

October 29

“The Olive Branch”

Genesis 8:10-12

10 He waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark.

11 When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth.

12 He waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, but this time it did not return to him.

Special Music:

“Hope in Front of Me”

Danny Gokey

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KlhYZQ_ovw



THE OLIVE BRANCH

I extend to you an olive branch.
Please take it if you will.
It's not about who's wrong on right.
I pass it to instill
An atmosphere of deep respect.
I trust you'll bring the same.
For sitting at the table here
Is not religion game.
It is a chance to make amends,
And perhaps bring something fresh.
Maybe mend our hearts of stone
And turn them into flesh.
I do not seek to change your mind,
Or compromise my stance.
But maybe find some common ground
And meet in a mindful dance
Of civil words and common verbs
And joining of our hands,
Seeking not to change our minds,
But trying to understand.
But, if by chance, we can't relate,
And you choose to go your way,
Please take with you this olive branch
And know that I will pray
For yours and my condition.
Perhaps there'll be another day

**Where we fix our situation.
For the world is ever changing
The future not carved in stone.
And each new day brings another way
So the seed of peace is sown.
You know where to find me
If by chance you change your mind
You'll find me at this table
Where peace and love are blind.
For God brought forth this table
And every soul a seat.
Only by meeting each other here
Can our souls be made complete.**

Genesis 8:14 tells us this:

13 By the first day of the first month of Noah's six hundred and first year, the water had dried up from the earth. Noah then removed the covering from the ark and saw that the surface of the ground was dry.

14 By the twenty-seventh day of the second month the earth was completely dry.

15 Then God said to Noah,

16 "Come out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and their wives."

Now, if I have done my math correctly, Noah and his family had been cooped up on that ark with all those animals for 375 days before God told them it was safe to disembark. The ark had become grounded on Mt. Ararat on the 17th day of the seventh month, so the ark had been sitting still for seven full months before the land dried up enough that the family and animals could get off safely. Don't you know that Noah was tempted to let those animals off early if only to give him and his family some peace and quiet, a reprieve from the constant care for the animals.

Now, we talk about how the animals went in two by two and Genesis 6:20 specifically tells us that God told him to take **"Two of every kind of bird."** But over in Genesis 7:3 we hear God telling Noah this **"and also seven pairs of every kind of bird, male and female, to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth."** Campfire tales are like that. It really doesn't change the narrative of our story. Noah took what God asked him to on the ark.

When we listen to the story of Noah, we talk about the dove returning with the olive branch, but we forget that God first sent out a raven. It is important that we take time to examine the story as a whole. Genesis 8:6-7 says

6 After forty days Noah opened a window he had made in the ark

7 and sent out a raven, and it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth.

But then Noah sends out the first dove in Genesis 8:8-9

8 Then he sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of the ground.

9 But the dove could find nowhere to perch because there was water over all the surface of the earth; so it returned to Noah in the ark.

It is these kinds of verses that make it so difficult for many scholars to find common stand on the story of Noah. It is also why many theologians pick and choose from the verses to try and make it all make sense. They do not want to bring confusion to their listeners. And I understand that.

But as Disciples of Christ, we encourage Christians to use their minds and allow God to guide them through these passages. Remember, there were many generations that lived between the times of the actual story of Noah and the time when Moses was able to write it down all the campfire tales. These campfire tales were not told in order. They did not have chapters and verses. Those were

added much later by theologians, translators, and printers starting around the 13th century to make easier study, memorization, and references.

All this is to say that the story of Noah, like so many early Biblical stories were more likely collections of campfires tales that were slowly merged together over time. It does not lessen the viability of the story or the influence the story had on the people of God.

But I certainly don't want to mislead you by omitting Biblical material. Noah did send out a Raven first. And it does say that the raven flew around until everything was dry. He then sent out a dove, who returned empty handed. He then sent out another dove and it returned with an olive branch. He then sent out another dove and the dove did not return at all.

But the question I want to raise and that I want us all to ask ourselves is this: Why? Why did he send out the birds? We know that the ark was resting on Mount Ararat. We know that the waters were receding. We also have nothing written in Genesis 8 where God tells Noah to send out these avions. So, why does he do it? Is he testing God? Is he frustrated and restless? I know I would be after being shut up in that boat with my family and all those animals for over a year.

Think back to Covid. We didn't have it so much around here, but there were places in major cities where people had to shelter in place for over a year. It left an indelible psychological footprint on those people and destroyed many relationships. And there were all the setbacks for students who were forced into

long distance learning which proved to be a disaster when they returned to the classroom, both for the lack of socialization and the inability of the schools to keep the student's attention in their virtual classrooms.

So why, without God's prompting, did Noah open a window that had been shut for over a year and send out a raven to peruse the land where the ark had settled. What did he think he would learn from that?

6 After forty days Noah opened a window he had made in the ark

7 and sent out a raven, and it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth.

And if the raven kept flying around until the water had dried up, why send a dove? Surely Noah could see that everything was dried up through the same open window. So, what purpose did it serve?

We saw from the beginning that Noah walked with God. Even after that long year, Noah was still responsive to the voice of God. His faith assures me that Noah would not leave that ark until God told him to. He would not even open the door in the ark without God's whisper in his ear, as tempting as it all must have been.

The Bible does not tell us why Noah sent the raven and doves out, but I do have my suspicions. Genesis does not tell us how Noah's family was faring at this time, but I have a feeling that they were even more stir crazy than Noah. Imagine spending a year on a boat that was now on dry ground, still having to feed and take care of those animals every day knowing that daylight and land

were just beyond that big door. While they had faith, it probably was not near as strong as Noah's and to some extent they must have felt that God was torturing them. They were also probably arguing with Noah every day. Just like Noah's neighbor's at the time of the flood pounded on the door saying, "Let us in," I can picture Noah's family pounding on the inside of that same door yelling "Let us out!"

They were human beings and they had lived through the trauma of the flood, the loss of their entire civilization. Everything they knew was gone, they had spent all this time on the boat with only the animals and each other to keep them company. The stench must have been overwhelming. Salvation and redemption were just a few feet away. If only someone would open the door. They probably felt like someone with claustrophobia on an airplane. They must have wrestled with each other for time at that open window. And Noah was not going to open the door until God told him to, because it just wasn't the right time. It wasn't safe yet. Whatever was beyond that door was not ready for human presence.

And Noah, sent out the raven and the doves to assure his family that there would soon be a time when God would allow him to open the door. This showed his family that he was actively engaged with God. Those birds were birds of hope, of change, of new life. The opening of the door in the ark needed to be a time of embracing newness and change, not of rushing to leave the past. They needed to be running towards what God had to offer them rather than away from the destruction and sorrow they had left behind.

Folks, it is not enough to become a Christian by leaving our old lives behind. We need to be willing to rush into the arms of a waiting and all loving God, embracing the life that he has prepared for us. Christianity is not about running away from things, but rather running towards something better. When we say that Jesus saves us from the sins of our past, that is truly good news. We are no longer held back by those anchors of sin. But the better news is that Jesus has a wonderful life full of blessings that he wants to share with us. There is no joy in escaping Hell. There is only relief. Escaping hell doesn't even promise change in our lives. The joy comes in being in the presence of our living God and his nurturing spirit. He transforms our lives into what they were always meant to be, servants of our Creator.

Imagine being in the dark of the ark and suddenly the door drops open, letting the sunlight stream in and overtake the darkness that we have become accustomed to. There, ahead of us, is a fresh new world of new growth, with none of the pain that we left behind. There, before us, is fertile land waiting to be tilled so that we can grow fresh vegetables and stop eating dried fruit. There, just on the other side of the door are trees, plants, mountains, clouds, blue sky, and a sun showing us a rainbow. There, within our reach, is everything we could have hoped for, peace, tranquility, a new start, and a blessing that trumps all other blessings. Our family is safe. We have our entire future ahead of us.

But that is as far as we go. We stop dead in the doorway, content that we have survived the flood. We refuse to move on because this is our safe place, the bulkheads of our salvation, the ark of our year upon the water. And we are so tied

to the ark that we refuse to move on. Out there may be beautiful, but it is also a big question mark. We know where we are. We are comfortable where we are even though just a few moments ago we were begging to get out. We are now afraid to step into the unknown of this new blessing because we find security where we are at. The fact that we are going to run out of food and water as well as the fact that we haven't moved the animals off the boat, and they will need to be fed and cared for does not encourage us to take that step forward and leave the security of the ark.

You may find that ridiculous, but I tell you, people are afraid to step into the blessings of God because they don't believe in the freedom of grace. They expect the rules to be different. If I step into a relationship with God, I'm going to have to do this or I am going to have to change that. No. That just isn't true. There are no expectations. God never put a price tag on grace.

Most of us know that. We have heard that preached until our ears are parched. Grace is free. Unconditional. But we don't embrace it. We don't really believe it. We think that to live the Christian life means we have to pay a high price. In order to step off the boat onto dry land, we have to pay the captain for the trip, even though we are told over and over that the trip is free. Without cost. The passage has already been paid by our savior. Nobody is going to ask for our passport. We don't have to declare anything at customs. There are no port or tarmac fees. It's free. We have no reason to let fear of change or cost keep us on the boat. There is no reason to stand in the doorway and wave at everyone else as they pass by.

But here is the caveat. “Okay, here it comes, preacher. It does cost something.” No! Nothing could be further from the truth. This is not a demand from God, but a promise. A promise that by the very nature of the freedom found in grace. If we choose to step off that boat, a change will come over us. We will want to embrace the life that God has prepared for us. We will want to reflect the life of Jesus, the essence of the Holy Spirit in all that we do. We will want to proffer grace at no cost to others. We will want to love as Jesus loves. We will want to embrace a life that is free of the turmoil that surrounds us. We will want Jesus to be a part of everything that we do.

And that, my friends, that fear of change, is what keeps us standing in the doorway and not engaging with all the blessings that God wants to shower us with. Being saved from hell is not the same as embracing the lives that God has for us. Being saved from hell is standing in the door of the ark looking out at all the wonder and being afraid to take the next step. Being saved from hell is not the same as allowing Jesus to walk us down the ramp into new life.

Being saved from hell does not encourage us to be loving, gracious, merciful, thankful, and joyful in all that we do. Stepping into an intimate, glorious, passionate walk with Jesus, walking with God like Noah, willing to leave the past behind and embrace what God has laid before us, that is what we are meant to do.

I often think that we spend way too much time trying to keep people out of hell instead of encouraging them into heaven. Where’s the blessing in that? Are we so comfortable standing in the miracle of the ark that we just can’t make

ourselves step into the blessing that is meant for us, much less lead others down that ramp? That blessing that we long for, that is just beyond our reach, because we can't let go of the fear? Walking through that door means that we are turning our control over to Jesus Christ.

We often think that if God would just send out a dove and it would bring back an olive branch, we would be better encouraged to take that step. My only reply to that is: "Really?" God sent a dove and it returned with an olive branch to assure us of his motives and blessings. "But when did God send out a dove for us?" you ask.

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.

21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

John 3:16-21

Is the dove not obvious? Is the olive branch not big enough? Did Jesus not come far enough? Was the sacrifice not great enough?

God sent Jesus into the world, just as Noah sent out the dove. Jesus died and returned from the dead, just as the dove returned to Noah. Jesus brought back the olive branch of Peace. Grace, Hope. Just as the dove brought back the olive branch to Noah and his family.

I want all of us to ponder that this week. I would encourage you to mark that passage in John 3 of your Bibles and read to yourselves every morning in the coming week. Don't ever let it lose its flavor. Let Jesus give you the courage to leave the ark and embrace all that he has waiting for you.

God bless you all,

AMEN

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