the vessel of salvation in Genesis, baptism is the vessel of salvation in Peter’s reading of that story.

So Noah built an ark. And redeemed a remnant of humankind. As an author we have recently read says, “God took what God didn’t want and squeezed good from it… God redeemed it [humanity].”[[5]](#endnote-5)

Btw… the word used for “ark” in Genesis 6 is used in only one other Bible story. In Ex 2 the “basket” that the baby Moses was set afloat in is a, “ark,” a mini-ark. It is a vessel of preservation and rescue, of redemption.

And our text this morning speaks of the human failure, the sin, that was the very cause of Christ’s sufferings.

And… Peter says Jesus’ life is just like the time of Noah? The world was lost in sin and so God built an “ark.” Jesus is our ark.

But now… But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. (Gal 4:4)

This time, the ark is “once and for all,” through the death a resurrection of Jesus. Look at what is birthed from failure for those in Christ! Redemption. God has sent you an ark. You can turn to God in Christ and find your way home.

There is a great old gospel song, ***People get ready there’s a train a comin’ don’t need no ticket you just get on board….all you need is faith to hear the diesel hummin’, you don’t need no ticket you just thank the Lord***

**From the Text**

What we do is read the ancient truths, attempt to understand them, and then ***apply*** those truths to today.

Was the creation of humanity before Noah a mistake, was it an experiment that went awry, was it a failure? …for I am sorry that I have made them (Gen 6:7). Was the veil of sin and corruption and lostness of the world into which Jesus was born, of the world in which we live, a mistake, an experiment gone awry, a failure?

Do you know how to fail well? This isn’t just some TED talk topic. Christians have lives that are being continually redeemed from the reality of failure by a saving God. Failure should be a different thing for us. Not life-destroying, but part of the path of redemption. Despair is not our thing.

I’ve been reflecting on this from the point of view of where we are in the life of our community. We’ve come through a leadership transition, with good faith and success. We have a new Lead Pastor. Pastor Jimmy was in the office this week, out of quarantine!

We have been in the refiner’s fire not only because of the transition, by also navigating a pandemic that has kept us from being physically together for coming up on a year. This has been a trying experience for the church.

The first lesson we can take from our Lenten passage today is just that, when failures abound, build an ark! Arks are

* Crazy Hope in wood.
* Arks are bodacious, Gen 6 says the ark was 450 long and three stories of 15 feet each. A massive symbol of the mercy of God, of preservation and rebirth of creation.
* Hope filled.
* Absurd acts of faith!

It didn’t take me long to begin to identify lots of times in my life when there was failure either impending or actualized.

When I joined little Canadian Nazarene College in 1990 for my first teaching job, it was evident that this was one of the many, many small denominational colleges in Canada and the US that were on their way to closure. Not because they weren’t great places of learning, but because the Bible College movement was in its last days. Christian young people now needed university degrees that would be accredited and widely accepted, just like everyone else.

 So, in the face of failure, we build an ark, a Christian university, Ambrose University.

The thing I admire the most about Elon Musk is not just that he is a visionary genius. It is not just his ambition, which is astonishing.

The new “it” thing for billionaires is to go to Mars! The NASA Perseverance Mars Rover landed this morning. What I love most about his way of doing things is the way he knows how to fail so spectacularly.

His new Mars rocket, the SN8 returned from a test flight not too long ago but when it eased onto the landing pad it explodes into a zillion pieces. Do you know what he said? He was delighted because “we got the data we needed.”

I love the way he fails. That explosion wasn’t actually a failure, it was the DNA of future success. What is so great about his organization is that they innovate with the willingness to learn from failures.

As we come out of this pandemic, a new and strengthened entity, I’ve been thinking a lot about our sense of mission. We should be so bold as to fail at some things as we grow. We mustn’t walk in fear!

As we emerge from the pandemic into a new page of our life together, it is our sense of shared mission that will make or break us.

Mission is our glue as a faith community.[[6]](#endnote-6)

And so let us stand together and fail boldly and get back up and build an ark together. Let’s build an ark of preservation and rebirth here for our community – for those new souls who are within our reach of influence now that weren’t there before! Let’s. Build. An ark.

“Because we are family we stand together, supporting one another for the purposes of God to be fulfilled in and through each one of us!” Cherie Kahn

1. Cf Eph 4:7-10 and Acts 2:24, which seem to refer only to the grave it seems to me. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John Wesley said: “The unholy men before the flood, who were then reserved by the justice of God, as in a prison, till he executed the sentence upon them all; and are now also reserved to the judgment of the great day.” John Wesley’s Explanatory Notes. John Calvin thought this passage referred to “the elect” who were predestined from the foundation of the world but happened to live before the gospel. Simon Kistemaker points out that the meaning of each word in verse 19 varies and he cites D. Edmond Hiebert who says “Each of the nine words in the original has been differently understood.” And this from the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery “This image has a particular point when it is used to describe the judgement of spiritual beings, including Satan (Isa 24:22; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude3 1:6; Rev 20:1-3k 7). Peter’s tantalizing reference to the spirits Christ visited in prison (1Pet 3:19) has attracted a wide variety of interpretations, ranging from the spirits of the departed who had never heard the gospel to the rebellious spiritual beings incarcerated before the flood (2 Pet 2:4; Jude 1:6). Opinion is divided on the exact significance of this verse.” (p. 664). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Stephen J. Cole, Flagstaff Christian Fellowship [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The 1 Peter passage rereads the flood sees it as the flood narrative as prefiguring the act of baptism. Water, the primal chaos that consumes all (Gen 1), bursting out of the womb of God as we learned in the book of Job (38:8)

…all the fountains of the deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. The rain fell on the earth forty days and fort nights (Gen 7:11)…and He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground (Gen 7:23). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. T. Oord, *God Can’t,* p. 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. I’ve always been fascinated by the JFK’s commitment to put a man on the moon. He made the challenge to a joint session of Congress just four months after becoming president in May 1961. He said America would achieve this goal before the end of the decade. It was July 20, 1969 that Apollo 11 landed. NASA says it took the concentrated efforts of over 400,000 people over a decade to realize the achievement. Look at the power of a shared sense of mission. What could possibly hold such a vast number of workers on task in which every detail was life and death, and a nation that had to pay for it? The mission. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)