

Building an Ark

If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you.

You will recognize these words as the opening lines of Rudyard Kipling's famous poem, *If*, and they, as much as any scriptural commentary, provide the key to understand the story of Noah and the Ark.



What is the meaning of this story? Are we really to believe that at a certain time in history the whole earth was flooded and that one man, Noah, had the foresight to build a boat on which he had placed a male and female of every living species on earth so as to save them from extinction? Clearly the story is not to be taken literally, as a concrete event in the history of this planet. Like a number of other biblical stories of the origins of history, it is not an historical video-tape of what happened but is rather a story of the human heart, a story which is truer than true in that it happens again and again inside of our lives. And how does it happen? What is the meaning of the story of Noah and the Ark?

The story might be recast this way: Every so often there comes a time in history when there is so little vision, faith, idealism, decency, and charity left on this planet that there is a real danger that the world itself will sink, will drown, and revert to a chaos that will kill everything that's precious. But one person, despite all that is going on around him or her, will keep his or her eyes on what's higher, keep faith intact, protect life, and refuse to compromise charity and decency. Eventually the earth will drown in chaos, but because of this one person's vision, idealism, faith, decency, and charity, a pocket of life, that still contains all that is precious, will be preserved and given a new chance to grow.

Noah's Ark is a boat of faith, vision, idealism, decency, and charity. These virtues give us the capacity to float above the chaos that drowns things. Moreover, our decency, charity, faith, and vision contain within themselves all that's precious and that needs to be protected and given a continued chance for life.

And there are different ways to build this ark. Here's one:

Daniel Berrigan is fond of issuing this warning: Beware, beware, or the culture will swallow you whole! It's easy to be swallowed whole and drowned by our culture. It is that kind of a narcotic. Recognizing this, at a point in his life, Daniel Berrigan chose to work full-time in a hospice for the dying. His motives were mixed: On the one hand, he sincerely wanted to help dying patients in any way he could, physically and spiritually. On the other hand, he wanted to work with the dying because he recognized that they, the dying, precisely because they no longer have a meaningful place inside the culture and the future, could give him a privileged perspective on our culture and on our world. Simply put: When you see your culture and your world through the eyes of someone who is dying, things take on a very different perspective and a lot of what fires ordinary life (tiring our bodies, minds, and heart in its pursuit) is now exposed as secondary and as not worthy of all the attention and energy it is given.

For Daniel Berrigan, building an ark, meant attending to the dying so as to be given the faith and perspective to not drown in our culture.

And so we might paraphrase Rudyard Kipling this way:

If you can keep your faith when all about you they are losing theirs, but are comfortable in the feeling that there is strength in numbers, that everyone else is following suit, that so many million people can't be wrong;

If you can keep giving others respect when all about you this is seen as weakness, and disrespect is held as strength and passion for truth;

If you can remain courteous and retain your manners when all about you courtesy is seen as quaint, and crassness and crudity are paraded as sophistication;

If you can live in tension when all about you there is compromise because it is judged that it is better to let the devil take tomorrow than to live in tension today;

If you can refuse to settle for second-best when all about you it is accepted that this is all that life will offer;

If you can combine chastity and passion when all about you this is judged as naïve and impossible;

If you can make room for Sabbath amidst the pressures of life when all about you those pressures have begun to dictate all of life;

And, if you can bear down even more in charity and forgiveness, loving and forgiving those who hate you, when all about you they are advocating hate for hate;

Then, just as surely as Noah, you will have built an Ark!

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