

A couple of winters ago a priest friend and I went to the Como Zoo and Conservatory where they had various gardens and animals. One of the exhibits at the Conservatory is called Tropical Encounters, which is basically a small rainforest with hundreds of plants and animals. They had a huge anaconda, stingrays, frogs, turtles, and even a sloth named Chloe. The sloth is a very interesting creature. It sleeps from 15 to 20 hours per day and moves about one mile per hour. Some of you be thinking, "Boy, I know someone like that."

What struck me about our visit was the contrast between the conditions outside the conservatory and the life inside. The day we visited it was probably about zero degrees and fairly dreary. But once we walked into the exhibit, there was a tremendous amount of life, color and warmth. The environment was so alive.

In this light, I wonder if it was a little like the inside of Noah's Ark compared to the world outside. Unfortunately, the human race went downhill pretty quickly after the original fall. Sin had spread like a terrible cancer: anger, jealousy, vengeance, and murder. Consequently, God commanded Noah to build an ark and essentially hit the reset button and started over.

Incidentally, about a year ago I asked students if they knew the name of Noah's wife. They had lots of guesses until I said, "It was Joan – Joan of Ark." I got a lot a moans and "oh brother" from that!

Noah's job was to bring a male and a female of every species of animal into the ark to preserve them. What a scene bringing in giraffes, porcupines, hamsters, golden retrievers, ladybugs, elephants, etc. I am not sure how he stored the termites. We wonder how Noah/family got any sleep on the boat.

With all these animals, the ark was like the Garden of Eden floating across the waters. Through Noah, God was preserving a remnant of His good creation. Outside the boat, there was darkness, rain, and chaos. Inside, however, there was life in all its richness.

Additionally, many of the Church Fathers understood Noah's Ark as a kind of foreshadowing or type of the Church. They recognized that the boat is made of wood, which reminds us of the cross, the Tree of Life. Jesus, for his part, is the new Noah who guides the Church through the waters of time. He does so through the successor of Peter, the pope, bringing it to the port of heaven.

When teaching students about the Church, I sometimes show them an aerial picture of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. It's literally built on a little island and it looks like a ship sailing through the waters.

In fact, many of the medieval cathedrals were built like ships. The central part of a church or the main isle is called the nave. The term is derived from Latin *navis*, which mean "ship." The idea is that by staying aboard the Church, you will find peace, salvation, and life in the midst of a chaotic world.

Baptism is your ticket to board the ship. In fact, in our second reading, Peter says that Noah's Ark prefigured baptism. Eight people were saved through water. Through baptism, you board the ship and enter into God's covenant family.

Our first and second readings are most fitting in that our new baptismal font is now running and will be blessed after the 10:00 a.m. Mass. We will then have the first baptism in our new font afterward. Earlier this week, I looked at the baby's name and I couldn't believe it. His name is Noah. You can't make this stuff up! Divine providence is truly remarkable.

If you remember the story, eventually the rainwaters subsided and Noah's boat landed on dry ground. He then sent out a dove, which symbolizes the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the wind that guides Peter's Barque, or the Church, to the port of heaven.

Oftentimes, it feels like the ship is going to tip over, break apart, or that Jesus is asleep on the cushion during storms. These storms occur on a large-scale level – think of priest scandal that we are still going through – or the storms in your own lives. However, Jesus is always in charge. He is the captain and always with us.

Finally, Noah and his family opened the door of the ark so that life could pour out of the ark and into the world. The same is true at Mass. At the end of Mass, I say, “Go forth, the Mass is ended.”

Nourished by God’s Word and the Eucharist, we open the doors of the Church so that you can be sent to bring Jesus to your homes, families, work, restaurants, sporting events, places of vacation, etc.

The world desperately needs Jesus. Obviously, most of you heard about the tragedy at the high school in Parkland, Florida. As in Noah’s time, we live in a world of chaos and violence. Hence, we open the door of the Church, Christ’s ship and the true ark, to bring the world peace, forgiveness, healing, direction, meaning, and life.

As we move deeper into Lent, ask the Lord to stir into flame the gift of the Holy Spirit given you in baptism. Always remember you are a part of God’s covenant family. Regardless of how chaotic the world becomes or the storms that blow in your life, stay on board the ship! In doing so, know that Jesus, our captain, will navigate you to the port of heaven.