

Two of Each

TEXT: Genesis 6:5-14, 17-22

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on September 24, 2023

“O man of Shuruppak, son of Ubartutu:
Tear down the house and build a boat!
Abandon wealth and seek living beings!
Spurn possessions and keep alive living beings!
Make all living beings go up into the boat.
The boat which you are to build,”

...

“The launching was very difficult.
They had to keep carrying a runway of poles front to back,
until two-thirds of it had gone into the water.

...

All the living beings that I had I loaded on it,
I had all my kith and kin go up into the boat,
all the beasts and animals of the field and the craftsmen I
had go up.”

...

“Just as dawn began to glow
there arose from the horizon a black cloud.”

...

“The... land shattered like a... pot.
All day long the South Wind blew ...,
blowing fast, submerging the mountain in water,
overwhelming the people like an attack.
No one could see his fellow,
they could not recognize each other in the torrent.”

...

“Six days and seven nights
came the wind and flood, the storm flattening the land.
When the seventh day arrived, the storm was pounding,
the flood was a war--struggling with itself like a woman
writhing (in labor).

The sea calmed, fell still, the whirlwind flood stopped up.
I looked around all day long--quiet had set in
and all the human beings had turned to clay!
The terrain was as flat as a roof.
I opened a vent and fresh air (daylight!) fell upon the side of
my nose.

I fell to my knees and sat weeping,
tears streaming down the side of my nose.
I looked around for coastlines in the expanse of the sea,
and at twelve leagues there emerged a region (of land).
On Mt. Nimush the boat lodged firm,
Mt. Nimush held the boat, allowing no sway.

...

When a seventh day arrived
I sent forth a dove and released it.
The dove went off, but came back to me;
no perch was visible so it circled back to me.
I sent forth a swallow and released it.
The swallow went off, but came back to me;
no perch was visible so it circled back to me.

I sent forth a raven and released it.
The raven went off, and saw the waters slither back.
It eats, it scratches, it bobs, but does not circle back to me.
Then I sent out everything in all directions and sacrificed
(a sheep).
I offered incense in front of the mountain-ziggurat.
Seven and seven cult vessels I put in place,
and underneath I poured
reeds, cedar, and myrtle.”

That story comes from the eleventh tablet of the ancient Sumerian work, The Epic of Gilgamesh. The translation of the sections I just read was done by Maureen Gallery Kovacs in 1998. The story might sound...familiar.

The larger epic of which that story is a part is named for Gilgamesh, the king of the ancient city of Uruk. At the start of the fourth millennium BCE, the city of Uruk sat on the Euphrates River in what is now Iraq. The ruins are still there, complete with the ruins of the ziggurat with the temple on top which marked the beginning of every early city in the region.

And do you know who supposedly founded the city of Uruk? You heard it two weeks ago in Genesis 10. It's the second city founded by the mighty hunter Nimrod. Nimrod first founded Babel, and we looked at the story about the tower there. And do you remember who Nimrod was in the biblical genealogy? He's Noah's great-grandson.

And now, a word from this morning's sponsor, the Euphrates River.

Uruk is 58 miles northwest of Ur, the city where we find Abraham in Genesis 12 somewhere around the start of the second millennium BCE. At that time, Ur *also* sat on the Euphrates River. It was a port city, situated where the Euphrates emptied into the Persian Gulf. The past tense here is important.

Both ancient cities, Ur and Uruk, are now dry and deserted, as about 100 miles of the Euphrates River abruptly gushed into a new channel in the 17th century, in a cataclysmic geological event called an avulsion, leaving both cities without a water source and, eventually, without inhabitants.

Avulsions are more common than we might think, and happen when sediment builds up in a riverbed to the point where the river is forced away from its former path and moves, quickly and catastrophically, to an area where it can more easily flow.

Avulsions are frequently caused by large floods and other natural disruptions but also by human activity—dams, levees, and the like—that affects where sediment is deposited along the river. The Euphrates avulsion between 1687 and 1702, that left thousands dead and totally disrupted the politics of the Ottoman Empire, was caused by a combination of human and natural forces.

The Mississippi has had so many avulsions that the course of the river is now tightly controlled by a series of levees and earthworks to keep the river flowing where we want it to. How long it continues to comply is another question.

And now back to our regularly scheduled program.

Although the flood story that I read comes from a much longer work named for King Gilgamesh of Uruk, he's not the one who builds the boat. In the story, Gilgamesh is in search of eternal youth, which he hopes to find with the help of the king of Shuruppak, who legend said had been granted immortality by the gods.

Fortunately, Shuruppak was only a hundred miles up the Euphrates. So, Gilgamesh pays Utnapishtim a visit, where he learns that Utnapishtim was rewarded with immortality for saving some of all living beings from the great flood in a giant boat.

There are differences in the flood stories of Utnapishtim and Noah; but the differences are primarily in the different religious beliefs of the two peoples. The Sumerians had a pantheon of many gods and it was only one of them, the storm God Enlil, who caused the flood, intending to destroy all living things. Why? The people were making too much noise. Who knew they had leaf blowers in ancient Sumer?

It was a different god, Ea, the god of water, knowledge, and creation, who overheard Enlil's plans and saved the earth by tipping off Utnapishtim and getting him to build the boat. In the Bible, it's the *violence* of the people, rather than their noise, that causes God to wipe out all but the one righteous person God can find, Noah.

But these two accounts are, clearly, the same story, right down to God being fed up with bad human behavior, specific building instructions, landing on a mountain after the flood, sending out ravens and doves three times to find dry land, and offering a sacrifice when it was all over. The only significant differences surround what happened in the heavens, not what happened on the earth. Both stories arose in the same period along the same 100 miles of the Euphrates River.

You can argue about which version of the story came first, but the thing more people argue about is whether there actually was a great flood.

We tend to make two related mistakes with the Bible—especially with these ancient stories. The first is to think that everything in the Bible is factual, just because it's in sacred scripture. We've talked a lot about that problem. The Bible is here to help us with truth and meaning, not with facts.

From ancient myths to Jesus' parables to modern novels, films, and bedtime stories for children, it is, and always has been, entirely acceptable to teach truths about life through works of fiction. The sacred stories of the Bible are no less sacred and no less true if they aren't historically factual.

But a second mistake is to swing to the opposite extreme and believe that the Bible is made up out of whole cloth and that the mere presence of something in the Bible makes it factually false. We saw two weeks ago that there likely was an uncompleted tower that, over time, spawned a legend about how it came to be and why it was left unfinished. The *meaning* the Bible attaches to that legend teaches us about the importance of diversity to the survival of the earth.

I believe it's the same with the flood. The earth has undergone literal tectonic shifts; entire continents have moved—of course there have been great, world-altering floods. Major rivers have caused catastrophic flooding

during an avulsion, from ancient times to the present, including the Tigris and Euphrates, the two major rivers in the Mesopotamian cradle of civilization.

Excavations by archaeologists in every city we've talked about have found a significant flood layer. The flood layer in Ur was so massive that they temporarily stopped digging, thinking they had come to virgin soil.

But was there really some giant mega flood? Assuming you mean after the Zanclean Mega Flood between 3-5 million years ago when the Strait of Gibraltar opened and the Atlantic rushed into the Mediterranean Basin with a 1500 ft waterfall, consider this.

There are 175 known myths about a great flood, from every part of the globe. Of those 175, fourteen mention a full solar eclipse. Those myths, combined with some astronomy and geological evidence on the sea floor, allowed Dr. Bruce Masse, an environmental archaeologist with the Los Alamos National Laboratory, to postulate that an asteroid hit the earth on May 10, 2807 BCE.

He believes that is what created what is known today as the Burckle Crater, which is at the bottom of the Indian Ocean just southeast of Madagascar. By his calculations, the impact created a 600-ft tsunami that swept around the world.

Separately, those researching the massive sand dunes of both Madagascar and Western Australia, have found them to be full of marine fossils, something not typically encountered in landlocked dunes; and some believe both sets of dunes were created by the same mega tsunami, only the sand dune researchers think it was a mere 300 feet high as opposed to the 600 ft. of Dr. Masse. They all eye the impact at the Burckle Crater as a potential source.

Masse, along with Italian geologist Luigi Piccardi co-edited a book called *Myth and Geology* that notes, "Myths are largely event-based, in that they are triggered to a large part by an event, or combination of events, that catastrophically impact society, then these myths provide a window upon those events that can be recovered, retrieved, and even dated."

As we venture into our own age of climate upheaval and disruption, it's clear that you don't have to be either a science-phobic fundamentalist or a conspiracy theorist to believe that there might be close to 175 myths about a great, world-altering flood because there were, in fact, many great, world-altering floods; with at least one truly massive one in the region where both the Hebrew and Mesopotamian stories of a man who built a boat and survived were born.

That doesn't mean any one version of them is factual in all of their details. More importantly, none of that is why the story of Noah has been passed to us in Holy Scripture.

The story of Noah is in the Bible to tell us how ancient Israel found meaning and hope in the wake of an ancient, world-altering climate catastrophe. So, just maybe, as we face larger and larger climate catastrophes of our own, there is something we can learn from old Noah and his immortal doppelganger, Utnapishtim.

Both stories focus on the divine principle that all life is sacred, and that God calls on human beings to significant, and even heroic action to save not just ourselves, but all living things from calamity. Both stories also come with the warning that human behavior can and will bring unimaginable consequences to the earth if not kept in check. Seems relevant to me.

An ark doesn't have to be a boat. The word simply means a place of protection—the Ark of the Covenant was a box that protected the Ten Commandments and other sacred artifacts of ancient Israel. Noah's ark was a boat that protected every species of living thing.

Today there are arks in various places around the world, attempting to do what Noah and Utnapishtim did for at least some of life on earth. On the remote Norwegian island of Spitsbergen, built into the Arctic permafrost in 2008, is the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, a secure backup facility for the world's crop diversity. As of June 2021,

the Seed Vault holds 1,081,026 distinct crop samples, representing more than 13,000 years of agricultural history and just over 1/3 of the world's seeds.

The vault is located in the permafrost because the seeds need to be kept at -18 degrees Celsius. But the earth's warming is threatening permafrost. Entire villages built on the permafrost in remote Alaska have had to relocate as the land beneath them melts. Earlier this year, a previously unknown species of nematode, a tiny worm, was found in the Siberian permafrost. The worm thawed, and after being frozen for 46,000 years, it woke up and it laid eggs. I'm sure it's all perfectly fine.

In 2016, warmer temperatures and heavy rain in the Arctic caused flooding at the Svalbard Seed Vault entrance. Thankfully, the water froze several meters in and the seeds were not harmed. Improvements were made in 2019 to further protect this agricultural ark for the seeds of the world. How long will the ark hold there in the permafrost?

The World Wildlife Fund calculates that we are seeing extinction rates that are between 1,000 and 10,000 times higher than the natural extinction rate—which would be the rate of extinction without human interference.

One of the contributing factors in the dramatic decline of some migratory songbird populations over the past few decades is light pollution from our cities that confuses their migration and ends with them colliding into illuminated towers and buildings. Street lighting messes with moths and caterpillars, which are a crucial part of the food chain, and it turns out that LEDs are worse on that front than their predecessors.

Four days ago, the site space.com reported that the loss of dark skies is so harmful that astronomers have coined a new word for the hurt—Noctalgia—night pain.

The truth of the story of Noah is that there will be no world if we humans don't regulate our own behavior and if there are no righteous people willing to bear the scorn of our clueless neighbors and build an ark. If we do not reclaim the vocation given to Adam in the Garden to serve and protect the earth, God will do it for us, and without us. Darkness will again cover the face of the deep with only the Spirit of God to hover over the waters.

We need to build an ark. We need to build hundreds of thousands of arks. We can all do something. If you have a yard, you can make your yard an ark—a place of safety for living things to fulfill their purpose on earth. Shut off the lights. Plant *native* flowers, trees, shrubs, and a butterfly garden.

Manage insects the way you would your own child's food supply, because indirectly—and maybe soon directly—they are. Don't have a yard? Work with your town to turn any greenspace into an ark. No greenspace? Lobby to create some. Fight for clean air and water and wildlife-friendly infrastructure.

In May of 2022 construction began in Los Angeles on what will be the largest wildlife crossing in the world, crossing above ten lanes of highway. It's just in time as the lack of genetic diversity in the mountain lion population, that has been isolated by roadways, has been causing abnormalities that threaten the species. It will also support migration for coyotes, bobcats, deer, lizards, and birds. We need arks. Lots and lots of arks.

And no, Elon Musk, I don't mean a spaceship to escape earth and go to Mars. I mean arks to protect the earth that we already have; the earth that God made in love for us and all that live on, under, and above it.

When King Gilgamesh finally found Utnapishtim and asked why the gods granted him immortality, he told him it was because he had saved all living things from the Great Flood. When Noah and his family stepped out onto the slopes of Mt. Ararat, God made a covenant with Noah and all living things as a reward for his faithfulness to the earth.

We have been unable or unwilling to regulate ourselves, despite decades of warnings. It's now too late to prevent catastrophic change on many fronts. But Noah's story still holds one hope. With God's help, we can still build an ark. Each of us. All of us. To save...well...at least two of each. Amen.