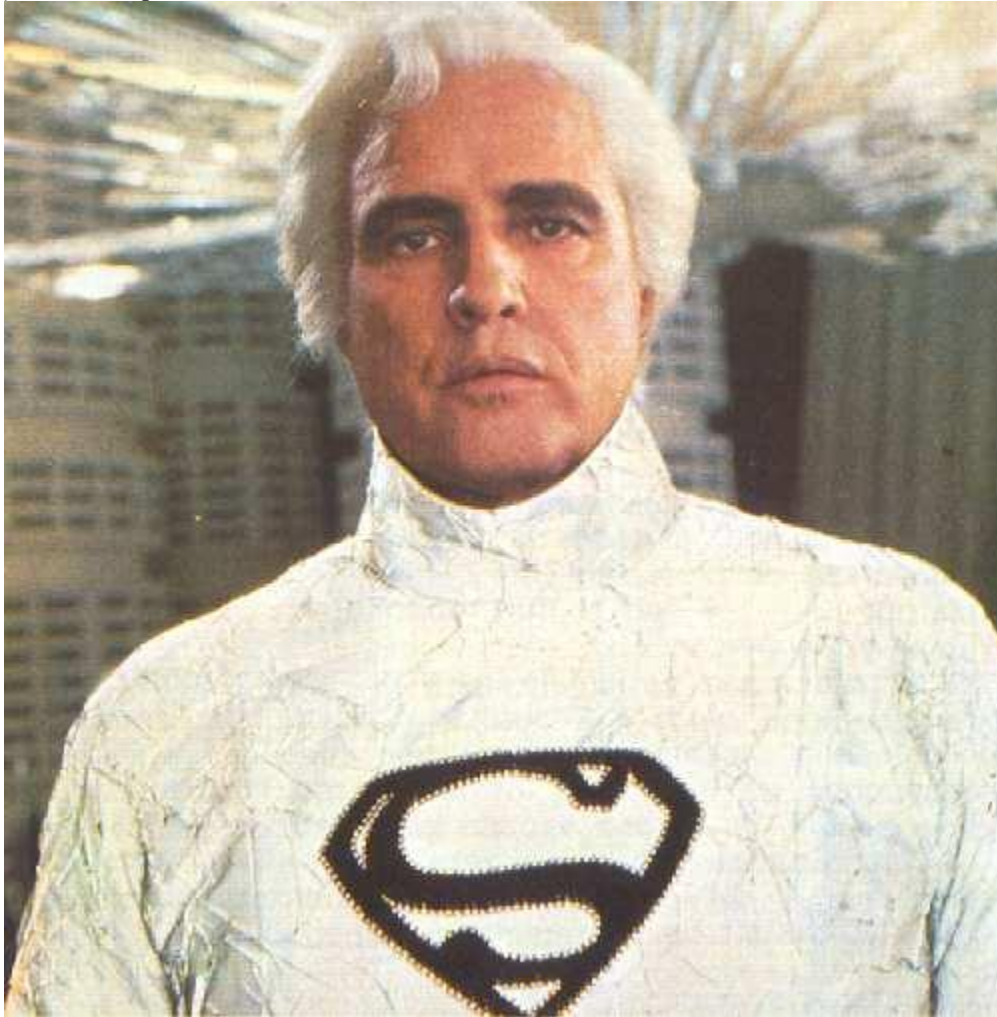




One of my favorite characters in the story of Superman is someone who doesn't even survive the prologue.

Superman, of course, is the story of a hero with incredible superhuman abilities — abilities he has because he is actually from a distant planet called Krypton. Superman was found on earth after being rocketed across the universe as an infant. But who sent the infant Superman on his journey?

Jor El, Superman's father.



Jor El, besides being Superman's father, is the cleverest scientist on the planet Krypton. He was the one who discovered that their planet was doomed to explode, which is why he put his infant son in that rocket. I am positive that the Jewish creators of Superman — Joel Shuster and Jerry Siegel — were influenced, at least subconsciously, by the story of Noah in the Bible.

Both Noah and Jor El are put into a situation where they know the end is coming, and they are surrounded by people who don't believe it. Jor El stands before a Kryptonian council and begs them to recognize the danger he has discovered, but

they don't. There's something about human nature — and, I guess, Kryptonian nature — that encourages us to ignore dangers that don't align with our expectations. Even dire warnings seem to fall on deaf ears. In both stories, the ones who ignored the warnings are destroyed. Krypton explodes and Earth floods.

And the story is more common than you'd think. Every ancient culture has a flood story. It's not just the Bible. We don't know why this is. Perhaps there really was a catastrophic flood that decimated the world as humans knew it, leading to a variety of similar tales. Maybe we tell these stories to remind ourselves that having a closed mind can be deadly. Regardless, when we read Noah's story, we're not reading *the* flood story, we're reading the biblical version of a flood story, and the meaning of that story lies in the way it differs from more typical flood stories.

One of the things that makes this flood story unique is God's treatment of Noah. The gods in these flood stories are typically pretty hostile and capricious towards humanity. But God is *really* looking after Noah in this story. Noah receives precise instructions on how to build the ark that will save him. It's like we have Ikea instructions sitting in the middle of Genesis. In fact, the instructions are so precise that we could use them to build a replica ark right now, today — if we had the time and the supplies. A group of creationists in Kentucky [actually built one you can go see and interact with](#). The tickets cost \$49.95, not including parking.

So this disaster is heading Noah's way, but God has perfectly equipped him to handle it. Noah and Jor El both face coming disasters in a time when no one else wanted to see them. We in the church are also facing a coming disaster, albeit

one we don't like to talk about. The easiest way to understand this problem is to think about the year 2040.

The vast majority of churchgoers — both in 1st Congregational and the church at large — are part of the Baby Boomer generation, folks born generally between 1946 to 1964. The church is experiencing very little growth outside of that generation. So take a moment to ask yourself: What will our church look like in the year 2040? When the baby boomer generation has all passed on, what will be left of our church? In the past we've been able to assume that the next generations would keep our churches going.

The typical cycle we've seen several generations go through is this: Kids grow up at church, come of age in the youth group, and then they typically aren't involved in church during their early twenties. But around thirty, folks typically start having children and that's when church starts becoming a priority again. We bring our own children to church and that's when the cycle starts all over again. That's how it has *always* gone.

Until my generation came along and ruined it. I know, it's always our fault.

Millennials, just like every generation, stopped going to church in their 20s. The difference is [we never came back](#). We now have spouses, children, and mortgages, and yet we haven't come back to church. Why not?

A *lot* of ink has been spilled on that question. A lot of theories, ideas, and hunches have been published trying to answer it. But no one has been able to boil it down to a satisfyingly complete answer.

All I have to offer you is my own experience as a Millennial. I'm obviously an outlier — not only did I stick with church, I decided to follow a calling into the

ministry. But even I have had my own complicated relationship with church and moments when I never wanted to come back.

So I believe the primary reason we don't see Millennials coming back to church, is that they are discomforted by church. I believe this because I have felt that discomfort. Most of my life, I have felt the calling towards ministry, although it would take me several years to recognize that call. It was **discomfort** with the church that kept me from recognizing it.

I was a kid that was very involved in church. I went to Sunday school and Sunday worship every week. I attended Youth Group and every youth retreat and mission trip. I even brought friends with me. My dad used to joke that if I gained any more "disciples" catching a ride with us to church Sunday morning, we'd need to buy a van.

But even though I was drawn to it, I always felt I was approaching church as an outsider. I was not the best behaved kid — I fidgetted during worship, I asked uncomfortable questions during Sunday school, the movies and music I liked were not what you'd call "church appropriate." While I was drawn to the divine presence that permeated the church, I still felt alienated by the church's expectations.

Becoming a pastor has always felt impossible. When I saw my own pastor, a mild and gentle man by the name of Jeff Silliman, I saw this robed figure of holiness that could understand the mysteries of God which I could not, who was unflappable and unerring and probably ate clouds for breakfast. (Later in life, I would get to know Rev. Silliman more personally and discover that he was a lovely man, but also a mere human being.)

It wasn't until I discovered Holladay United Church of Christ in Salt Lake City, Utah that I felt like I had found a church where I could be 100% me. I was in my mid-twenties, and despite continuing to feel discomfort, I was still drawn to church. Holladay UCC was different. They opened their worship by saying, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here!" The pastor presented herself as a real human being, wrestling with faith and justice and how to live out Christ's good news. There was a certain, perhaps undefinable, sense that I would not be saddled with expectations here. I felt that people were interested in me and what I had to offer, even if it wasn't your typical church-goer's qualities.

Holladay was where I began and underwent my process of discernment that led to becoming an ordained minister. Since then, I have become more comfortable with some of the expectations that churches have by being rooted in an identity as God's beloved, an adopted son who has pleased the Father just by being me. But I'm not sure I would've learned that grounding without my experience at Holladay.

Mine is a unique story. I had a strong enough call towards the church to overcome my discomforts. Most Millennials do not. They see the discomforts and think, *Why would I want to endure that?* Previous generations have been motivated by a desire for their children to learn morals and good values. But Millennials either don't have children or don't see values in the church at large that they want their children to learn. They see judgement, close mindedness, and, yes, the burden of expectations that they would rather their children not be exposed to.

We have a new Vision for our church: *That 1st Congregational would be authentically known by those outside our walls to be a place where open-minded people can **Be, Belong, and Become***. This Vision was not accepted lightly by the members of our governing body. When I presented it to them for approval, they had a lot of questions and even a few objections.

One particular objection stuck out to me. After discussing the problem of 2040 and hearing me insist that we have to change to meet this challenge, someone said, *“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with us!”*

It stuck out to me because I agree. I think we have so much going for us. We are an open minded and intellectual community. We have made a commitment towards being open and affirming towards all people, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. We have an amazing music program with a lot of talented musicians. Our pastor is pretty good too.

We have everything that a progressive person in their 50s or 60s could ever want in a church. But that’s the thing. I think we — and the vast majority of churches — got so good at being the church for one particular generation, that we neglected to prepare the church to be relevant for the subsequent generations.

But I also think we in particular are uniquely situated to be the church for the Millennial generation here in Rhineland. The fact that we have a rainbow flag on our front lawn is a signal to Millennials that this is a safe place — and not just for LGBTQ folks. This is a place where they don’t have to fear the values we’ll teach their children. This is a place where love and inclusion trump orthodoxy and tradition.

So what more can we do? How can we make this a community that younger generations will see and feel drawn to? It's not abundantly clear. This is more complicated than making a really big boat. It may even be more complicated than building a baby-sized rocket ship.

But that doesn't mean that God has left us without a plan. I think we can become what we need to be to survive the future. And it's important that we do it, not just so that we can leave a legacy that extends past 2040, but so that we can be the church for a new generation. Gayle Engel, a mentor in the [NGLI](#) program I'm part of, is known for saying that it makes a difference whether you're talking about the future of the church or the church of the future. We don't want the church to merely survive, we want to *be the church* for a whole new generation. It's important because the young families in our town need a community to be a part of. They need a community where they can face the big questions without judgement. They need a community that will support them and connect them. They need a community where they can be themselves, belong to each other, and become their best selves.

Because, although we've seen the world at large walking away from church, we haven't seen anything rising up to address the needs that church has traditionally met in our society. The good news is that we can be that for an entire generation. If we are able to adapt, we can become the kind of church that is essential in the year 2040: A place of comfort and growth for the next generation.

But, just like Noah, the first step is to face the reality of our situation. Only then can we get to work on the ark.