

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 1st Sunday of Lent, February 18, 2018.

Welcome to the Season of Lent. We know that this is a time for us to raise our game as God-fearing and Jesus-loving people. The Lenten experience is meant to be intentional. We don't promise to respond to situations as they arise. We promise to identify situations and then respond. We should be aggressors during this time. We should be on the outlook for those in need, and having identified that need, take action to address it.

Our model for this initiative is Jesus. Once he was baptized, he didn't wait to see what might happen and where some need might appear. He went to work, including time at the very beginning in the wilderness. He needed to focus. He needed to get ready. He needed to sharpen his skills. This wilderness experience wasn't easy. He had to live among the wild beasts, and he was tempted by Satan. But he got through it, and came out swinging. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

As he set about his work, Jesus had some tools, including a rich history of ancestors doing the work of God. One of the most helpful of these models was Noah. Our lessons this morning (**Genesis 9:8-17**) and (**I Peter 3:18-22**) provide two references to Noah and the ark. My guess is that during the wilderness experience, Jesus thought a lot about Noah. About the only task comparable to making sure that a great flood does not destroy all living creatures is dying on a cross. Jesus prepared himself for one task by reviewing another task.

And what Jesus confirmed in this Noah review was that Noah listened carefully to what God was expecting, and built the ark according to God's specifications. The result was that when the flood came, the animals had someplace to go. In other words, a safety-net was in place. Had Noah waited to build the ark until the flood appeared, construction would have been impossible.

Maybe Noah's experience can be our experience during this Lenten Season. Listen, prepare and respond.

Listen. What is God saying to us? What instruction are we receiving from God? And, if we get a sense of what God is asking us to do, are we in a position to act? What preparations do we need to make? Are there specifications to which we

need to pay attention? Do we even know where to start in building our version of an ark?

And, having done all of that, are we ready to make ourselves available to those in need? Do we have the energy and creativity and patience to deploy the ark that we have built, and help those who are facing serious difficulties come aboard?

If this sounds a little far-fetched, think about an outreach activity in which you are engaged right now? And think about how this effort started. And I'll bet that you went through a process that involved listening, preparing and responding. And, as your involvement grew, I'll bet that your listening became more acute, that your preparation became more thorough, and that your responding became more effective. In other words, you became more Noah-like.

As the listening task wasn't easy for Jesus, it isn't easy for us either. Like Jesus, we are tempted. For Jesus, the tempter was Satan. The stakes were high. No substitute tempter here. Satan himself. Well, we are tempted too. Do we really want to build an ark? Do we really want to apply our energy on the possibility of a flood? Wouldn't God rather have me work on some other project closer at hand?

All sorts of doubts appear when we listen for Divine direction, including the possibility that the Divine doesn't even exist. Forty days in the wilderness? Really? Can't we find a better way to serve God? What is prayer anyway? How can I be sure that what I think I hear God saying is nothing more than projection on my part?

Well, if listening is tough, so is actual preparation. Good grief. To build an ark means that I have to take time off from my job and the paycheck that goes with that job. I was saving vacation time for a trip I always wanted to take. And now I have to spend time on a brand new project? I don't think so.

And, can I even trust God's specifications? Is he even licensed? Was he ever an apprentice? How many stars did he get on his last job? Noah gave him five stars, but against what was God measured? Yes, the ark floated. It did its job. But, let's face it. I'm no Noah.

Now, we come to the third piece of listen, prepare and respond. Intense listening and careful preparation don't guarantee effective response. At some point, our

listening and preparation need to move into action. Enough talk. Time to act. Is there risk of failure? You bet. But what is the use of listening and preparing if we do nothing with them?

The last verse in this morning's gospel (**Mark 1:9-15**) is not "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news, but don't rush into anything. Take your time. Maybe everything will work out without your intervention. By the way, who do you think you are anyway?"

No, there was no caution, no backing-out, no I'll get to it later. Jesus acted. He responded. He made a list. At the top of the list was "Call some disciples." And call them he did.

The response took time. It strained relations with his family. It stirred up religious and secular authorities. Even his closest friends, the disciples, questioned his response. When people gave him an out, he declined it, and kept going.

Well, if we are no Noah, we are certainly no Jesus. We can't match their achievements. But we can match their strategy: listen, prepare and respond. What is our version of this strategy? How will we use our time this Lenten Season? How will we raise our game to serve the Lord who gave his life for us?

This morning's psalm (**Psalms 25:1-9**) is really appropriate to this Season. We could do worse than to take it to heart. First, it captures our desire to raise our game. "Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths." But it also acknowledges the frightened people we can be. "He guides the humble in doing right and teaches his way to the lowly." And finally the psalm sets aside our fears and marches on. "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; my God I put my trust in you."

That's how we raise our game. We trust in the Lord. Noah trusted. Jesus trusted. We are not they to be sure, but we too can trust. When we listen carefully and faithfully, we might just hear, "Trust me." And, as we build that trust, our preparation just might grow stronger. And, as we grow stronger, our response just might hit a home-run, for some agency in need, some stranger in need, some family member in need, ourselves in need. This Season of Lent can be a very rewarding time in a whole bunch of ways. Welcome to this Holy Season.

Amen.

