

Noah's Wife

You've got time to build an arc but my cupboard door is still falling off...! We can imagine a comedy sketch to follow involving Mrs Noah, the sceptical house wife. But would it be an accurate portrayal of Noah's wife? In fact controversially I am going to start by asking the question was there even a real Mrs Noah?

Old Testament stories are great and a good story teller can make the characters come alive to the extent that we identify with them. And even if I personally regard some of the Genesis stories as myth that is not to say that beneath the surface there is a deeper truth and something even more fascinating. There is not always a clear way of telling what is fact and what is fiction, there will always be grey areas where the Old Testament is concerned. For me there is truth in the Old Testament stories that may not necessarily be grounded in historical fact but is nonetheless a timeless message for all humanity. And just because there is no historical evidence doesn't mean there wasn't a big flood, or a man named Noah who had a wife and who responded in faith and built a boat.

In understanding the Old Testament as a 'faith story' we need not be too concerned about whether there is historical evidence that events actually took place. Clearly history does matter but surely the bigger question is: what was the original meaning of the bible stories, what can we learn from them and what can the bible stories teach future generations? The Bible doesn't say very much about Noah's wife because it is her husband's story that is told but the lack of information doesn't stop us from wondering and questioning and honouring a character who has something to teach us about our role in God's story of redemption.

We do not know Mrs Noah's name but we can imagine that she might have been called Joan – Joan of Arc! Countless women throughout history have remained unnamed, their stories not told but women do count, we are all significant in the purposes and plans of God.

In first-century Judaism women's roles were severely limited. The rabbis taught a strict separation of the sexes and they even viewed conversation with a woman as a serious threat to a man's spirituality. Yet Jesus spoke with many women and showed an appreciation for women that was truly revolutionary.

Yet in today's world pressures on women to play a feminine role as defined by society have not decreased, and yet that role is increasingly difficult to play. The feminine, tender character that we associate with women does not make us weak or inferior. Despite our differences women do hold their own with men in many spheres. Both women and men are intended to be part of life's grand adventure yet there is still an on-going, worldwide struggle for equal rights.

In early Genesis, in the account of God creating the first woman, Eve the words that are recorded are: 'It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.' A 'suitable helper' needs not cast women as a 'subordinate' but as a 'partner'. The Hebrew phrase (which I can't pronounce) 'ezer kenegedu' is best understood as a 'helper corresponding to him'.

In our reading today Noah's wife is mentioned only in passing. Genesis 6 – 9 tells the story of the great flood by which God judged a totally corrupt society. The focus of the story is on Noah, whose Godly way of life was approved of. Noah and his family were singled out, a righteous man living in unrighteous times. Nothing is said about the moral character of Noah's wife yet we would be wrong to assume that she was as corrupt as those around her.

Scripture says that it took 120 years to build the arc – which is a jolly long time by anyone's standards! If it was even a quarter of that time (just 30 years) – perhaps even I could learn to build a giant boat in that time. It was a massive vessel – 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet high. The size and complexity of the structure make it clear that Noah could not have built it alone. His sons and family members must have helped. Noah's wife could have supported, encouraged and sustained those that helped to build the structure over such a length of time.

We are told nothing specific yet for many years the family held together and focused on a task which must have made them the object of ridicule for all who knew them. We can only assume that the pressures from outside brought them closer together rather than drove them further apart. How important it is for us to cultivate trust and to stick together when experience shows that under stress, many relationships collapse.

Throughout the Bible it is clear that many women who remained anonymous have been important to their families and their friends and even in shaping history. We do not need historians to record our names to have a positive impact on the lives of those we meet. And, like other unnamed women of history, we can be God's agents for changing the future through our relationships and through the purposes which God has for us.

The rain fell. The floodgates of the heaven were opened. Rain fell for forty days and forty nights, every wild animal according to its kind, every creature that moves along the ground, every bird, everything with wings, pairs of all creatures that have the breath of life. The animals going in were male and female of every living thing as God commanded Noah. Then the Lord shut him in. And the waters rose and the ark floated on the surface of the water.

Surely there could have been a great task and role on-board the arc for Noah's wife, feeding and caring for the animals and the humans. She was the only woman of her generation to board the arc and there were only three women in the next generation who were to become her son's wives. If we imagine the boat at sea there would have been times of fear and facing danger. On-board she may have helped develop in others a character of strength and perseverance.

40 days at sea, all must have felt at some point sea sick and home sick. Yet we can imagine the building of community, of family, of having to run things ship shape, with warmth and love and supporting Noah in his role as Captain. Yet I want to resist the submissive, silent partner portrayal. If there is a Mrs Noah in any one of us then we know that there is a real person to portray, a real partner in the true sense of the word. We can think of Mrs Noah as courageous, determined and an undefeated woman. Who faced the destruction of the world as she knew it and survived - an important person in God's redemption story.

The story of Noah's wife is hidden from the pages of the bible. But if she was a real person then her life story is known to God. It was St Augustine who said that God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. All of us have hidden parts of our lives. Hidden lives can mean hidden truth. Hidden truth in religious terms means hidden light. Each of us is unique and each of us bears the image of God and if there are hidden parts of us then perhaps we are hiding part of God too?

But sometimes there is a need to hide things in order to protect them; every human being bears something within themselves that needs protecting. Something we want to guard from the pressures and prejudices of the world. Not everything belongs in the public sphere for there it might break into pieces.

We have hidden experiences of fragility, experiences in prayer, hidden sympathy for others, intuitive understanding of music or poetry which is difficult to put into words. None of this can be shouted out to the world. Some things must be rightly guarded.

But the extent to which women's lives have been hidden from the Bible is something to grieve over. We have lost something, we have half remembered stories. Women down the centuries have been silenced. Women have found that the bible has been used as a weapon against us but at the same time it has been a resource for courage, hope and commitment to equality. The bible is contradictory in possessing both oppressive and liberating power. The Bible has also inspired many women to speak out against injustice, exploitation and stereotyping.

For me this story of Noah's Arc echoes the beginning of Genesis. Noah's wife like Eve has a claim to being one of the first mothers of all. Unlike the expulsion from the Garden of Eden this is a redemption story and a rainbow in the sky is said to be a sign of the covenant between God and the Earth. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, we remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures (women, men and all peoples) of every kind on the earth. Amen

Jenny Walpole

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