

The Stories We Tell

by

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Genesis 8

But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; ²the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, ³and the waters gradually receded from the earth. At the end of one hundred fifty days the waters had abated; ⁴and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. ⁵The waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the seventh month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains appeared.

⁶At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made ⁷and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. ⁸Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; ⁹but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. ¹⁰He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; ¹¹and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. ¹²Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him anymore.

¹³ In the six hundred first year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying. ¹⁴ In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. ¹⁵ Then God said to Noah, ¹⁶ “Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons’ wives with you. ¹⁷ Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.” ¹⁸ So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives. ¹⁹ And every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out of the ark by families.

²⁰ Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. ²¹ And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odor, the LORD said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

²² As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night,
shall not cease.”

Author of all that is and all that will be, speak to us with ancient promises and present voices. Turn our hearts and minds so that all we may perceive is what your Spirit would have. May the words of my mouth and meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

“Fairy tales do not tell children that dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be defeated.”

Although the quote exists in many forms and the original is a bit wordier; when critic and lay theologian, G.K. Chesterton, first penned those words more than a century ago, he was lifting up a certain truth. One not just about dragons, but

about stories we tell.¹ Many a great children's author have returned to these words when criticized for telling "difficult" or "ugly" or "overly complicated" stories. Neil Gaiman began his story of *Coraline* with it, practically warning parents they were about to begin an unwieldy adventure.² We love our stories.

From the simple, "A *man walked into a bar...*"

To the ancient, "Speak, Memory—Of the cunning hero/ The wanderer, blown off course time and again."³

To the beloved, "Brown bear brown bear what do you see?"

From pages penned by Herodotus, Josephus, Sima Quian, Thucydides and even Dolores Kerns Goodwin. To the conversations you will begin as the service ends.

We humans are, as Jonathan Gottschall argues, "Addicted to stories." He describes the work of Heider and Simle in the 1940s who created a simple animation of triangles and squares moving in and out of a box. When 120 people watched the film, 3 came back and described circles and squares and triangles moving about. The other 117 who saw the same film, the same film of shapes moving around, described the stories they saw. They described a heist, and a romantic interlude, even a battle, in the end 117 different stories were told.⁴ Our minds are honed to find stories and attach to them. It's not just a love of stories, no, stories play a key role in how we pass on information from one generation to the next. Think of the stories your grandparents told you. What information they wanted you to carry on, and which stories were never told. The stories we tell give us space to practice, to consider contingencies for the moment when we hear a dragon snarl, or to prepare our response to a wizard's invitation to a journey out of your hobbit hole, or it lets us know what we might do when bad news is spoken between tears. It's a place to whisper our fears aloud, to name our hidden goblins, post-apocalyptic landscapes, and zombie hoards, or failed tests and lost jobs. But stories also let us see a world without want or fear or the pesky rules of gravity intervening. Stories bind us to a common culture and a common language and idiom. But, they also allow us to empathize with the experience of another.

¹ Original quote "The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon." From G.K. Chesterton "The Red Angel" in *Tremendous Trifles* (1909).

² Neil Gaiman, *Coraline* (William Morris: 2006), 1.

³ Homer *The Odyssey*, translated Stanley Lombardo (Hackett Publishing: 2000), Book 1, line 1.

⁴ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Mariner: 2012), 105.

Someone whose story is so different from your own, we meet in narrative. I wonder what books on your shelf are so worn for reading, whose spines are cracked and pages brittle from use? So loved you worry they might fall apart? What's the first book you buy when a new baby is born? What words do you want to be sure they have at hand? Stories are gifts that we share.

Stories both embedded in history and imagination shape us, and they also help us face the unimaginable, they can even help us face our own stories. In his work with Vietnam Veterans, psychiatrist Dr. Jonathan Shay used *the Iliad* as a tool to help men and women address moral injury and the wounds of war. Those he worked with found their story in the story of Achilles and Ajax and Patroclus, with different weapons, but similar wounds. That people across 3000 years could sit and mourn a common loss together.⁵ When instructions and fact fail to show a way forward, a story can mark a path for others to follow, to give a name to a wound we cannot see, to offer an ending when our story is still being written.

Do our stories help us face the unthinkable? Research says yes. Our stories make us stronger. Our sacred stories make us stronger still.

When asked to name a story from the bible, study after study, show that most of us have a hard time to do just that. Except for the case of Noah's ark. People can identify and tell the story of Noah's ark. People can remember Noah's ark. It's not surprising... the story shows up everywhere: sometimes in paintings in nurseries and toys on shelves. The actual text takes up an extraordinary 97 verses or 119 if you include the prologue in chapter 5. For comparison, Luke only spends 50 telling us about Jesus' birth and childhood. It's a long story.

It's a story that scholars have tried to unpack recognizing its appearance in cultures across the Ancient Near East and tying it to potential catastrophic environmental events from thousands of years ago. Our stories speak between cultures and times; they describe the gritty reality that shaped generations long past.

But Noah's ark isn't just an ancient story, it is a collection of stories. You may have noticed the missing rainbow. No it wasn't hidden between the tenth and the first month and the 27th day. It comes later in chapter 9 in a second version of the covenant. We can see two distinct ways of telling the story woven together. The details of both were so important that Holy Scripture kept both together, leaving the

⁵ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (Scribner: 1994).

complexity on the page and inviting us to deal with the inconsistencies of a story well remembered.

Noah's ark is also a vocabulary, a particular set of words. Rabbis and listeners of the word have long pondered the fact that the Hebrew word *Te vah* is used both for the ark that Noah builds and the basket that Miriam weaves for Baby Moses some generations later. Maybe it's because the notoriously landlocked Israelites didn't need many words for boats... or maybe there's something else. Maybe all of those days, and months, and years tell a story within the narrative. The words we use to tell the story matter.

It's not a complete story. No, Noah's ark also has missing pieces, space for our imagination to fill in the gaps... Rabbi Sandi Sasso tells the story of Noah's wife and her task of gathering the seeds to replant the world. Good Night Ark tries to imagine how on earth Noah would put all the animals to bed. Isaac Bashevis Singer tells the story of the dove and her role. Peter Spier and Arthur Geisert created the most detailed drawings to accompany their stories. Each page a mesmerizing attempt to capture just what two of every kind could mean. Our stories matter because they can take on new life in each generation.⁶

It is a story that has shaped generations, even the foundations of the early church, as the writer of Hebrews invokes Noah's name and action to describe faith. The definition of faith in Hebrews is a short three verses: "The assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen," but the examples, the stories, the narratives that put meat onto that definition those stretch an additional 40 verses. Our stories teach us who we want to become.

The story of Noah and the ark is a complicated one and maybe you're drawn to the narrative—the big story of covenant unfolding. Or maybe your mind is caught in the details, the days and the months, and the numbers and the measurements. Maybe you're with the scholars trying to determine the relationship between ancient stories or ancient tragedies. But you have to admit the story is compelling, and not just because of the animals boarding two-by-two, elephants and kangaroos.

If we tried to hide the complicated difficult stories from our children, they would find them, they always do. And when they found them they would wonder

⁶ Sandy Sasso, *Noah's Wife: The Story of Naamah* (Jewish Lights: 2002). Laura Sassi, *Good Night Ark* (Zonderkiz: 2015). Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Why Noah Chose the Dove* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 1974). Peter Spier, *Noah's Ark* (Dell Publishing: 1992). Arthur Geisert, *The Ark* (Houghton Mifflin Company: 1988).

what made them so dangerous that we were afraid to tell them. We would rob them of a story that is theirs as well as ours. So we tell the story of Noah's ark and while the basic text stays the same, stories have enough give that they can grow with us:

For our two- and three-year-olds faithfully finding two of every kind of animal and shoving them into a box—they are practicing call and vocation—they like Noah can protect and find and follow God. For our Pre-K and Kindergarten students, this story is linked to the abiding presence of God in all things. It begins in creation with God's spirit woven through all that we can see and imagine and continue with God surrounding the ark in the face of destruction. Our first and second graders debate the details and the practicality—how would sea animals like Walruses have managed in the flood? Was it a miracle that the rattlesnakes didn't bite anyone or just their good sense that it was going to be rough on the ark? I don't have answers to their questions, but they are good ones. Our third graders hear the story as one of the great covenants that tie God and people together. The fourth and fifth graders, the same ones who picked this story to be preached upon, are the first to debate its ethics. To question the why? And bring up the point that there is indeed “still Evil in the world, Pastor Rachel, despite the flood.” They want to poke at the holes they see.

Stories take on new life each time they are told. I'm sure you have a few that have changed over time. Stories that seemed so important in the moment that fade away to be replaced by something else, more sacred, more true.

We don't tell the story of Noah's ark to scare children, no we tell it because children know what it is to be afraid. They know that there is evil in this world. They know that there are storms and floods, and things their grown-ups cannot control. We tell the story of Noah's ark to remind children that there is an end to the story, there is a sacred promise. A moment when they will hold an olive leaf and decide if there's enough hope in that sign to go outside again. It doesn't negate the storm and the destruction, but it tells us we can endure, that we will have a life outside of creaking walls of gopher wood and pitch.

It's not just a story of survival...Hebrew scholar David Cotter explains that here in Chapter 8 we meet God again. After God's heart breaks at the evil of the world and after all of the destruction that ensues, God *remembers* Noah and all of the creatures on the ark, and as Cotter says, “God has unmade and now will set

about making anew, saving creation from itself as an act of love for Noah.”⁷ The world is recreated out of love. God’s grieving heart at ubiquity of evil is paused, God’s anger stayed because of love, and God will not forget and will never again destroy. That’s why we tell the story, and I wonder if that’s why there was deep wisdom in our fourth and fifth grade class when they said this was a story that you needed to hear, that the church needed to hear, that it wasn’t just a story for “little kids.”

C.S. Lewis explains it this way in his dedication of *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, he wrote to his Goddaughter Lucy:

My Dear Lucy,

*I wrote this story for you, but when I began it I had not realized that girls grow quicker than books. As a result you are already too old for fairy tales, and by the time it is printed and bound you will be older still. But some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again. You can then take it down from some upper shelf, dust it, and tell me what you think of it. I shall probably be too deaf to hear, and too old to understand a word you say but I shall still be your affectionate Godfather,”*⁸

We are a storytelling and a story-consuming people, and maybe today you needed to come back to this old, old story, to read it again. Maybe you needed to remember the animals and the rain and dove and the promise. Maybe you heard something new and maybe you were just reminded of something you already written on your heart. Our stories tell us that we can face dragons and make them our friends; that we can make fools of ourselves and start over. In our stories, the ones we loved who have died are alive again. In retelling, we remember who we are and who we are becoming.

Why do we tell stories of violence and floods, of long waiting and muddy messes? Not because we need to prove these things exist. We repeat this story, we echo this story across the years, because we need to remember that God does not forget and that we can endure, that despite the floods and the fear, and the unknowns, we still have stories to write and new worlds to form. And a God who will walk with us as the story begins again.

⁷ David Cotter, *Genesis from Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry*. (Michael Glazier Books: 2003), 58.

⁸ C.S. Lewis. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Mott Media, 1976), dedication.

