

“Noah and the Dove”

Bryn Athyn Cathedral - March 17, 2019

Rev. Solomon Keal

*“Then God remembered Noah, and all that were with him in the ark.
And God made a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters subsided.” (Genesis 8:1)*

The Story of Noah and the Ark, and the great flood that filled the earth is familiar to Christians and non-Christians alike. In fact, parables and myths about floods can be found in many cultures and religions around the world. The frightening imagery of being trapped by floodwaters is one that many people in the world can relate to in some way.

Many of these mythological flood stories appear to describe an angry god punishing the human race. However, in the New Church we are fortunate to know that the parable of Noah describes the way that the Lord preserves and protects us during hard times, because of His never-ending love for the human race (see Isaiah 54:9-10).

As we heard in the lessons, a “flood” symbolizes times of spiritual struggle or what are called “temptations” in the Writings of Swedenborg (see AC 705, 741, 905). This correspondence has become part of our everyday language (see AC 606). When we’re going through a difficult spiritual state, we talk about feeling “swept away,” or “lost at sea,” or like we’re “drowning,” or barely able to “keep our head above water.” Even modern psychological language uses the term “flooded” to describe feeling overwhelmed by emotions such as anger, stress, fear, grief, depression, selfishness, or negative thoughts. We will all experience spiritual “flooding” at some point in our lives, and so one of the first stories in the Word addresses this.

The Ark is a symbol for our mind (see AC 638-645) which can get tossed about by floods of negative thoughts and feelings from the hells. During those floods, the Lord protects and preserves the goodness in us (Noah), so that even though we may feel miserable, we are not completely destroyed (see AC 530).

But then we might ask, how do we get out of situations like that? How do we find safe passage to the solid ground of peace and calm? How do we find our way out of temptations and spiritual struggles? As I was reading what the Heavenly Doctrines say about this story, I kept looking for the answer. “How can I end the spiritual floods in my life? How can I make it so I will stop feeling the way I feel?” And the answer came back to me: “I can’t, but the *Lord* can.” We can’t change the way we feel, any more than Noah could end the flood on his own. The forces of the hells are too big for us to handle on our own, like a vast ocean (see TCR 68). We can’t lift ourselves out of temptation by our own bootstraps. The Lord is the One who brings an end to the “floods” in our lives. And part of our job is to have patience in riding out the storm, and trust that “this too shall pass.”

The floodwaters rose for “*forty days and forty nights*” (Genesis 7:12), symbolizing spiritual struggle or temptation (see AC 758-762). And the “*waters prevailed on the earth one hundred and fifty days.*” (Genesis 7:24) But Noah and his family didn’t set their feet on dry land until about a year after the flood began! (Genesis 7:11; 8:14) It takes time for our spiritual “floods” to recede, and so it takes a lot of patience and trust on our part. But this story does describe something else that we can do, as we trust “*in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him*” (Psalm 37:7). And it has to do with a kind of “spiritual bird-watching.”

We begin by opening the window of the Ark (see Genesis 8:6). This symbolizes opening our minds towards heaven and the Lord. When we turn to the Lord in prayer, the Heavenly Doctrines tell us that the Lord can fill our hearts with hope and comfort (see AC 2535). In fact Noah's name means "comfort" (Genesis 5:29). We can get a sense that there is light at the end of the tunnel for us. When we turn to the Lord in His Word, we can be reminded of the many ways that the Lord and His angels are protecting us from harm, even during hard times (see AC 863).

But the next part of the story describes an interesting and somewhat cryptic series of events involving birds. Noah first sends out a raven, which flies back and forth. Next he sends out a dove, which returns to him. Then he sends the dove out again, and this time she returns to him with an olive leaf. Finally, Noah lets the dove go again, and this time she doesn't return. The behavior of these birds appears to give Noah clues about the end of the flood. So what clues can they give to us about the ends of the floods in our lives?

Throughout the Word, birds represent our thoughts (see AC 745). In our lesson from the Gospels, when the Lord is comforting us and encouraging us to not worry, He asks us to "*look at the birds of the air.*" (see Matthew 6:25-26) The Lord wants us to observe our thoughts. Because in observing our thoughts, we can begin to see patterns in the way that the flooding recedes in our minds. And when we familiarize ourselves with these patterns, we can feel more comfort in knowing that the Lord is leading us out of the flood.

The first bird that Noah releases is a raven, which flies "*to and fro,*" back and forth. The Heavenly Doctrines teach us that the raven represents falsity or lies (see AC 864-867). The first stage in the Lord delivering us from spiritual floods involves a time when we are confused and uncertain. The Writings say, "*false ideas then flit through the mind, they depart and return*" (AC 867). "*We are left with almost no idea what is true or good. We are so unsure that we scarcely know whether anything is true*" (AC 848). In this stage, our mind is filled with "*numberless misconceptions.*" (AC 865.2) For example after a time of depression, the thought might fly through our mind that we are weak and worthless. This is a lie, but it flies through our mind nonetheless. Sometimes we can get flooded with anger in our relationships with loved ones, and then the thoughts might fly through our mind that "*they always treat me badly,*" or "*they've never done anything nice,*" or "*they made me react the way I did,*" or "*I was justified in my violent reaction.*" These too are lies, but we often believe them anyway.

Now you might be wondering at this point, in what way is this knowledge offering me comfort? The comfort can in some ways be found in simply knowing that this is normal. It's normal for us to be confused after a spiritual flood. It's normal for our minds to be filled with lies from the hells at this time. But our job, as we look out the window of the Ark, is to be a spiritual bird-watcher; to look at the birds of the air; to observe our own thoughts. When we can identify a thought flying through our mind as a lie from hell, then we are at the first stage of being freed from our spiritually flooded state. We see a raven.

In the second stage, Noah releases a dove, but the dove comes back to him. A dove was seen at the Lord's baptism as the form of the Lord's Holy Spirit (see Matt 3:16). In a similar way, this dove also represents the Lord's truth (see AC 870). This is the stage where we begin to find some clarity about our spiritual state. We begin to know the truth, and the truth begins to set us free (see John 8:32; Psalm 55). For example, we might experience a flood of feeling overwhelmed by depression, grief, or stress. In that flooded state, we might not even recognize *why* we feel miserable. But after we begin to identify some of the lies that the hells are telling us,

we then begin to see more clearly *why* we feel the way we do. For example “I just realized that the reason I’m so moody today is because it’s the anniversary of my mom’s death. I see now that this is grief.” Or “I’m sorry I got so angry at you. I’m just realizing that I’m so snappy today because of stress at work.” The true ideas begin to fly through our mind. The flood waters haven’t fully receded yet, and we might still *feel* miserable, but at least we are more aware of what’s going on.

But the dove flies out and then comes back to Noah. The Writings tell us that this represents a sense of ownership and control over these true ideas (see AC 873-878). Even the language of the story conveys this with its focus on the person of Noah as he sent out the dove “*from himself,*” and that she returned “*to him... So he put out his hand and took her, and drew her into the ark to himself.*” (Genesis 8:8-9) The Heavenly Doctrines say that in this stage “*we imagine that we are doing good deeds and thinking true thoughts under our own power*” (AC 874). So it’s as if we’re hanging on to that dove and claiming it as our own. In this stage we might clearly identify the truth about whatever spiritual struggle we’re in (the dove flying out), but we also think that we can control it on our own (the dove returning to Noah). So we might correctly identify that we are experiencing depression, or grief, or anger, or stress, but then mistakenly think that we can control those things through sheer force of will. “I see now that my anger in this relationship is connected to false ideas from hell. Now that I know that, I will never get angry again. *I’ve* got it under control.” Or “I see now that I’ve been feeling depressed. Now that I know that, *I* can fix my depression, so that I never feel depressed again.” But the spiritual struggles that we face in life are bigger than we can tackle by ourselves, with our own limited power. So we are not completely out of the flood yet.

In the third stage of this story, Noah sends out the dove, and it returns with an olive leaf. By itself, this imagery brings a greater sense of hope. Somewhere there is dry land. We’re getting closer to a more stable spiritual state. Like day three of the Creation story in which the plants begin to grow, this stage symbolizes a time when we see signs of spiritual growth in our lives (see AC 29, 879-887). The Heavenly Doctrines say that, “*when we are being reborn, true ideas are sown in us, and the Lord bends our false thinking in the direction of those ideas. Then falsity seems to have been dispelled, and it is the goodness He gives us as a gift that accomplishes this*” (AC 887). In this stage we might look back on the situation in which we experienced flooding, and see how that situation is actually helping us to grow spiritually. For example we might get into an argument with a spouse or a loved one. In that argument we might experience floods of anger, or negative thoughts. But as we begin to come to a place of clarity, we might be able to observe (somewhat reluctantly) “This argument has probably been good for us. We are learning and growing from going through this difficult time.” We’re still stuck in the flood, but we see signs of growth happening. Any time we experience the thought that “this is probably good for me,” we can imagine that we are Noah seeing the dove return with an olive leaf, and perhaps we can find comfort in knowing that we are being led out of the flood.

In the final stage of this story, Noah sends out the dove, and it does *not* return. This stage is perhaps best summed up by the familiar phrase: “Let go, and let God.” Because of identifying the lies for what they are (the raven), and seeing the truth more clearly (the dove), and seeing signs of spiritual growth (the olive leaf), our spiritual flood is nearing the end. This is the stage where we begin to let go of expectations. We let go of resentments. We let go of the need to be right. We let go of the need for an apology. We let go of perfectionism. And we even let go of

ownership of our thoughts, as it says in the Writings: “If we believed that--as is truly the case--everything good and true comes from the Lord and everything evil and false comes from hell, then we would not claim the goodness as our own and make it self-serving or claim the evil as our own and make ourselves guilty of it” (DP 320). We let go, and we let God. The dove is free, and so are we. In the book *Secrets of Heaven* it says:

Liberation is symbolized on an inner level not by the dove’s return to the ark but by its being sent from the ark and not returning. (AC 876)

The dove—religious truth, or the truth of faith—like the other birds, the animals, and Noah, was no longer trapped in the ark by the flood water. As long as it stayed on the ark, buffeted by the flood water (falsity), its state was one of slavery, of captivity or imprisonment. ... Its state of freedom is depicted in the fact that not only Noah but everything else with him too went out of the ark The first of them all to leave was the dove, that is, religious truth that grows out of goodness, because all freedom comes from the goodness connected with faith, that is, from a love for what is good. (AC 891).

When we’re overwhelmed by flooding in our lives, the Lord works hard to protect us. But because of the flood, we often end up trapped inside our own heads, like Noah and his family were trapped in the very Ark that saved them. So the final piece of being freed from our floods, is that we come out of our own heads, we come out of ourselves, and into the life of love and useful service to other people. We are not saved by faith and trust alone, but by faith married to charity. That is when we are truly grounded, and truly free and at peace (see AC 905). And letting go of the dove - letting go and letting God - is the sign that we are ready for that life.

Spiritual flooding is a normal part of our spiritual lives. It’s not fun, but it’s going to happen. And the Lord protects us during those times, like Noah was protected in the ark. But spiritual struggles, temptations, spiritual floods are bigger than we can handle on our own. The Lord is the One who has the power to lead us out, to free us from those states. And when we turn to Him, He gives us signs that we can watch for. “Don’t worry... look at the birds of the air.” (Matthew 6:25-26) At first we will be confused by lies from the hells. Look for the raven. And even when we begin to see the truth more clearly, we tend to want to be in control and fix things on our own. Look for the dove returning to us. But in going through hard times, we can begin to see small signs of spiritual growth in our lives. “This is probably good for me.” Look for the dove with the olive leaf. And when we’re ready to let go, and let God, then we will experience freedom from our flood. Look for the dove not returning. As we watch these birds of the air, and become more familiar with these patterns in our lives, we will find that the Lord has surrounded us with songs of deliverance. And perhaps in that we can find some comfort. As it says in the Psalms:

Everyone who is godly shall pray to You in a time when You may be found. Surely in a flood of great waters they shall not come near that person. You are my hiding place; You shall preserve me from trouble; You shall surround me with songs of deliverance. (Psalm 32:6-7) Amen.

Lessons:

Genesis 8:1-19

Psalm 32:6-7; Isaiah 54:9-10

Matthew 6:25-27

Secrets of Heaven 705, 741, 905