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First Unitarian Society
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Noah: Our Silence Will Not Protect Us

From the Zohar, the Jewish mystical tradition:

[When Noah came out of the ark]
he opened his eyes and saw the whole world completely destroyed
He began crying for the world and said
“Master of the world!
If you destroyed Your world because of human sin or human fools,
then why did You create them?
One of the other You should do:
either do not create the human being
or do not destroy the world!”

How did the Blessed Holy One respond? “Foolish shepherd!”...
[Before the flood] I lingered with you and spoke to you at length
so that you would ask for mercy for the world!
But as soon as you heard that you would be safe in the ark,
the evil of the world did not touch your heart.
You built the ark and saved yourself.
Now that the world has been destroyed
you open your mouth to utter questions and pleas?
(Translation by Daniel Matt)

This week marks the ten year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Most of us remember the horrific events unfold before our eyes – the rising water, the people crying for help – for water, for food, for medical care, for evacuation. We listened to our elected officials’ response – and we could hear the silence in their lack of response. We could read the accounts of people battered and hungry, displaced and bitter, betrayed by a government they thought would provide them with relief.

We cannot say we did not know.

Unlike Noah, the evil of the world did touch our hearts. We were horrified, appalled, outraged that a catastrophe of this magnitude could occur in our country. We stared at each other in disbelief, and we asked each other how, in the richest country in the world, the emergency response could have been so slow, so pathetically inadequate. We shuddered in the face of such desperation and suffering.

We were struck by incredible acts of bravery, of human courage and compassion that defied cynicism at its very root. Of local community members who carried out the sick, elderly, and disabled; who prepared communal meals for hundreds of stranded people; who organized rescue missions on boats and in cars. Of relief workers and medical care providers who traveled down to New Orleans from all over the country and even from all over the world to help.

In Judaism we call these people who helped *tzaddikim* – righteous ones. They were there. They showed up. They did what they could and they walked the path of compassion and justice.

But back to Noah. The Torah also describes Noah as a *tzaddik*, a righteous man. But how righteous could he be if he watches the destruction of his entire generation in silence, without a word of protest.

As the Zohar states:

As soon as you heard that you would be safe in the ark,
the evil of the world did not touch your heart.
You built the ark and saved yourself.

A great rabbi, Rabbi Yochanan, points out that Noah may have been righteous in *his* generation, but had he lived at a less corrupt period, he would not have been considered righteous at all.

In the Hasidic tradition, Noah is accused of being a *tzadik im pelz* – a righteous man in a fur coat. Surrounded by others who are freezing, he warms himself without thought to their needs.

What could Noah have done? A rabbinic story imagines that it took Noah 120 years to build the ark so that the people surrounding him would see what he was doing and change their ways. But in all that time

not one person does so, and Noah just boards the ark with his family and the chosen animals. Perhaps the people didn't change their ways because Noah never spoke up. He never challenged the injustice around him.

Even in the last moments when Noah boards the ark, he is silent. What if instead, Noah, like Abraham, argued with God? Or asked God for mercy? Or refused to board the ark?

As we look around at our world and at our community right here in Madison, we see so much suffering. We witness poverty and racism and environmental devastation. We witness political leaders privatizing our resources and widening the gap between the rich and poor. We witness the unraveling of the safety net designed to support the neediest in our society.

If there is anything we can learn from Noah it is that our silence will not protect us. Noah may have been saved by the flood, but he, along with his family, witnessed the destruction of the entire world. When Noah emerged from the ark he immediately planted a vineyard, turned the grapes into wine, and got himself drunk. Maybe he couldn't handle the barrenness of a destroyed world. Maybe he couldn't handle knowing that he was complicit in its destruction.

So many of us feel the need to speak out against the injustices of our world. But we think to ourselves, "How dare we look at our world and think that *we* can make a difference?"

But that's exactly the wrong question. Instead we should ask, "How dare we look at our world and think that *we can't* make a difference?"

Time and time again people have come together throughout history – against enormous odds – and have made change. We don't know where our actions will lead – who they will touch, how they will tip the balance. It's true that projects, initiatives, programs, and organizations come and go, but it's also true that the work adds up, creates energy and momentum, and that at just the right moment these efforts can push people to do the right thing.

Look around this room. Look at your neighbors, at your community members, the people all around us who have extraordinary talent, passion, and commitment. You are all here today for a reason. You are here to make a dent in this crazy, unfair world we live in, one built on injustice after injustice. You are here to lift your voices and to make a difference, however small.

We *can* make change, we *can* raise our voices, we *can* work for a more just world. Where we are now is *not* where we must remain.

The most troubling aspect of the story of Noah is that he was not powerless. He was obedient. He remained silent. We too are not powerless. We have a tremendous capacity to create change. When we mix the right amount of hope, courage, indignation, persistence, strength, anger, inspiration, ingenuity, and patience together, we can do extraordinary things.