

Kids Stump the Preacher: Noah and the Floating Zoo

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Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Genesis 7:1-10

So today we are jumping into a new series titled “Kids Stump the Preacher,” and for this series we have asked the kiddos of the church to pick all their favorite Bible stories – and I will be preaching on one each week for the next seven weeks. The inspiration for this series came about a couple of months ago when my daughter asked me when was the last time I preached on *her* favorite story – Daniel and the Lion’s Den – and I found myself racking my brain, realizing that I have *never* preached on that story. And then I found myself wondering why. And wondering what other great Bible stories I may have been avoiding through the years that I should really spend some time in. And that we as a church should maybe spend some time in too.

Like this week’s story. Noah’s Ark. Another favorite favorite Bible story that – as many times as I have read it – I don’t think I have ever preached on it.

So kids – you have definitely thrown me a challenge.

I think that I can probably safely say that Noah’s Ark was the first Bible story I can ever remember hearing. And I date it all the way back to first grade.

One of the things that I absolutely love talking about is what John Wesley called “Prevenient Grace” – which is the “grace that comes before” – the little fingerprints of God’s activity in our lives that come before any awareness on our part that God is active and involved in our lives.

As I’ve mentioned to you all before, when I was a young child, my family was not a churchgoing family. I didn’t grow up going to Sunday School and Vacation Bible School and learning the fun kids’ songs like “Arky Arky” that we sang today. And I didn’t grow up with all the classic Bible stories as my bedtime stories. I knew – vaguely – who God was, because I had friends who did have a life of faith, but when I would ask my mom if she believed in God, or believed in heaven, she would say “no, I think heaven is just a made-up place for people who don’t like the fact that they are going to die someday.” And she left it at that. And I left it at that too.

But God didn’t leave it at that. And God had some really sneaky tricks up his sleeves to start planting little seeds in my life that would one day, years later, begin to sprout.

And one of those seeds got planted in my first grade classroom. It was library day. And usually, on library day all of us kids would go to the school library, and the librarian would read us a story, and we might get to go pick out a library book to check out and take home with us. I always loved library because I loved books.

But this particular library day was extra-super special. Because the librarian was not reading us a story. We were watching a movie. That was especially super-cool because as a family we didn't watch a whole lot of TV when I was growing up. I think my parents' old TV set with rabbit ears *maybe* got about 2 channels, both of which were incredibly staticky...so we just didn't bother. So getting to watch a movie at school with all of my classmates was a special treat.

But before the teachers turned on the movie, they gave all of us first graders a warning. "So, this story is from the Bible," they said. "If any of you think that your parents might not want you watching a story from the Bible, raise your hand and we will go find something else for you to do."

And that threw my little 6-year-old brain into a tailspin. What to do? I knew what the Bible was – it had something to do with church. And with God. And my parents didn't believe in God, and they never went to church, and I didn't think that they would want me watching a story from the Bible.

But it was a MOVIE. And I so rarely got to watch movies. Especially at school. And I really really really wanted to see what was going to happen. So in the end, in the battle of conscience in my little first grade soul, my curiosity finally won. And with full awareness that I was defying what I thought my parents would want, I determinedly stayed in the library and watched the story of Noah's ark along with the rest of my class. With all the cute little animals made out of clay and popsicle sticks and macaroni, marching two by two up into the big boat that would provide them shelter from the storm.

I think maybe God knew what he was doing. Grabbing my attention with a story about a bunch of animals. As a kid I was *such* an animal lover. Like, obsessively so. I wanted to be a veterinarian for the longest time. And I remember thinking that maybe...*if* God was real, then maybe...just maybe...God was an animal lover too. And a God who loved animals was a God that I might be interested in.

I think the story of Noah's Ark is probably the #1 most beloved Bible story of all time by kids. It was definitely the #1 most-requested story by our kiddos at the church. And it is easy to see why. A big boat that Noah builds himself. Animals of all kinds floating on the big boat – like a big floating zoo. And then, when the flood is over, the first-ever rainbow. Full of not just pretty colors but full of love and promise. What's not to love about this story?

Except, that I think that maybe this story is also one of the most challenging stories in all of scripture – for us grown-ups. Boats and animals and rainbows aside, it really isn't a kid's story. There are parts of it that are terrifying. And parts that are theologically *really tough*. I don't think it is any accident that I seem to have avoided this story throughout

my years of ministry – because there is some stuff in this story that I personally wrestle with. And that I am still trying to work through in my own mind.

So at the beginning of the story we learn that all creation has basically gone haywire. Specifically, humanity. It started back in the garden when Adam and Eve decided to eat that forbidden fruit, and then continued outside the garden when one of Adam and Eve's sons killed the other out of jealousy, and that began a neverending downward spiral of sin and brokenness that we still wrestle with to this day. And in Genesis 6 – just six short chapters into the story of God and God's people, God decides that he has had enough.

We are told that this was a time of giants, and heroes, and warriors. In other words, "the good old days" when people were strong and life was good. But nevertheless, "*The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.*" This is interesting. So God is saying here that even the very best of humanity is constantly and unrelentingly inclined to evil. And that even when people try to do good – even when their intentions are in the right place, their actions end up doing more damage than they do good.

Sounds a little bit familiar.

And so, "*the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.'*"

So what we have here is the original cancel culture. When God himself decides to cancel culture. To scrap it all and start again.

And that's what God does. Everything. Gone. Animals, plants, humans. Done. Their evil intentions and their evil desires; their bent toward destruction and self-destruction; their selfish whims and fantasies – all underwater. The whole world, scrubbed clean. Given a long, soaking bath of flood waters.

Except that there was a little part of God that wasn't altogether sorry about what he had created. When God created the world and the plants of the earth and the birds and the beasts and the fish and the people and looked at it all and said "this is very good" – there was a part of God that *still loved* what he had created. Even though God's creation was breaking God's heart, God couldn't help but to love some little part of it. And there was something about Noah and his family that really kind-of delighted God. Noah was the best of the best. And if humanity had any hope whatsoever of redemption, it was going to be through Noah.

So God told Noah to build an ark – an enormous boat – big enough to hold some of each kind of animal that walks the earth. And through that ark God would bring some of every living creature through to the other side of the flood. And then, all creation would get a fresh start.

Never mind the question of how the bunnies and the squirrels and the deer survived on the ark in such close quarters with the lions and the tigers and the coyotes. Maybe all the carnivores went vegan for 40 days.

Then after 40 days, the rain stopped. But Noah's ordeal was far from over. The earth had basically been turned into one giant ocean, and so there was no place for the boat to land. So they kept floating, and floating, and floating, waiting for the waters to slowly, bit-by-bit, evaporate. *Seven months* later, *finally*, the ark lodges up against some mountain peaks that are still underwater – but the water is shallow enough at that point that the boat can rest on them. After *another* three months, the water has receded enough that the tops of the mountains began to appear.

But Noah and the animals *still* have to wait for the rest of the earth to dry out. And they don't leave the ark until after Noah sends out a dove and the dove comes back with an olive branch in its beak. Which means, they would have been sitting there in the ark on that mountaintop long enough for an olive tree to start from a seed and grow big enough to produce branches. We're talking, a *minimum* of 6 months to a year. Probably longer.

We talk about Noah being on the boat for 40 days and 40 nights, but in reality, he was probably stuck inside a boat with nobody but his family, managing a crazy wild floating zoo for the better part of 2-3 *years*. And probably longer than that. When we complain about a year-plus of COVID restrictions, just imagine being Noah. At least when we are stuck at home, we don't have to scoop the poop of all the world's animals. And we can drive to Walmart. Or order off of Amazon. Noah was *stuck*.

But finally. *Finally*. At just the time that the people and the animals were all about to go completely crazy and start eating one another – quite literally – the dove returned with the olive branch and God said "it's time to start again." And everyone thundered off of the ark, and God put a rainbow in the sky as a reminder that God would never again flood the earth. And all was happy and glorious.

For about 10 minutes. Until Noah gets drunk and the Bible turns R-rated, and pretty soon all humanity is back again to where it was before the flood. Broken and messy and complicated and confusing and totally and completely incapable of breaking free of our own sinful desires.

So much so that in the book of Exodus we see Moses having to talk God out of scrapping it all and starting over again, yet again.

Friends, this is a fun story because of the animals. But it is also a really hard story because it reminds us of how deeply we can fall as people. And how painfully our sinfulness and brokenness and rebellion breaks God's heart. And yet, we go back to it. Again. And again. And again.

Just last week we celebrated the resurrection – God's victory over sin and death, once and for all. God's final word to the chains that bind each of us. Saying NO MORE. We have been washed clean. We have been set free to start again – like Noah and his family. Where the weight of everything behind us is just that – *behind us*. And God has given us a new chance at life.

But how often do we as people jump straight from the resurrection story – from the joy of redemption – right back into our old, broken, messed up ways of doing things? I do. Just about every single day I find within myself a sort-of battle between seeking the little comforts that soothe me for a little while but don't ultimately bring me joy, and doing the hard work of following God's leading in my life which sometimes walks me through places of struggle but always to places of delight in the end.

It's a neverending cycle. And yet, here is the good news for us: when we find ourselves the most broken, the most beyond repair, the most lost, the most confused – we have a God whose love overshadows God's judgment every single time. A God who may weep over us, but who still looks at all God created and says "it is very good." And then God continues the work of *making* us very good, yet again. Of washing us clean, and giving us yet one more fresh start.

So today, my prayer is that we will step into the fresh start that God is giving us. And to experience the powerful and profound joy of walking hand-in-hand with our living God.