

She could not know the relationship she would have, how much she would cherish the creatures of the ground. A mere infant, she lay sleeping beneath the blanket her grandma had made; soft yellow trim bordering the edge and in the center a jungle—a pink elephant, a purple-striped zebra, a dark blue monkey, and an orange-spotted giraffe. The theme continued—a gentle nursery rhyme lulling her to sleep—the brown playpen with bright green leaves and animals dancing all around. And a Noah's Ark night-light keeping watch with pastel coloured elephants and giraffes and monkeys two by two bulging and bursting at the seams.

Odd that in our nurseries and our childhood dreams, the Ark has no people only animals. Odd that in our bible stories the animals coming two by two are quickly forgotten for the sake of the minority population of Noah and his wife and their three sons and their wives. 8 people. Possibly some children. But the rest animals. An ark bulging with thousands upon thousands of two by twos of every kind. And history writes this as a story about God saving Noah and his family. And we say this is a story of baptism; of God saving by water—and it is—but is God's saving life only relevant for us and for Noah? Well, those are questions for a later time. When a girl grows much older. But for now, she sleeps—an infant blanketed in the pastel colours of love with a Noah's Ark night-light keeping watch with smiling animals bulging out the sides.

And now she is older. A brown playpen crib exchanged for a bunk where she lays sleeping yet beneath the blanket her grandma made with fading soft yellow trim and a colourful jungle of animals. At her feet a big brown lab; on her dresser a bright

orange goldfish gurgles and swims; a hamster, soft warm coat of brown and white nocturnally, furiously, runs on a wheel. And over in the corner in the darkness of night—a Noah's Ark night-light still keeps watch with smiling animals bulging out the sides. A multitude of animals; one girl fast asleep, blanketed in love.

She awakes to a slobbery sloppy tongue drooling kisses on her face. To the nocturnal hamster buried deep in shavings fast asleep. Then she sprinkled smelly thin flakes that danced and floated to the bottom while an orange goldfish gurgled and gulped and swam. One girl, a multitude of animals; only the beginning. Stray kittens, aquatic frogs; crickets and newts; an abandoned duckling she brought home from the pond—but no snakes, 'cause Mom had to draw the line somewhere—until the house bulged with the jungle of creatures that swarmed and swam and crept and crawled. And in Sunday school she heard the story of Noah's Ark, the animals coming two by two, and they sang a silly song about an Arky, Arky built from twigs and hickory barks, barks. Were there any people on this boat at all? Did it matter? Because this was an animal story. But somewhere deep she understood that she was—she was on that boat too. Because if God cared this much for all the animals; then she, too was and would be cradled, saved, carried, rocked too and fro on the waves of God's love.

But without warning the gentle nursery rhyme becomes harsh, real. She would awake to a slobbery sloppy kiss no more. A dog lay dead, buried in a hole in the backyard. She said the Lord's Prayer; her dad shoveled dirt over a lifeless brown body. In the darkness she cried and the hard questions came. "Dad, will Sam go to

heaven? Why did he die? And I think God loves dogs so he'll save Sam too, don't you?" The awkward questions no one knows how to answer. Because in a story about an ark bulging at the seams with thousands of two by two and only 8 people and some children—we only see ourselves, and water where God saves, but saves who?

And that night as she lay wide awake; as the tears wet her pillow; as an orange fish gurgled and swam; as a hamster ran; as gentle smiling cartoon animals bulged out the side of an ark that shone light into the dark—that night she wondered why. Why there were only giraffes and elephants and monkeys on that boat; but no hamsters, no goldfish, no stray kittens or ducklings and especially no dogs. That night she wondered what kind of God would save only jungle animals living in her fairy tale dreams. Wondered what kind of a world it was where only Noah found favour with God; where God would save just a few people but didn't care for dogs, a world where God had to draw the line somewhere, a world where God didn't save Sam. Maybe the real question was about a God who lives only in a nursery rhyme world where everything is smiling; a God who never touches the reality of pain and death, of love and loss. But that was a story for when a girl was much older. Perhaps one never to be told, in favour of gentle stories trimmed in a pale-yellow God who knows no pain or regret or sorrow. But still the animals smile. And the ark bulges, blanketed with God's love. And since before she was born—a night-light shining in the darkness of night.

Now older still, a volunteer at the local pet store, cleaning cages. Once more her mind goes to that boat bulging with creatures who came two by two. And the reality

that even here dogs and cats have separate cages. So what about a boat that housed both lion and lamb, both snake and hamster? And even here the smell of not thousands but only a few was enough to wrinkle her nose; enough to wrinkle the senses of those who tell nursery rhyme stories in a nursery rhyme world. So what about that ark with only 8 people and maybe some children? Would it always be filled with animals who only smiled and never smelled? Did Noah pack enough shovels?

Later that night she lay in the double bed that no longer held a big brown dog with sloppy kisses but was covered over with three long-hair cats; a bed where she had long since outgrown the blanket of smiling pastel jungle animals with yellow trim but where she was yet and always blanketed with love. And she read the story from her childhood, of animals two by two by the thousands; that story where God saved 8 people and some children; that story where animals are exotic and fun but no one asks the hard questions. That night she read—the heading in her Bible, like the history we write. Not, “God Saves the Animals and Noah’s Family.” The animals already written off the page while we put ourselves in center stage—the title read, **Noah** and the Ark.

And it was nursery rhyme no more. And not everyone was smiling. God was not smiling. But God **was** the God she had wondered about all those years ago. God who touched the reality of pain and death, of love and loss. God who knew pain and regret and sorrow for the world of beauty created good, now filled with evil and ugliness and the blind self-centredness that continues to write creature and creation off the page. The blind self-centredness that decides who and what should be in the boat that is

cradled and rocked in the waves of God's grace. The same self-centredness that bulges the world with hatred and division; with bursting bigotry in racial and gender violence; with the homeless and poor marginalized and forgotten; a world that writes off the page even God's love, while in our darkness the God of all creation weeps in regret. Weeps in pain of and for the loss of creature and creation, for the vision we cannot see of a world created out of love, for love, for beauty that was beautiful no longer. Created for life, to know life, to **be** life; but was not life any more. And we do not understand that in creature and creation the heart of God is revealed and opened wide for something more to be. The heart of God that opens wide in life springing forth, in love pouring like rain flooding the earth; with grace like baptismal water—for 8 people? For some children? For all people? For every creature, for all creation? Would history write this story of the God whose heart tears wide open in grief; whose tears wet the world while her own tears spilled to wet the pillow on her bed?

It was a story she never heard, yet unfolding all around her in a broken and dying world. So connected are we to giraffe and elephant, to hamster and goldfish and stray ducklings and kittens and slobbering dogs—so connected are we with the thousands of creatures who come two by two—that human sin; putting ourselves in the center of the story—our actions have far reaching consequences for all creatures. Our human sin that breaks the very heart of God. As God regrets creation for what it has become—for what **we** have become—not only humanity faces death and certain destruction, it is the animals too. With all of creation we are in the same boat—all of us created, all of us creature. All in need of God's heart opening wide once more for the creation and re-

creation of life. All in need of God's grace pouring down like rain. All in need of God's flooding life; of God's love like a blanket to cover us in the darkness of night.

So what of the ark now? And the thousands of animals who come two by two; the thousands more now extinct that no longer come? And what about the God who intentionally commands Noah to construct a ship large enough to bear not only 8 humans and perhaps some children—but large enough to bear the death and pain, the love and loss, the manure and smell—large enough to bear human life; large enough to bear the life of all creation within its wooden boughs? Carried deep within an ark, bursting and bulging from its seams; the story of God's love—love that carries creation on the waves of the water all the way to the wooden boughs of the cross where God's heart opens wide once more. The boughs of the cross where God's love drowns hatred and oppression. Where the arms of Christ arc wide to house people of all colour, all gender, and class, to house even us. The boughs of the cross wide enough to house all creation; so that foxes have holes, and birds have nests, and dogs have beds where children lay their heads. And even while the dew of the ground licks the face of the Son of Man; even as the grave is the only pillow where the Son of God rests his head; God is busy rewriting the story one more. Rewriting our history, our present, our future and the future of all creation for giraffes and hamsters and dogs. And in the center, in the title line, *in Christ*—God's restoring, re-creating, arc of love bursting and bulging at the seams. And two by two, or by eight and with our children we come. And two by two by the thousands and thousands the animals come. The door is opened wide. And there is room. Thanks be to God!