



“Land In Sight”
Genesis 7:11-24
May 31, 2026

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On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast. New Orleans was particularly hard hit. I will never forget the images of a city enveloped in water. Sheri Fink’s book *Five Days at Memorial* tells the story of how the hurricane affected one particular hospital in that city: Memorial Medical Center. Most of the six hundred staff members who chose to stay and work the hurricane had experience with bad storms and anticipated they would be back home within a day or two. But this one was different. As the flood waters rose, the backup power generators, located in the basement, were soon flooded and failed. The hospital was left without electricity – which meant in August no air conditioning, no lights, no working plumbing, no elevators, few ways to communicate with the outside world. These were unimaginable circumstances to care for the over two hundred patients who remained. Evacuation efforts were disorganized and sporadic. The staff found themselves in a situation they had never anticipated. The hospital – this place they knew so well – this place of healing and care – quickly became unrecognizable.¹

Have you ever experienced a flood? How many of you had a flood in your basement this past week or water running down the walls of your office? When I lived in Iowa, I experienced two major floods. I lived just outside the flood plain and witnessed first-hand the phenomenon of rising water.

This morning’s story from Genesis is the story of a flood. This morning I want to focus on one section of the story; the period of time between when Noah enters the ark and that same ark is completely surrounded by water. When Noah leaves dry land, he leaves behind all that is familiar to him: his home, his neighbors, his entire world. And then the rain begins and the waters rise. And rise. And rise. Until there is no land, no landmarks, only water.

At that moment, nothing is familiar. Everything is new. The landscape is unrecognizable.

Noah’s experience is not unique. Such things happen. They happen all the time. There are floods and fires and wars, and such events leave so many people in dramatically changed circumstances.

¹ *Five Days at Memorial: Life and Death in a Storm-Ravaged Hospital* by NY Times reporter Sheri Fink. For a shorter version of events go to http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/30/magazine/30doctors.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

Many of us have the experience of waking up in a new landscape. One day we are going about our business, the next day we find ourselves camped out in the ICU waiting room because someone we love is in crisis and this new environment is completely unfamiliar. Or our spouse dies. We may be walking through the same spaces, but nothing is the same. The old life is gone. It's all different. It's all new. It's all impossible.

Sometimes we throw ourselves into unfamiliar situations by choice. We leave home. We go off to college. We take a new job. We move to a new city. We welcome a child into our lives. And we find ourselves in a strange and unfamiliar landscape and, more often than not, we find ourselves overwhelmed.

Yes, I dare say that most of us are familiar with flood and chaos. The storms we face don't have a name like Katrina or Sandy, but we could identify them: the year I lost my job, those months after I broke my wrist, the year my marriage ended, that decade we lived paycheck to paycheck. At various times in our lives, we find ourselves in situations in which we are overwhelmed – if not by water – than by circumstances. In fact, many of us go through months at a time – years at a time - when we barely keep our head above water, barely stay afloat. I call this phenomenon:

“As long as...”

I am currently an empty nester. But it wasn't that long ago when I was single parent. During those years when my daughter was a home, I would sometimes be asked: “How do you do it? How do manage job and home?” My stock answer was: “It's not that hard. I can manage it. I've got it under control.”

And most weeks that was true.

I had everything under control, as long as...

As long as...

- ...something didn't happen to the car
- ...nobody got sick
- ...I didn't lose my phone or keys
- ...my parents didn't have a health crisis
- ... the house didn't have a major problem

If one of those things happened, the water started to rise. If two of them happened at the same time, my fragile boat sprung a leak. Most of us have an “As long as...” list.

What are we to do when the waters rise and we find ourselves in a landscape unfamiliar and overwhelming?

We need to build a better boat or repair the one we have. It's best to do this work on dry land, when we are not in crisis, but that option is not always available to us. We build a better boat out of the materials on hand. The materials that we reach for first are often things like self-reliance. “I can build a better boat all by myself. How hard could it be? I don't need any help. I have this.” Those materials aren't very good for building a sturdy vessel. I don't think we can build it alone. Because the strongest boat is woven together with human relationships. When we find ourselves in a flood the thing we most need is other people – friends, family, community to help us, to pray for us, to make meals for us, to listen to us, to walk beside us.

Being a single parent (or any kind of parent), being a human these days is manageable as long as (there's that phrase again) we accept the support and help of others. In fact, we can get through almost anything as long as we accept the support and help of others.

One way in which we receive such support and help is through prayer. One of the strongest boats I know is one built by the prayers of others. I am constantly surprised by this. I know – I am always asking people to pray for others. I am always praying for others. But it's something altogether different when I am the one being prayed for by the community of the faithful. I remember back to the days when my dad was dying. I had this feeling that our small family boat was being carried along by your prayers. Your prayers gave me a sense of deep calm and strength. It was lovely and comforting and it made all the difference in the world.

There is something else that helps us navigate rough waters. That is worship. Worship sometimes feels like a boat that we board every Sunday morning. We enter the boat of worship, sit down on the wooden benches and then we wait – wait as we set sail towards God. At its most effective, at its best, worship is the ark for our flood, the calm in the storm, that enables us to plot a course through the week ahead.

I want to jump forward later into the story, the part we didn't read, when the waters recede and God puts a rainbow in the sky and makes a promise that water will never again cover the whole earth. We will never face a flood that doesn't leave at least one recognizable landmark.

That recognizable landmark – I would argue – is God. God has promised in the rainbow to never leave us without God's presence, without God's love, without the landmark, the destination that is God.

No matter how high the water goes. No matter how overwhelmed we may be, God is there.

In other words, land is in sight.

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