

“WILL BUILD TO SUIT”

Genesis 6:9-22, 7:24, 8:14-19; Matthew 7:21-29

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The scene begins with two people sitting in a diner:

He says, “I’ll take the number three.”

Then she orders, “I’d like the chef salad, please, with the oil and vinegar on the side. And the apple pie a la mode. But I’d like the pie heated, and I don’t want the ice cream on top. I want it on the side. And I’d like strawberry instead of vanilla if you have it. If not, then no ice cream, just whipped cream; but only if it’s real. If it’s out of a can, then nothing.”

Waitress: “Not even the pie?”

Sally: “No, just the pie. But then not heated.”

This scene from the movie, “When Harry Met Sally” ends with the bewildered waitress turning to walk away and Harry with a look of shock on his face after witnessing Sally’s very complicated order. This scene is meant to illustrate the difference between this particular man and woman, and thus say something about how men and women relate to one another.

Every time I see this scene I laugh, because I know people—both men and women—who could be Sally. Many of us have very specific ways we expect our food to be prepared, and sometimes we aren’t even afraid to ask for it.

We are actually trained to ask for it. While eating lunch about a week ago, I was wandering through the business section of the newspaper when I came across a feature on the marketing plan implemented by the new CEO of Burger King. It seems that after trying a slew of different slogans, celebrity endorsement deals, and even child-friendly campaigns meant to have children bring their parents in to eat, Burger King has returned to their “Have it your way” campaign that market research tells them is still the most commonly quoted Burger King campaign slogan. When it comes to our food at least, whether in the movies or at our local burger joint, we want things our way.

I would argue that it doesn’t stop with our food, though. Check out advertisements that come in your e-mail, your mailbox, or into your home via TV and radio. Products and services are coming at us at warp speeds, and our task is simply to wade through all of the information and choose what we want. Choose what you want—anything you want is at your fingertips—we only have to decide what color, what size, or how much horsepower. Cars, clothes, electronics, vacations, computer upgrades, fine dining: spin the wheel, and it is all right there for us. Grab it, it is ours. Not only can we have it—whatever we want—but we deserve it; and we want it built, cooked, or sewn to suit us.

But then, as Christians, we must reconcile our consumer habits with our scripture lessons. As we know, our scriptures were written long ago before the advent of pop-up marketing and those annoying magazine inserts. But that doesn't make them less relevant. Our scripture lessons today are about God's call to us as individuals, about building things, and about being faithful. Seemingly a long cry from the reality that advertisers place before us.

In the book of Genesis, today's lesson tells the story of Noah and the flood, using what is known as the Priestly source. If you read the full account of the Flood you will notice discrepancies in many places, which seems to indicate multiple sources. But the passages we heard are believed to be from just one source, and they focus on Noah's goodness and faithfulness. We read of the people who lived around Noah, and we discover that they become violent and corrupt, a reality that God could simply no longer tolerate. And so, according to the story, God commanded Noah to build a huge boat, inside which Noah and his family and every creature imaginable would live during the time of the coming flood. God, it seems, was going to flood the earth in response to the evils of the people; but God also wanted to assure that life would continue. And so he called upon Noah to prepare a boat and to be ready.

As I read the story of Noah, I do so realizing that this story is probably based in the ancient people's attempts to come to grips with why their world—everything they knew of it anyway—was being destroyed by flood waters. Who was the God who allowed this to happen? Why do bad things happen to good people? Sound familiar?

Recent scientific data point to the factors that might have led to the Flood which is the focus of Noah's epic story. Two American geologists, William Ryan and Walter Pitman, theorize that the origin of the Noah flood story—and other similar stories in widely separated cultures—lay in the melting of the Ice Age from thousands of years ago. During the Ice Age, the Black Sea was an isolated freshwater lake surrounded by farmland. About 12,000 years ago—toward the end of the Ice Age—as Earth began growing warmer, glaciers in the Northern Hemisphere began to melt. Oceans and seas grew deeper as a result. About 7,000 years ago, the Mediterranean Sea pushed northward, slicing through what is now Turkey. Funneled through the narrow Bosphorus Strait, the water flooded into the Black Sea with 200 times the force of Niagara Falls. Imagine what that looked like. The Black Sea rose, flooding coastal farmland. Seared into the memories of terrified survivors, the tale of the Flood was passed down through the generations and eventually became in Hebrew scripture, among numerous similar legends from other cultures, the Noah story of Genesis 6 - 9.

Our science helps us understand the geological forces that might have caused Noah's flood, but what our science cannot answer is how such an event becomes an important story in the life and faith of both the Hebrew and Christian people. That happens not because of geological forces but because faithful people continually seek models for faithful behavior. And so the story of Noah becomes a story of faith. Because even when the Ice Age brought horrible floods, the people survived and, thus, began to tell of a merciful God who saved creation, even as it was being destroyed by geology.

Because the Flood didn't consume everyone, we have a model of the faith of Noah who, when commanded by God, built a boat. It is quite ridiculous really. Imagine the winter rains beginning and several of us decide to build a huge ocean liner in the parking lot outside Reser Stadium. What would people say to us? The incredible and absurd nature of the story is exactly what is being passed down. I imagine the Flood epic was no less ridiculous when it was told in the oral traditions—and that is the point. I suspect the people who first told this story knew how they would have reacted if someone had told them that God had commanded them to build an ark. “What a crazy fool.” But for the Hebrew people who were surrounded by the natural world and the followers of many different gods, following their God had to be more than a little absurd. And so the Flood epic gives strength to the Hebrews as they wrestle with how and why to follow their God. If someone like Noah could faithfully build an ark and become the one who survived, surely one can believe in this God and follow some commandments and some laws. “I can do this; others like Noah have, and it worked out for them.” A story of building an ark and building a future.

As we move from the Flood epic to our Gospel reading, we continue to hear the echoes of faithfulness and individual call. Our Gospel reading comes at the close of the Sermon on the Mount and is the last in a series of warnings that Jesus uses to conclude his teaching. The warning in this passage concerns those who would listen to the words of Jesus, or even speak the lessons of Jesus, yet have them tumble out of their heads as if they were not really absorbed. In this passage Jesus describes those who hear and act on his teachings as those who have built their homes on the rocks, on solid foundations that will then keep their houses safe from winds and floods. However, Jesus notes that those who simply hear and ignore the lessons of Jesus are “like those who build their homes on sand—only to have them washed away by water and wind.” In this warning Jesus is trying to intercede against hypocrisy and instill in those who listened that day that it is not enough just to hear his words. Action is required—real action—not just prophesy or exorcisms because such things will dazzle the masses. Remember, the Sermon on the Mount includes the beatitudes: blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger for righteousness, blessed are the merciful and the peacemakers. This warning tells of the danger of building a faith on belief—on hearing the words of Jesus—but never really acting on them. Jesus was calling those who listened that day away from their hypocrisy and laziness; and the call is the same today. As I heard this passage I could not help but compare those words to those who sell the Christian faith through what is known as the “Prosperity Gospel”: a re-telling of the gospel that proclaims that the central message of the love of Jesus is in making us happy, wealthy, and wise. One of the leading purveyors of this prosperity gospel has published several books of his sermons. Here are some of the titles:

Holding onto Your Dreams
and even: Financial Prosperity
How Valuable You Are in God's Eyes
Believe God for the Greater Works

Do All You Can Do to Make Your Dreams Come True
Living a Life of Excellence
Developing Your Potential

Sorry, but as I read the gospel stories and interact with the teachings of Jesus, I find that faith is not a “have it your way” enterprise based on “making it big.” Instead, in the teachings of Jesus, I hear a call to faith that requires us to be builders of faith, ready to answer the call to live out the beatitudes—to know that we will build not just what we want or desire but that we will build to suit what God is calling us to do.

Real estate signs often say, “Will Build to Suit.” This is the courageous language we need to find to offer to God. It isn’t easy, it is probably quite ridiculous—like building an ark. But in standing ready to follow the lessons of Jesus and in building on the solid foundation given by God, we are connected to Noah, the holy lands, and generations of Christians who listened and followed Jesus. Let us heed the warnings and celebrate the fullness of Christ’s ministry by following the blueprint that proclaims hope, justice, and mercy for all God’s beloved people. Guide us, O God; help us to hear your call and grant us courage as we build upon the solid ground you give. Amen.