

Noah: Leaning into Life

The Second Sunday of Advent, 1 December 2019.

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44.

Happy New Year, everyone. Today is the first Sunday in Advent, the first Sunday of a new church year. And this Advent season is particularly exciting because we are anticipating a lovely Advent event. On December 21 and 22, the choir will offer a performance of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*.

Amahl was the original live musical on TV. Before *Little Mermaid*, *Rent*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, or *Hairspray*, there was *Amahl*. It was first performed live by NBC Opera Theater in 1951. It was the first production of the Hallmark Hall of Fame, making it in a way the first Hallmark Christmas Movie. NBC commissioned Gian Carlo Menotti to write it. Keep in mind, only about a third of American households had TVs at the time. And the screen was more like a shoebox. But NBC had a hunch people would gather around the set to watch, and they did. *Amahl* was such a hit, the original cast came back to the studio to record it in 1952. The recorded version was broadcast every year for over a decade. During that time, the St. Thomas Choir performed it, one of the first performances in the South.

We decided to borrow from *Amahl* for our theme for this season – *Advent and Christmas People*. Throughout the season, we are inviting you to think imaginatively about the people in the scriptures we are reading, the way Menotti did. *Amahl* is not a character in the Bible. The scriptures don't tell us where the Wise Men stayed on their journey. Menotti made all of this up. But, the Wise Men had to stay somewhere. They must have met people on the way. Who's to say they didn't stop at the home of a young boy and his widowed mother?

For thousands of years, Jewish and Christian people have engaged the scriptures in this same imaginative way. We come from a long line of people who read the scriptures and wondered "What if?"

So, over this season, we are inviting you to think imaginatively about the people in the stories. As an example, this Wednesday night, our Advent speaker Dr. Loyd Allen will tell us about a Medieval Christmas Carol that imagines Joseph and Mary stopping on the journey and a Cherry Tree springing up beside them. On Sundays, we are offering a study by Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine that focuses on the people in the Christmas story.

And this morning I invite us to go back earlier in the scriptures and imagine the person Jesus mentioned in today's gospel lesson – our multi-great grandfather Noah.

Jesus called his name after leaving the Temple. He had just stood in that grand place with his disciples and declared that soon not one stone would be left upon another. He was right, of course. The Temple was leveled by Roman armies just a few years later. Jesus did not say when these things would take place. "About that day and hour, no one knows." But he affirmed what the people already knew. They were living in an anxious and uncertain time.

And then Jesus mentioned Noah.

Jewish Midrash is a kind of commentary on the scriptures written down by rabbis over the centuries. One form of Midrash involves imagining additions to the story, events or people that are not mentioned in the text but might have happened, sort of like Menotti did with *Amahl*. It turns out there is quite a bit of Midrash on Noah.

One story says that Noah planted the cedars he eventually used to build the ark.

Another story says that Noah thought very carefully about the food the animals would need. He made sure there was enough of the right kinds of food for every animal on the ark. One day after the flood, someone asked Noah's son, Shem, "What was it like on the ark?" Shem replied, "We had much trouble in the ark. The animals which usually feed by day we fed by day, and those which normally feed at night we fed by night. We didn't get any sleep trying to keep all the animals fed. But my father did not know what to feed the chameleon. Then one day he was cutting up a pomegranate. A worm dropped out of it. The chameleon ate the worm. From then on, my father mashed up bran, and when it became wormy, he gave it to the chameleon."

The story goes on. In the midst of working day and night to feed all the animals, Noah found the phoenix lying in the hold of the ark. "Don't you require food?" Noah asked. But the phoenix gently said, "I saw that you were busy, so I said to myself, I will give you no trouble." And Noah blessed the phoenix. "May it be [God's] will that you should never perish." And that is why the phoenix lives again and again. Isn't that wonderful!

The point of all of this, according to the ancient rabbis, is that Noah intended to live. Genesis declared God was furious with creation and wanted a do over. God sent the flood to destroy the world and make it new. Noah knew this destruction was coming. But, rather than go about eating and drinking as if nothing were happening, Noah chose life. Noah chose to survive. He built an ark. He gathered his family. He saved the animals and the plants. When the rains came, he stayed up all night keeping animals alive. When the world was falling apart, Noah chose life.

It wasn't by accident that Jesus mentioned Noah. He had just talked about some pretty scary things. But he wanted his disciples to know that they did not have to give in to fear. Like Noah, they could choose life.

Sadly, today's gospel lesson and others like it have often led to some pretty destructive behavior. At several points in history, someone read the Bible and counted the days or lifted up another prophecy and claimed to know a particular time when Jesus would return, or the earth would be destroyed, or some cataclysm would happen. And almost every time that happened, some people frantically chose to sell their possessions and quit their jobs and prepare to leave this earth.

One example happened in this country in the 1840's. A man name William Miller predicted that Jesus would return sometime in 1843 or 1844. A comet appeared in the sky, which convinced people he was telling the truth. As the time drew near, believers abandoned their crops and sold their land. Women cut their hair and gave away their jewelry. People dismantled and destroyed their furniture thinking they would not need it again.

That's not the spirit of Noah. Jesus lifted up Noah for a reason. During an anxious time, Noah worked to preserve life, not abandon it. He built up the world rather than add to the destruction.

What does it mean to be like Noah today? We are being warned about threats to the planet. Do we continue to eat and drink as if nothing is wrong? Do we throw up our hands in frustration and say there is nothing we can do? Or, do we plant some trees and build some boats and save some animals and do whatever we can?

Or consider our individual cataclysms. What do we do when we lose a job or lose a loved one or lose hope? In the face of anything that threatens or frightens us, do we act as if nothing is wrong, do we pretend the challenge is not there, or do we lean into life?

Or what about those moments when we have the power to help or to harm, to build up others or destroy them? One of the rabbis said that as the rains fell, Og, king of Bashan, grabbed a rung on the ladder outside the ark. As the waters rose, Og begged Noah to save him. Noah punched a hole in the side of the ark, and through it he handed out food to Og every day. Deuteronomy 3:11 says that Og survived.

Noah leaned into life, for himself, for his family, for creation, and for others.

The season of Advent is about leaning into life. Yes, we are counting the days until Christmas. But this season is about so much more than even Christmas. Advent is about trusting in God's reign of love and healing, in spite of the struggles of the present. It is about looking for the day when "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks" even when things are falling apart. We wait for Christmas to remind us that we are waiting and hoping and longing for God's reign in this world. We know it is coming. Like the Christmas decorations that went up a month ago, signs of God's reign of love are all around us, even in this broken world. We know God's reign will someday be unwrapped for all to see. But while we are waiting, like Noah, let us do everything we can to build up life rather than destroy it. Amen.

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<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/countering-destruction-lessons-from-noah/>

<https://www.massmoments.org/moment-details/millerites-await-end-of-the-world.html>

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