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Genesis 6.5-22

August 31, 2014

Roots A New Beginning

This, of course, is one of the best-known stories in all of scripture. Most folks, especially after the Russell Crow movie came out earlier this year, are pretty familiar with at least some form of the Noah story. It's one of the first Bible stories that most kids learn and it's pretty easy to see why this particular story captures the imagination of children, isn't it?

You have an abundance of water and most kids love water. They love to swim, to jump around at splash pads, to play in the bathtub, to shoot one another with water guns. Our kids, like many kids, love to find a puddle somewhere to jump in, regardless of what it does to their shoes or outfits. And then of course, you have this large boat, this building project. And again, most kids love building things, right? So, whether it's Legos or Lincoln Logs kids love the thought of building something, especially something big and especially something that will be in the water. And then, if that's not enough, you've got all those animals. And kids certainly love animals. They're captivated by dogs or cats or elephants or lions. Whether they are real or stuffed or on the television or in books, if there's an animal than most kids will give it their utmost attention. So, you have animals, in a big building project (i.e. an ark), in the water! What more could you want as a kid?! Well, a rainbow of course. Just like icing on a cake there's a beautiful rainbow that stretches high into the air. Red, yellow and purple; scattered across the skies.

And so, yes, it is not surprising that this is a remarkably powerful story for children, young and old alike, really. And oftentimes, when we see the Noah story in pictures, the scenes are quite idyllic. When I think about this story I always envision a picture from my childhood with the ark resting safely upon dry ground, animals frolicking together, birds soaring in the air, and everything underneath the protective arch of the rainbow. Even in the Jesus Storybook Bible the picture depicts a turtle walking up the nose of an elephant, an armadillo perched atop a giraffe's neck and a bear...a BEAR...just sort of peeping out over the crowd. All the while, Noah has this gentle smile.

Now there's nothing wrong with that, per se, but it does get a bit to what I've mentioned before about the fact that when it comes to children's stories, it's important for us to ask what these stories might say to us as adults. It's fine, in other words, for our 3-year olds who are learning this story to see it as a relatively peaceful scene, however, there is also something to asking if there isn't something more to be seen in this story as 33 or 66 year olds.

Whenever I talk about the story of Noah and the Ark I am often reminded of Ikea. (I keep hearing rumors that they're going to build one here soon, but so far I haven't

seen anything!) Anyway, I remember pretty distinctly the first time I went to Ikea. I didn't really know what to expect and so when I walked in I felt, quite honestly, a bit like a kid in a candy store, looking around at everything in great awe. I walked in and took the escalator all the way to the top and there, before my eyes were all of these beautiful showrooms: a bedroom here a living room there, a kitchen over there. And it's so inviting that you easily picture yourself (and in fact you are encouraged to) sitting on the sofa putting your feet up on the sleek, modern coffee table, remote control in one hand and a cup of coffee (made by my great espresso machine over in the kitchen) in the other.

And so after leaving "my" living room I headed over to the bedroom and again could easily picture myself crawling underneath the beautiful and cozy duvet, dimming the beautiful floor lamp just a bit and grabbing a book off the safari nightstand that they've been kind enough to place there for me. I was easily swept away, by the dreamy-like Ikea land where everything is perfect and done just exactly as I would like. And so, after being swept away by their showrooms, they have these little tags that have a number and letter on them that you write down in order to make sure that you get this exact room with just the right sofa and lamp and bed that you can then re-create in your own home. It's positively seductive.

There's just one problem. And it's a problem I didn't fully understand until the first time I took my numbers and moved from the heavenly picture of all my dreams come true and started taking the escalator down, down, down into the bowels of Ikea. And there before me was row after row after row of boxes. Boxes for as far as your eye could see and as high as, well, a rainbow. And as I reached the letter and number that were on the tag I looked up to see my sleek, modern coffee table, but of course, was met only with a long and quite heavy box. The bed, the bookshelf, the nightstand, everything in a daunting box. And it may surprise you to know that these boxes don't work like pop-up books. In other words, when I got home and opened the box up, the perfect living room I had seen at the Ikea showcase did not magically pop up. No, rather inside of these boxes were nothing but pieces of wood and hundreds (and I mean hundreds) of little bits and pieces and screws and nails.

Yes, the picture I had in my mind from the showcase (what I call, my child-like vision of things) was still there, but as I sat down in the middle of this mess of boards and screws, my adult-lens made it very clear that it was going to take a lot of time to get to that picturesque vision I had in my mind.

And so as we look at this story of Noah's Ark, I think we have to remember not just the picturesque scene we may carry over from when we were children, but also, well, the more adult-like understanding of what it took to get to that picturesque scene. The picture of death and destruction that took place. The reality that Noah had to begin, not with a pop-up book like box that unfolded the whole ark in front of him, but with one piece of wood and one nail. That those animals would have left, well, let's just say quite a mess wherever they were, a mess that you could see, feel and smell. That when one is being thrown this way and that in a storm on a boat,

and food may be running short and tempers running high; questions and doubts would certainly be rampant.

In other words, if we want to take this story seriously then we need to understand the whole of the story, which means that the vision to which God had given to Noah was going to be built bit by bit and that it was going to get messy at times. If we don't see that then our faith is not child-like, quite frankly, but childish. And that is a big difference.

Now you may think that this is obvious and yet there are times when I have been quite surprised at how people have understood church. There are folks whom I have met who say, "Why can't we just get back to that vision we see in Acts where people are giving to those in need and listening to the teaching of the leaders and the church has the goodwill of the community around it." And that is certainly a great vision to have. But it fails to remember that in the midst of that there are folks like Ananias and Sapphira who are lying about what they have given to the church and that leaders like Paul and Barnabas are splitting with one another because of conflict and that people are dying and being thrown in prison. In other words, if we get too caught up looking for the perfect, sweetest smelling ark where all the animals are sweetly petting one another or the ideal, problem-free church, then it might be best for us to stay at home and just look at sweet pictures of Noah's Ark.

I think it's important for us, as we got about the vision that God has given to us, to go into it with eyes wide open. So that, when difficult times come, as they inevitably will, we are not surprised by them. One of the things I love about this story of Noah is that we never actually hear from him, at least not verbally. Instead we just see Noah doing the vision that God has called him to. Genesis repeats the simple phrase, "Noah did everything just as God commanded him" almost as if it's surprised that he keeps doing it. It wasn't always pretty, I'm guessing, and there may have been times (like Moses had) when Noah questioned the vision, but he just kept plodding along. Nail after nail after nail. Animal after animal after animal. Rainy day after rainy day after rainy day. Noah, as we've talked about over the last couple of weeks, seems to understand that God loves him and no matter how crazy and difficult and smelly a vision it was, trusted that God was in control and so kept following him even if it didn't always make sense.

We here at ZPC have a mission statement, a vision if you will, that we have been given by God. That vision, that beautiful picture of the ark, is "To make disciples and release them for service into our broken world." Now that's a beautiful vision that I'm sure most of us are fully behind. Of course, the actual working out of that is not always as pretty and wonderfully smelling and instantaneous as that vision might have it seem. No, making and becoming disciples is a slow, long arduous process isn't it? It's a bit like nailing boards together one at a time. There are times when you hammer you own thumb, times when you have to start over, times when you might agree or disagree with your co-workers about what board goes where.

And being released for service into our broken world has a nice ring to it, but I can assure you it is quite smelly, is it not? Any time you start trying to actually do that, well then things get a bit dicier. That blasted broken world just won't stay in its' stall and there will be times when the stink of the world begins to get its stench on us. We'll see this a bit more in a couple weeks when we take a look at Abraham.

There is though one more thing I think is important for us to notice that allowed Noah to keep moving forward. It's something I think is significant for us if we want to keep moving forward in the mission that God has given to us here at ZPC. And that is the simple reality that Noah knows that he has been called by God to pursue this vision. In other words, there is no way that Noah is starting to build this ark when the rain has not yet begun to fall unless he believes that God has called him to do this. There's no way that Noah is undergoing the grief he probably endured from neighbors while he built this ark unless he truly believed that God called him to do this. There's no way he started scooping the poop of the animals that surrounded him unless he knew that God had called him to do this. And that is vital for us to see.

You may have noticed that I left off the beginning part of ZPC's vision statement. Honestly, I've noticed that I, and others, have done this with some frequency when we are repeating our vision statement. It doesn't actually begin with the words, "To make disciples..." but instead it begins with these vitally important words, "Called together by God ..." And I would contest that if we want to truly fulfill this beautiful, but lengthy, and smelly vision, that God has given to us, then like Noah, we had best be committed and certain that we have been called by God to do this. Because if we're not, when the waters get rough and when the animals start acting like, well, animals, then we're going to be in great trouble. But if we are committed to the vision and we know that God has called us to pursue this vision together, then I have no question that we will become a people who are truly making disciples, who are becoming disciples, and who are being released for service into our broken world.

In the days ahead I hope and pray that we will remember not just the vision of what we are called to do and be, but the fact that first and foremost we have been called together, not by our own initiative or desire, but by God and God alone. In that confidence then, can we with faith and hope move forward in making disciples and releasing them for service into our broken world, no matter the cost, no matter the storms, no matter the smells. Moving forward with the beautiful vision we have been given. For God's glory and for God's glory alone. May it be so. Amen.