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Genesis 6:13-22
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Children, for reasons that I don't understand, always love the theological, problematical stories. Children just love, "The Lord said to Noah there's going to be floody, floody." And so on. It's a problem...Is this a big problem, or is it a wonderful thing that we share a common humanity? That we share common vulnerability? That we share a common hope?...Ann read the passage elegantly, but you can't cover up. It's about God destroying life. What do we make of that? A wrathful God? We want to retain the idea that God is a God of judgment. You hope God is a God of judgment, or else terrorists and evil have the final say, right? So God is a God of judgment, but then how do we avoid the idea that God looks down at every little thing that goes wrong and lashes out with some terror upon us? You know, when Katrina flooded New Orleans, some preachers sang, "That was God's judgment on New Orleans because New Orleans strayed away from God." Good grief. If God flooded every place that ever strayed away from God, Charlotte would be under water, your home would be under water.

Today, I want us to think about God's call to Noah. Noah didn't have some special God gene that nobody else had. What Noah had was he was attentive to God. He listened for God. And did you hear it in the passage? Whatever God said, Noah did all that God called him to do. And this is a lot of what we're about in the Year Through The Bible. We got off to a great start this week for Year Through The Bible. I was so excited, we had more than 500 people show up in our building this week to have a Bible study on Adam and Eve, and thousands more read by e-mail and listened online. We're going to spend the year learning how to be like Noah. How to hear what God is calling us to do. But not just to hear it, also to do it. We misunderstand the Bible sometimes. We think it's like a Ouija board or it's an answer book, sort of like the tech help guy. You call up God for some tech help, find the answer to your question in the Bible. But the Bible, let me suggest to you, is more like a blueprint for building. It's more like blueprint for building. And what we need to build, what God's calling us to build is an ark.

The church has always taken Noah's Ark as one of its prime symbols. If you go through cathedrals in Europe, on the front of pulpits, very often is carved in wood or stone, Noah's Ark. The doors of churches through medieval times frequently were carved with Noah's Ark. It's a symbol of the church being our shelter from the stormy blast, the church being that which preserves life for God's future, the church being those who dare to say yes to God in a world that would have nothing to do with God.

We are today, with the Noah's story, unveiling our church's new strategic plan. We had a group that met and talked about this. The group was called 106. Sometimes you wondered about the mystical meaning of this number 106, and its meaning is that we met in Room 106. But we involved more than 250 people in the congregation, including many of you who are sitting here today, and we did not ask the question, What do we

want to do? What would be really groovy and fun to do together? What is my preference for what the church ought to be like? No, no, no. We asked, What is God calling us to do? We looked in the Bible and asked, based on the Scriptures, what is God calling our church to do? Our church has already done so many things, so many wonderful things. This past year, you know, Rev. Kevin Wright organized a helicopter flying into Haiti so tens of thousands of people didn't starve to death, that is only one example of many things that may not be as newsworthy, but are no less remarkable that go on through our church; the way that we care for the sick and for the dying, the way we gather every Sunday for worship. We have five services that are just full of people. The way we reach out to young adults, to children, to teenagers. The way people take their time to teach stories like Noah to children and to adults of all ages. So many good things that we could boast about, that we could feel good about, that we could rest on our laurels. I have a friend up in Michigan, and he says if you're resting on your laurels, you're wearing them in the wrong place. You have to contemplate that for a moment.

God could be saying to Myers Park Church, You're already doing more than enough, just sit back and relax for the next decade or so, but we don't believe that's the case. We believe God's calling us to continue the great work that we've been doing, but also to reach out in several new areas, and we want you to think about these, and not just kind of say, Oh, that's a neat idea. We want you to ask, What's my part in that? What is God calling me to do as part of what our church is doing together? The first thing that we're looking at is to grow in our faith. And that seems so obvious, isn't that what churches ought to do? We decided that had to be the basis of everything that we're about. Too many Christians decide, I've got a pulse, I'm OK. Or, I've got my church membership card, that's enough, isn't it? Or, I've been in Sunday School through age 42, I've read the story of Noah before. But God calls us always to grow in our faith; to get ever closer to God is one of the wonders of Year Through The Bible. We're all going to grow closer to God and become more attentive to God's voice, and not just so I can have faith inside me, but so I can hear what God is calling not just me to do, but for us to do together.

Second part of our plan we're calling radical hospitality, and I want to tell you what I mean by radical hospitality by telling you a story. Before I came to Myers Park 5 1/2 years ago, I was pastor up in Davidson. The Davidson church, like this church, had multiple services and a lot of people that came, and a lot of young people and a lot of visitors. And I tracked one guy. He visited four times and then he said to me, I'm not coming back to the church. And I hesitated to ask, "Why aren't you coming back?" I worried it might have something to do with the sermons. And he said, "It's about this... Your church is the friendliest church I have ever seen." Then he said, "But nobody spoke to me." It's the friendliest church I've ever seen, but nobody spoke to me. And it mattered that nobody spoke to him because he wasn't the kind of guy; I'll just go be a Presbyterian or I'll go be a Baptist. He was the kind of guy, he'd given up on church a long time ago, had a lot of crises in his life. Good reason in his heart to give up on God. But somebody talked him into giving the church one more chance. And he came into a very, very friendly place indeed, but nobody spoke to him. We lost one to the Kingdom of God. We do not believe God is calling us to be a friendly place. We believe God is

calling us to radical hospitality. And we don't just look for our best friends on Sunday morning, we look for the person who looks a little lost, who nobody's speaking to. The person who might need us just to reach out, offer a hand. Might be just that person like the one we lost up in Davidson.

Noah, after all, could have built a family just for him and his wife. That would have been an easier boat to build, wouldn't it? And a small boat, could have made it very comfortable for him and his wife. But as it was, he had to build a huge boat and include space for all kinds of difficult creatures indeed. It was hospitality, not friendliness.

The next piece of our plan is affordable housing. We studied what's going on in Charlotte. You know this. The housing crisis here is getting ever worse, every year. There are many good initiatives around housing, and our church is a part of them, but we believe that God is calling us to do something big in terms of housing. And one of the things we've learned about housing is when people get housed, everything gets better for them. We used to do it the wrong way. We used to say, OK here's 17 prerequisites before we can help you with housing. You've got to get your life together, you've got to get everything organized, and if you satisfy all of these requirements, then we'll help you get into housing. This is a mistaken notion. As it turns out, if you put a decent roof over somebody's head, everything gets better for them. And I'll relate this, and the next initiative, by telling you my very favorite preaching story, and I know some of you have heard it before, so be patient with me. Years ago, we brought Millard Fuller to Charlotte, founder of Habitat for Humanity, and we asked him to be introduced by a woman named Melissa who lived in a Habitat house. In her introduction, she simply spoke to Millard Fuller and said you're the answer to my prayer. She said, I grew up in a tenement, violence and drugs all around me, and I knew that I wouldn't never be nobody, but then I had my little boy, and he was in a tenement with violence and drugs. I knew that he wouldn't never be nobody either, so I fell on my knees, I prayed to God. I said, God, I will do anything, I will even give up my own life if you just give my little boy a chance to be somebody. She said, Millard Fuller, you're the answer to my prayer. I learned I was eligible for a Habitat house, went to work on it, Millard Fuller, you came and worked on my house. The day came for us to move in. My little boy then was five years old. He never smiled very much, his kindergarten teacher said he's not good at learning, he's behind, he's never going to do very well. His life's going to be very hard, you might as well just get used to it. She said, But we moved in that house and he began to smile. He began to do better. He's in the third grade now. He's making straight A's in school. And he said to me the other day, "Momma, do you know what I want to be when I grow up?" I said, "No son, what do you want to be?" He said, "I want to be a doctor." Millard Fuller, you're the answer to my prayer.

We believe that the people all over the City of Charlotte who are on their knees praying today, and we're the answer. We're the answer to provide a decent roof over people's heads, but not just put them in the house and say, "Bye, have a nice time in the housing that we've helped you get." No, instead, to befriend something, think what it could be to connect with a five-year-old boy somebody said has no future. But you love that child. You treat that child the way you might a child in your own family. And you

love him over a long period of time, and you'd be sure one day that they go to college. We'll even let him go to Carolina! It's OK! And you send that child to college and they get out, and they become a productive member of society. We believe that God is calling us to this. We believe that God is calling us to pardon with other people. Think about it. Noah building that ark. We always picture him doing it by himself. I'll guarantee you this, Noah did not build that ark by himself. You just can't do it. When I was a little boy, my dad would have these building projects in the house. He'd always holler, "James!" And I'd be doing something. He'd need me to hold the other end of a board, to hold the flashlight, to run to get him a drink of water. To go get his glasses. You can't build an ark by yourself, you've got to have some help. You've got to have some other hands. We believe that God is calling us into partnerships with other people, and we think you expect us to do this. That we're going to join hands with just our beloved Presbyterian friends across the alley. Bless their hearts. The Episcopalians down the street. The Baptists. We're going to join hands with others and be the Body of Christ in a way that's pleasing to God.

God also is calling us to think about what's going on in our city and to make a difference. I had a guy say to me the other day, he said, "You know, I think there are some people beginning to come to Charlotte who are kind of different." And I thought, You've had your head in the sand, they've been here for some time. One of the problems you have in the City of Charlotte is that people don't know each other, they don't trust each other, they don't like each other. We think our church is being called to play a key role to help people learn how to befriend each other, understand each other, and especially in the realm of religion. We already have our Families of Abraham exhibit down the hall. You can see Christians, Jews, Muslims. We think God's calling us to befriend each other. I can tell you this, how much it's enriched my life. My most treasured clergy colleague in this city, I'm pleased to say is not a Methodist, he's not even a Christian. It's Rabbi Murray Ezring from down at Temple Israel. My life is so rich because of that relationship. We think God's calling us to this. We think God's calling us to be good stewards. The church has been really slow to catch up on the appeal to be green, but let's just face it, God calls us to preserve God's good world. God calls us to look around here and ask how might we be wasteful in a way that is not pleasing to God. How do we care for this great treasure of a facility that God has given us? We're called to be good stewards of what's been given to us inside the building and out in our lives.

Finally, and this is the most important piece at all. As we had focus groups that met all around this church talking about this plan, the word that kept coming up is urgency. Urgency. I can imagine God saying to Noah, "I want you to build an ark." And Noah says, "What? Sure I'll do it, but my back is hurting right now. When my back gets better I'll work on that ark." Or Noah might have said, Well, my sons aren't quite grown yet. When my sons get grown we'll work on that ark. Or whatever. Noah probably had good reason to delay, but I think Noah is the kind of person that God said, build the ark, he immediately got a saw out and started cutting the wood to build the ark. One of the things you and I suffer from is we have good intentions. We plan to serve God one of these days. We're waiting until we retire, until things are a little more convenient, until

things settle down. But the rain clouds are gathering. The other thing that happens in a big church, we know this, is we are so big, we think somebody else is doing that. Somebody else is doing that. But you know what, when you say somebody else must be doing this, God doesn't say, good answer. No, no, no. When you say somebody else must be doing this, God says, no, I'm calling you. I'm calling you. Not somebody else. Our challenge to you is to find your piece in the building of the ark. Big boat. It's a big boat. We need all of us. You need to be one of the builders of the ark.

We ask you to respond this morning or in coming days, there's an insert in your bulletin, it's got a little tear-off piece. You put your name in there. You don't sign up to be on some committee forever. All we're asking right now is really, What really piques your interest? What really tickles your imagination? Is it connecting with Jews and Muslims? Is it deepening our faith? Is it being sure that a kid's got a roof over his head and that he gets to go to college one day? Whatever it is, you just fill that out. And if you don't fill it out, you're going to have an e-mail in your box from me when you get home. You will, today. And it will be a great joy to be part of this together. God's calling us to build an ark. Amen.