

John 12:20-36 “The Temptation to Be Ordinary”

The story of Noah in the Old Testament sort of gets a bum rap. We tend to dismiss it as a kids' story. You know, “Kids love animals, and what kid doesn't think it would be fun to be the captain of a floating zoo?” Fisher Price even has a “Little People's Noah and the Animals” set. You can get it at Target for \$34.99. It has lions, elephants, giraffes and zebras. Two of each. Plus a little bald-headed Noah holding a dove. Does Fisher Price have any other toys based on Bible stories? There's no “Fisher Price Joshua and the Wall of Jericho Playset.” There's no, “Jesus and the Gerasene Demoniac Playset” although I think that one might have some kid appeal with a little herd of pigs and such. But Fisher Price does have “Noah and the Animals.” And for that very reason, we adults dismiss the story. With the exception, of course, of some adults in Williamstown, Kentucky who spent a ridiculous amount of time, money, and resources building a replica of the Ark. They wanted to show the world that it was possible, thus upholding the integrity of the Biblical account (notice I didn't say “story”) so that *maybe* by showing the world that it could be done, people who might otherwise doubt God's existence can be persuaded to believe. Clearly *they* think this is a little more than just a kids' story.

But a lot of folks say the most remarkable part of this story has nothing to do with arks and animals. Physicist Stephen Barr says that the rainbow is what sets this story apart. I agree too and you've heard the reason why I think so: Because the rainbow in the ancient Middle East served as a sign of terror to remind people that Marduk, the patron god of Babylon, used his “rainbow” to slay the monster Tiamat. So you better fall in line and not rise up against Babylon or you'll get the bow too! But the God of Israel used the rainbow as a sign of hope and peace. But see, I'm just looking at it theologically because that's what I was trained to do. Barr is a physicist and sees the importance of the rainbow through the lens of science. He says the best thing about a rainbow is that we see only a portion of it because of the limits of our human visual spectrum. There's much more to a rainbow than we can imagine. In

other words, God didn't offer full disclosure to Noah -- that had to wait for the incarnation. The rainbow was just a foreshadowing to Bethlehem.

We started out our Lenten Journey this year in Mark's gospel which is about the most straight-forward, minimalist, bare-bones reading of the four gospels. Then we switched over to John's gospel which is the most cosmic and theologically dense out of them all. And like that physicist's assessment of the rainbow, there's a whole lot more happening in John's account of Jesus than what we humans can perceive with our limited senses. We humans can only see part of the truth but through Jesus and the grace of the Holy Spirit, we can not only see the truth, we can know the truth. And that truth, as John says, will set us free.

So in our gospel reading today, we have some Greeks who were in Jerusalem for the Passover feast. They run into Philip, one of Jesus' 12 Disciples, and they tell him that they'd like to meet Jesus. So Philip grabbed Andrew, found Jesus and they told him about these Greeks looking for him. Jesus says, "Well, it looks like the time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Then he goes into a big discourse on what it means to be glorified which ends in verse 32 with a prediction of his crucifixion: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Great! But what about the Greeks who just wanted to meet him? Don't they matter? Sure they do. But they just wanted to see Jesus of Nazareth, the traveling preacher/teacher/healer who came to Jerusalem for the Passover. But in John's gospel, Jesus had moved beyond that by now. He's not "just" a traveling preacher anymore. In order to "see" Jesus now, they needed to look beyond who and what they *thought* was in front of them. They needed to see Jesus through the lens of the Holy Spirit in order to understand.

Have you ever been frustrated because you don't understand the purpose of something? Or have you ever met a person who has to have a plan all laid out in front of them before they can tackle a project? I was on a planning committee once with someone who had to have a detailed agenda for every meeting he attended. I'd send out an e-mail a week

ahead of time reminding folks about the meeting. I'd even outline what I wanted to accomplish. So I'd write, "Hey, just wanted to remind you about next week's meeting. Here's what we need to accomplish: We need to make sure our venue is secured. We need to figure out how we're going to do onsite registration. We need to make sure the sandwich shop down the road is still willing to deliver and if so, determine if we should order extra sandwiches for the people who forgot to pre-register and will inevitably show up. Oh, and we need to make sure we have a clean-up crew to help too. See you next week." On the day of the meeting, the committee would gather and this *one* person would get all huffy and say, "Well, where's our agenda?" And I'd say, "Oh, I'm sorry ... did you not get my e-mail last week? I included a list of what we needed to get done today." He'd say, "Oh I got the e-mail. I just like to have an agenda in front of me and in my hands when I come to a meeting." So I pulled up the e-mail on my phone, took a screen shot of it and texted it to him and said, "There. You have it in your hands now. And no paper wasted." Come to find out, I was a lot more amused with my creative solution than he was. But I really shouldn't fault him or pick on him because there are plenty of times when I'm like that. When I get frustrated because I feel I don't know the big-picture agenda in the game of life.

The point of John's lesson here in the gospel is that in order for these Greeks or anyone to see Jesus as Lord ... in order to grasp what is beyond our "human visual spectrum" ... we need to see the way God's great purpose is being worked out in what's about to happen to Jesus. See, this takes place right after Jesus came parading into Jerusalem for the last time on the back of a donkey. "Wait Preacher! Palm Sunday is next week! Spoilers!" I know, I know ... but this week's text doesn't make much sense without understanding that what Tom read happened immediately following Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. With "ordinary eyes," Jesus could have just been another Jewish troublemaker. Another "enemy of the state" who was about to be declared redundant by the Romans and the corrupt religious leaders. "Oh yeah, another one of *those* guys. Well he's not the first and probably won't be the last. He'll

probably end up on a cross like the rest of them.” That doesn’t mean that folks didn’t have hope. If the people didn’t have any hope, Jesus wouldn’t have had the sort of audience he did when he entered the gates of Jerusalem. They wouldn’t be waving palms and shouting, “Hosannah!” if they didn’t have at least *some* hope that he *might* be the Messiah. But again, he wasn’t the first. Human eyes that can only see the red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple parts of the rainbow had grown sort of accustomed to seeing this sort of thing. What Jesus has to say in this passage is an attempt to shed light and open people’s eyes to see beyond the ordinary into the *extra*-ordinary. “If you walk in darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.”

Sometimes we get comfortable with the “ordinary.” We have no desire to look beyond what we can see without effort. I guess if we want to look at it in the context of our theme for Lenten season this year, our temptation is to just “settle” for ordinary. And you may think, “What in the world is wrong with ordinary? Nothing seems ordinary anymore. I would like very much to have *one day* out of the week where I can wake up and experience ordinary.” Mind you, in this day and age you might have to go shut yourself in one of these float tanks that blocks all your sensory input. But even that’s not “ordinary” because you’re taking extra-ordinary measures to try to experience ordinary! Gah! See how messed up this is all gets?

And here’s Jesus saying, “The hour has come when the son of man will be glorified.” Here’s Jesus saying, “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” And to top it all off, there’s this confirmation of Jesus’ words from an actual voice from the heavens! This is the in-breaking of God’s extraordinary kingdom into this ordinary world. This is where the light of God shines so that we can see beyond what our human eyes can see.

But isn't it interesting that for most of Jesus' ministry, he used the ordinary to proclaim this extraordinary message? He used simple bread and fishes to show that in this new Kin-dom, God is concerned with our basic human needs. When he turned water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana, he was illustrating how God wants to provide things that go beyond our basic human needs ... and that the quality of God's gifts are the very best! In the healing of those who were plagued by demons, Jesus demonstrates that God's desire is for us to be whole ... to be free from the forces that would hold us down and keep us from being all we can be. And his death on an ordinary cross and burial in an ordinary tomb can lead to an extraordinary resurrected life where this kingdom can be realized. It's okay to appreciate the "ordinary." Just don't be tempted to *settle* for it.