

**16 August 2020
Sea Sunday**

Genesis 6:9-22; 7:11-24; 8:1, 13-19; 9:1, 8-17
Acts 27:27-32, 39-44
Mark 4:35-41

Today, belatedly, we celebrate “Sea Sunday”, a day set aside to remember and pray for seafarers and their families and to give thanks for their lives and work. And we particularly acknowledge and pray for the work of the Mission to Seafarers, a work of the church dedicated to caring for, advocating for, praying for, and witnessing to those who work on the sea.

Among the readings set down for Sea Sunday is the story of Noah and the ark. It is a story that captures the imagination. It is, in a sense, the prototype to all the great disaster stories that make for much exciting and wonderful film-making ... and some that is indifferent or stupid.

As I read again this familiar story, I found my mind immediately drawn back to a silly film I saw on television during lockdown: *Evan Almighty*, starring comedian Steve Carrell as Evan Baxter, and Morgan Freeman as God.

Newly elected to Congress, Evan leaves his hometown and moves to the community of Prestige Crest, where his congressional campaign officially declares that he will change the world. Evan prays to God to give him this opportunity. His wife, Joan also prays that she, Evan and their three sons will be closer together as a family. On his first day, Evan receives a letter from his greedy boss, senior Congressman Chuck Long who provides him with a prime office and the opportunity to join Long as the junior co-sponsor to his Citizens' Integration of Public Lands Act (“CINPLAN”) bill. Over the next several days, strange events in Evan's life occur:

- Eight vacant lots in Prestige Crest are purchased under his name, and ancient tools and gopher wood are delivered there.
- Pairs of animals start following him everywhere he goes.
- He uncontrollably starts growing a beard no matter how much he shaves.
- The number 614 starts appearing in various forms throughout his daily routines.

Evan comes to realize that this number 614 actually refers to verse 14 in chapter 6 of the Book of Genesis, where God instructs Noah to build an ark in preparation for

a coming flood. Evan initially rejects this idea, but God himself starts appearing to Evan in various guises, assuring him that a flood will come and that the only way Evan can change the world will be to build the ark. Evan decides to start building the ark with the tools and materials provided, which gives him an opportunity to get closer to his sons, although Joan initially sees this as a midlife crisis.¹

As Evan becomes more and more Noah-like in appearance, and as the building of the ark progresses with no hint of rain, Evan is increasingly the butt of derision and opposition.

Anyway, back to the original. There is a great deal that we could wonder at and ponder over about the story of Noah and the ark, and of what it reveals of the nature of God and of humankind; and there have been down the ages, and continue to be, many debates about aspects of this narrative. For today, I simply want to use it as a frame for three key points, which may be summarised under the headings of Flood, Ark, and Rainbow.²

Firstly, Flood.

This story tells of an unexpected global calamity – it feels like a story for our times! While the nature of the calamity that befell Noah and his contemporaries is quite different to what we face nationally and internationally at present, it will help us to recall that for the people of the Bible, the sea represented a place of danger and chaos. “Apart from fishermen, the Jews were not a seafaring people; they left that to their Phoenician neighbours to the north. The sea came to symbolise, for them, the dark power of evil, threatening to destroy God’s good creation, God’s people, God’s purposes. In books like Daniel, the sea is where the monsters come from.”³

We too may be in, or will face in the future, situations in which we feel things are out of control, overwhelming, chaotic, threatening, dangerous. This sense of “Flood” is common to many of us.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evan_Almighty

² The Flood/Ark/Rainbow structure of this sermon and many of the essential points are adapted from the address given by The Rev Canon Andrew Wright, Secretary General of the Mission to Seafarers International, during the online 2020 Sea Sunday service, viewed here <https://www.missiontoseafarers.org/sea-sunday> 14 August 2020.

³ Wright, *Mark*, p.52

Today as we celebrate Sea Sunday we think of seafarers. They may not be a group of people we think of often – especially we who dwell away from the sea. But we all nevertheless rely on seafarers. 90% of the products everyday New Zealanders consume are transported by the shipping industry: 90%.⁴ There are *thousands* of ships coming into New Zealand ports every year. Around the world as a whole, there are about 1.5 million seafarers at work at any one time.

And for seafarers the sense of “Flood” – of danger, chaos, overwhelming circumstances – is a daily reality.

There are the obvious dangers of storm, shipwreck, sinking, fire, and the like.

There are the issues created by remoteness, lack of access to healthcare and emergency treatment; loneliness; separation from spouses and children, family and friends; communication problems and distance from the day-to-day decisions and issues of home.

Alongside these dangers, there is the present issue that even those who are not usually kept confined to their ships are not currently able to get home after months at sea because of the Covid 19 lockdown regulations operating in many countries. Because communication is often poor, seafarers have little understanding of the reality of what is going on. They are in lockdown, but lack a reliable source of news or information to guide them.⁵

Much more hidden are the issues of injustice and oppression. All seafaring today, unless you are a captain or an engineer, is done by the cheapest labour shipping companies can find. In our own Asia-Pacific region, countries such as Thailand and the Philippines are rife with people-smugglers who frequent impoverished villages offering promises of income. Once they get on board, sailors often find their passports taken from them. They are kept in slavery with no way to get home.⁶

⁴ This information, and the issues outlined in the following, are drawn from the two Reeve articles, and the Lance Lukin interview with Kim Hill.

⁵ Reeve, “Hell on the High Seas: Part Two”.

⁶ “Hell on the High Seas: Part One”

Conditions are even worse in the fishing industry. “Labour abuse at sea can be so severe that the boys and men who are its victims might as well be captives from a bygone era. In interviews, those who fled recounted horrific violence: the sick cast overboard, the defiant beheaded, the insubordinate sealed for days below deck in a dark, fetid, fishing hold.”⁷ All this is the cost of meeting Western consumers demands for more goods, quicker, and at a cheaper price.

It was the awareness of these kinds of issues that made *Even Almighty* seem particularly apt to mention today.

In the film, Evan’s staff show him that congressman Long had developed Prestige Crest after damming off a nearby water source, but had cut many corners in building the dam. The staff members suspect Long will do the same with the Public Land Act Bill. But then as animals start to load the ark, and rain falls, Evan comes to realize Long’s dam is failing. He urgently warns the onlookers to get aboard the ark as the dam does indeed break. The flood destroys all of Prestige Crest. The deluge floods the streets of Washington DC and after a wild ride the ark comes to a halt jammed into the front of the Capitol building, interrupting the vote for the CINPLAN bill. Long’s corrupt practice is exposed, and the bill from which he would have profited handsomely is voted down.

Our rampant consumerism is supported by oppression and corruption, at the expense of the lives and livelihoods of seafarers.

When we are in the midst of Flood or storm, we Christians can find comfort in the truth that Jesus is with us, and that in him God is at work to bring peace. That same comfort is needed for the world’s seafarers.

So, first, Flood.

Secondly, Ark.

The ark is quite literally a lifeboat, a vessel of safety and rescue.

⁷ From the New York Times in 2015, quoted in “Hell on the High Seas: Part One”.

The Mission to Seafarers is something of an ark. It is committed to being a saving community for the sake of seafarers around the world, and for their families, regardless of race or faith. It is committed to sharing the love of God, through word and action. It is committed to advocating for justice for seafarers. It is committed to building the kingdom of God among the seafaring community.

Flood. Ark.

And thirdly Rainbow.

As Noah was in the midst of the chaos and uncertainty, in the midst of what was effectively a lockdown aboard the ark, we read that “God remembered Noah”. We may reasonably expect that Noah may have lost hope after 40 days of further rain following their entry into the ark and 150 days afloat not knowing when or how this would all end. But God remembered Noah. And the narrative ends with a promise, a covenant signified in the rainbow, that God would never again act to put an end to humankind, no matter how evil they have become.

It is a promise that was ultimately expressed in the work of Jesus on the cross, where God acts to ensure that all who would receive him will not face the final, eternally fatal, consequences of sin, idolatry, and evil. In the work of Jesus, we have the sure and certain hope that God has acted, and will bring to completion, his work to put the world to rights.

I noted earlier on that for the Jews the sea symbolised the power of evil. The Revelation 21 vision of the end of the age is one in which that power has been overcome. The passage that ends with the promise “There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” begins with “Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.”

“There was no longer any sea”. Through the work of Jesus, the power of evil has been defeated.

It is easy for us to fall into thinking that such a promise means that we who have committed ourselves to Jesus can sit back and relax, because he’s going to make it

all right and we're going to escape it all. But God always calls covenant partners to be at work with him.

The film *Evan Almighty* ends with Evan re-encountering God during a hike. God states that Evan's life is now perfect in the way he had prayed and hoped for, being closer to his family and having changed the world for the better through his one act. God describes this act as an ARK, an Act of Random Kindness.

Acts of Random Kindness are good in their own way. But God calls his people to even greater action. As people of Jesus, we are called to be at work among seafarers and among all of the least, last, and lost. We are called to bring care, healing, and comfort; we are called to advocate for justice; we are called to work to order our lives so that we do not rely upon oppressive and corrupt structures for our comfort; and we are called to proclaim the good news that Jesus is the world's true King.

And we do all this in anticipation of, and because we believe in, the final fulfilment of the promises of God who remembered Noah, rescued him, and placed his rainbow sign in the sky.

Sources:

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- Scottie Reeve, "Hell on the High Seas: Part 1", <https://movementonline.org.nz/blog/hell-on-the-high-seas-part-one> (Viewed 13 August 2018)
- Scottie Reeve, "Hell on the High Seas: Part 2", <https://movementonline.org.nz/blog/hell-on-the-high-seas-part-two> (Viewed 13 August 2018)
- "Concern for merchant sailors stranded in NZ waters", interview of Lance Lukin by Kim Hill on National Radio's Saturday Morning Programme, 8 August 2020, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/saturday/audio/2018758567/concern-for-merchant-sailors-stranded-in-nz-waters>
- Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, London:SPCK