

# *St. Augustine's* Sermons

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## **God's Action and Noah' Reaction**

*Holy Communion*  
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The Text: Genesis 8:1-14

8 But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; <sup>2</sup> the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, <sup>3</sup> and the waters gradually receded from the earth. At the end of one hundred and fifty days the waters had abated; <sup>4</sup> and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. <sup>5</sup> The waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains appeared.

6 At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made <sup>7</sup> and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. <sup>8</sup> Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; <sup>9</sup> but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. <sup>10</sup> He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; <sup>11</sup> and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. <sup>12</sup> Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more.

13 In the six hundred and first year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth; and Noah

removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying. <sup>14</sup> In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry.

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What kind of lighting did Noah have on the ark?

Flood lights.

Today we are going to look at a passage from Genesis 8. In these verses we see an action from God and a reaction from Noah. Think about it this way. If you are in a ballet performance or a concert, the dance you perform or the song you sing is the action. If, when you finished, the audience just sat there, or got up and left without clapping, how would you feel? Upset, right. This is because you are looking for a reaction from the audience. You want them to clap and express their appreciation for your action. Action is to lead to a reaction.

This is what we will see in Genesis 8 today. God acts, by remembering Noah, and Noah reacts by letting out the raven and the dove. God's act of remembering needs to come before Noah can react to him.

Now I have a question for you. **How would you feel if your parents forgot your birthday?** To be remembered on special days matters, because it helps us to know that we are loved, thought of and cared for. When special days are remembered, it matters to us who does the remembering.

If your teacher wished you happy birthday when you got to school, but the day had been completely overlooked by mom, dad, brothers and sisters, you would be sad. **The teacher's best wishes would not take away the feeling of emptiness you would be experiencing because you had been forgotten at home by the most important people in your life.**

Yes to be remembered on a birthday is one way to know that we are loved and cared for. The Bible tells us that one of the ways God shows his love for us is by remembering us.

In our story we are told about God's remembering action. We read:

*But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; <sup>2</sup> the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, <sup>3</sup> and the waters gradually receded from the earth. At the end of one hundred and fifty days the waters had abated; <sup>4</sup> and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. <sup>5</sup> The waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains appeared.*

The word "abate" means to "go down" So when it says that "the waters" abated it means the waters were going down, getting lower and lower.

God remembers Noah and shows this by bringing the challenges of living on the flood waters to an end. You know there are times when we might not understand how God acts. We might be confused by some of the things that go on in the world around us. People we love are suffering or we hear of the suffering of others known to us. Or we read in the papers or see on the TV the suffering that goes on in the world. At times it does not make sense to us at all. It seems so confusing and so chaotic. This must have been how Noah felt when he saw all of that water for 150 days, with people and animals dying as the waters rose higher and higher. And even though he knew this was something that God had brought to pass, the suffering was great.

Yet, we are told that with God remembering Noah the flood waters begin to abate and the chaos gave way to order. This is something that is very important for us as Christians to remember. The world is a very confusing and difficult place and we may think I am drowning, help! Yet the Bible teaches us that God is at work in the world even in the times when things are so chaotic. Now a lot of people do not believe this. They say that the evidence around us tells us that there is no God, or he really has forgotten us and we are in a hopeless situation.

However followers of Jesus do not believe this. One of the reasons we have Communion every week is to remember that God remembers us. Jesus tells us that as we take the bread and wine in remembrance of him we have a tangible sign of his remembering us. This is one of the reasons God has given us the gift of memory. It helps us to remember that God remembers, even when life is really hard.

In our story from Genesis 8 we are told this in a very specific way. We read that in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month that the Ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat in Turkey.

This is a very specific and a very important day. According to Jewish Tradition the New Year is dated in the Fall. It is a day known as Rosh Hashanah, and literally means "head of the year". If the New Year happens to occur in the Fall, the seventh month would have been in the Spring of the year. But in Exodus 12 we are told that, at the giving of the Passover, God changed the seventh month to the first month. He made Passover the beginning of the year, though previously the beginning of the year had come in the Fall. This is what we read in verse 1:

**"This month is to be the first month of the year for you."**

On the fourteenth day of the first month (which was formerly the seventh month) the Passover was to be eaten. We know from the Gospels that on the day the Passover was eaten our Lord died in Jerusalem. Three days from the fourteenth would bring us to the seventeenth, and on the seventeenth day of the first month Jesus rose from the dead. That would be the same as the seventeenth day of the seventh month in the old reckoning. It is most significant that the Ark grounded upon the mountains of Ararat on the same calendar day on which our Lord rose from the dead, thus signifying that life in the new earth for God's people was to rest upon resurrection power.

Because of the Resurrection of Jesus that is foretold in the story of the Ark, we are to react in a certain way to God's action. This brings us to the two birds, the raven and the dove.

6 At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made <sup>7</sup> and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. <sup>8</sup> Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; <sup>9</sup> but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to

the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. <sup>10</sup> He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; <sup>11</sup> and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. <sup>12</sup> Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more.

What are we to make of this story of the raven and the dove? They are clearly symbolical, even though also historical:

The raven is listed in Leviticus as one of the unclean birds, forbidden to the Jewish people to eat. We read in Leviticus 11:13

*These are the birds you are to detest and not eat because they are detestable: the eagle, the vulture, the black vulture, 14 the red kite, any kind of black kite, 15 any kind of raven.*

It is the first bird that is released from the ark. According to the Hebrew it flew to and fro, never returning to the ark, resting upon the floating carcasses that were there during the Flood. As the account makes clear, the raven is no help to Noah whatsoever. The release of the raven tells him nothing about the condition of earth. Noah sees it flying to and fro above the waters, seemingly quite satisfied with the conditions it finds. It does not return to the ark and so feeds upon the floating carcasses.

The dove, on the other hand, is a clean bird. It did not fly abroad and remain, but returned to the ark. It rested only in the ark until a new world was ready for it: On its last return it brought an olive leaf in its bill as a symbol of life and peace.

Now what does this all mean? It clearly pictures facts that we relate to daily as Christians and symbolizes how we are to react to God's action. Let me explain. The Bible teaches us that in our present life we trust in Jesus' death and resurrection. We know he is redeeming us and we know we belong to Jesus. However we still struggle in this world. The Bible teaches that there are two natures present within us. One is truly ours; the other is an imposter which is no longer ours, as Paul puts it in Romans 7:

*The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me*

*joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.*

So within each of us says Paul is the raven and the dove. As we continue to live in this world we must contend with the raven until the day we will be released from its presence by the resurrection of the body.

The Bible tells us that the raven is called "the flesh" and the dove is called the "the spirit." The whole struggle of the Christian life arises out of the conflict of the flesh with the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh. One is evil, unclean; the other is clean, and good. The symbolism of the raven and the dove is God's way of telling us that in the present age, like Noah, we must live with two natures: one which is truly ours, and one which is an imposter.

The raven rests and feeds on anything. It finds delight even in carrion, in foul and filthy things. But it is of no help to us. If we rely on it we will learn nothing worthwhile about ourselves or the world around us. It is useless, as far as any profit in life is concerned. That is the flesh. Scripture is utterly consistent in these things, teaching us all the way through of the worthlessness and emptiness of the flesh in its apparent ability to think, reason, and act. It is all worthless, and God pronounces it so in the cross. That is the offense of the cross. The natural person does not like to be told that all that he can do apart from God is useless, yet that is exactly what the Lord Jesus says. He told his disciples, "Without me, you can do nothing," (John 15:5b KJV).

It is not that they would not be active, but there would be nothing worthwhile, nothing of any value, nothing that would enhance or bless or strengthen, or prove at last to be gold, silver, or precious stones. It would all be wood, hay, and stubble; an imposing facade, with nothing behind it.

In contrast to that is the dove, our true nature which can only find rest in the ark, in Jesus Christ, until a new world is made ready for it. This is exactly the experience we are going through now, isn't it? We have a new nature within, a nature imparted by Jesus Christ; his life joined with our life, his Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, born again, waiting in the ark for a new world to arise. That new spirit bears witness within of life and peace in Jesus Christ. It brings to us the olive leaf. This is truth we need to know to cope with the world in which we live, just as this was expressive of the truth Noah needed to know this to live in the world of his day.

So we learn from this story that our reaction to God's action in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is to live in this world on the Ark. The Ark for the Christian is the Church of Jesus Christ. As we do this we are waiting for a new world where all suffering will come to an end. Where there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

But as we live in the present we remember that there are two natures at work within us. One the raven is described by Paul in Galatians with these words:

*It is obvious what kind of life develops out of being the raven all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on.*

And yet as Christians we know that there is also the dove nature that God by his Spirit is forming within us: Paul describes it like this:

*23 But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.*

So we are to react to God's action by remembering that in order for us to live well in this world as those who are becoming more like Jesus we need the Ark. The Ark is the Church. Like the dove, it is from the Ark that we go out into the world to live as people who are trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection, God's great act of remembrance. As we trust Jesus we will struggle with the raven within and see signs of the raven's presence all around us in the world. At the same time we will remember that our true nature is symbolized by the dove. As we grow into our dove nature more fully we too will see that the olive branch is with us as life and peace come to represent how we live in the present as we await for the day when there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

Amen