

The Safest Place in the World  
Genesis 9:8-17  
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St. John United Methodist Church  
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David Beckett, D.Min.

The town was Hamilton, Ohio, just north of Cincinnati. I was born there, and after moving to northern Ohio on Lake Erie for 7 years, now we were back. I was in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

It was a different world back then. On summer days I would tell Mom that my friends and I were headed to Wilson Woods to play. By my calculations Wilson Woods was at least 8 city blocks away from our home which I believe translates into one mile. It was very common for us boys to be gone all day playing in Wilson Woods. I remember climbing trees and building tree forts. We would catch crawdads and minnows in the creek. We imagined that we were scouts and soldiers using sticks for guns. I learned a lot about the woods including how not to blow your nose with leaves from a poison ivy bush!

I wonder if there are still any places left in America where kids can play safely in the woods on a summer day. We live in a different world. Parents are more concerned about the safety of their children than ever before.

The boss of a big company needed to call one of his employees about an urgent problem with one of the main computers. He dialed the employee's home phone number and was greeted with a child's whispered, "Hello?" Feeling put out at the inconvenience of having to talk to a youngster the boss asked, "Is your Daddy home?" "Yes", whispered the small voice. "May I talk with him?" the man asked. To the surprise of the boss, the small voice whispered, "No."

Wanting to talk with an adult, the boss asked, "Is your Mommy there?" "Yes", came the answer. "May I talk with her?" Again the small voice whispered, "no".

Knowing that it was not likely that a young child would be left home alone, the boss decided he would just leave a message with the person who should be there watching over the child. "Is there any one there besides you?" the boss asked the child. "Yes", whispered the child, "A policeman". Wondering what a cop would be doing at his employee's home, the boss asked, "May I speak with the policeman"? "No, he's busy", whispered the child. "Busy doing what?", asked the boss. "Talking to Daddy and Mommy and the fireman", came the whispered answer.

Growing concerned and even worried as he heard what sounded like a helicopter through the ear piece on the phone the boss asked, "What is that noise?" "A hello-copper", answered the whispering voice. "What is going on there?", asked the boss, now alarmed. In an awed whispering voice the child answered, "The search team just landed the hello-copper".

Alarmed, concerned and more than just a little frustrated the boss asked, "Why are they there"? Still whispering, the young voice replied with a muffled giggle: "They're looking for me."

Safety is a huge issue for parents. Every child has a basic right to be safe. But not every child is able to enjoy this right. I don't need to describe for you the sacred, safe places that have been desecrated by violence in our country. We feel vulnerable and violated when we hear of another school shooting. In the wake of such senseless tragedies we wonder about how we will keep our children safe.

In one respect the story of Noah and the Ark is about this very issue. This mammoth ship is seen by God as a safe place for Noah and his family. It is protection against the rising floodwaters. It is a hope in the midst of a dying world. But it wouldn't be this ark that would keep them safe in the long term. Sometimes what is designed for our protection can end up serving as a prison. No, Noah and his family would not live out the rest of their days in this giant, floating zoo. It was something else that would give them a sense of safety and security. It was a relationship with God. It was the covenant between God and Noah's family. And the sign would be the rainbow hung high in the sky. Whenever they would look upon the rainbow they would be reminded of God's desire to be in relationship with them and the entire earth.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is a 40 day period, not unlike the 40 day period of rain for Noah, in which Christians are called to ponder our relationship with God as we make the journey with Christ to Jerusalem and the cross. It is a time to look inward at our true motivations for how we live our lives. It is a time to pray and fast as we turn towards Christ. It is a time to realize our attachments to the world and to seek our real security in Christ.

A survey of Discipleship Journal readers ranked the areas of greatest spiritual challenge to them. As you listen to this list I would invite you to consider if any of them are keeping you from growing in your faith.

9. Lying; 8. Gluttony; 7. Envy; 5. Sexual Lust; 5. Anger/Bitterness; 4. Laziness; 3. Self-centeredness; 2. Pride; 1. Materialism

We will admit that it is no easy task to separate ourselves from our possessions. And in some ways it runs against the grain of our humanity. For to be human is to be attached to people, to things, to ideas. It is impossible to live a human life totally unattached. To be attached is to be fixated, bonded, fastened to someone or something. Let's be honest. Many of us are attached to material possessions.

For me it used to be my guitar. I was so attached to that thing that I wouldn't let anyone touch it, let alone play it. But there came a time when I learned a basic concept of Christian stewardship which was that I was not the owner of my guitar. God owned my guitar and allowed me to be the steward, the caretaker of that guitar. This was a very freeing idea for me and allowed me to detach from my feelings towards my guitar. This doesn't mean that I am free to allow others to abuse this instrument. It still means that I will take care of it. But it is clear to me that God is the owner. I am the steward.

What are the things to which you are deeply attached? Is it your house? Your car? A favorite bike or computer? Perhaps the Spirit will lead you this Lent to consider your attachment to things and shift your thinking from owner to caretaker.

It is so hard to let go. And there are many witnesses here today who would testify to the tremendous power of our attachments. An attachment to something can easily move to a full-fledged addiction. What begins as a simple pleasure can often be the start of a perilous journey towards destruction.

George Sweeting tells this story. "Several years ago our family visited Niagara Falls. It was spring, and ice was rushing down the river. As I viewed the large blocks of ice flowing toward the falls, I could see that there were carcasses of dead fish embedded in the ice. Gulls by the score were riding down the river feeding on the fish. As they came to the brink of the falls, their wings would go out, and they would escape from the falls. I watched one gull which seemed to delay and wondered when it would leave. It was engrossed in the carcass of a fish, and when it finally came to the brink of the falls, out went its powerful wings. The bird flapped and flapped and even lifted the ice out of the water, and I thought it would escape. But it had delayed too long so that its claws had frozen into the ice. The weight of the ice was too great, and the gull plunged into the abyss."

Lent is a time to pray that our attachments would not become addictions. It is a time to repent, to turn from our paths of self-destruction towards the light of Christ's resurrection love.

For Noah and his family the ark was a short term safe place in the midst of the flood. The covenant with God after the flood was to be a long term safe place. Sooner or later we all must come to the point where we realize that our true safety, our true security rest not in the things of this world, but in a relationship with God in Christ. When it comes our time to die we will certainly be separated from the people and things we love. Those who find death the most difficult are probably the ones who are the most attached to the people and things of this world. But a covenant relationship with God will be with us forever.

Many years ago there was an elderly woman who lived in the center of an inner city neighborhood. Surrounding her little apartment was noise, crime, traffic, and despair. One day a reporter asked her if she was afraid. With a twinkle in her eye revealing a deep Christian faith she said, "I'm never afraid. You see, I am in the center of God's will."

This woman understood the secret that true safety is about trusting our lives to a God who will protect us forever. The safest place in the world is already within our hearts. As we continue this Lenten journey may we take the time to peer into our hearts....may we see ourselves for what we truly are...and may we find the courage and strength to let go of our pride, our fear, our materialism so that our real security and safety will rest in our covenant relationship with Almighty God.