

Do you remember the story of Noah and the ark? Maybe one of the most famous stories in the Bible, one of those stories that we love to tell our kids. And it's a story about one guy who is kind of handpicked by the grace of God to be saved from the destruction of the world. And God asks Noah and his family to build this big, wooden ark and to get all the animals of the earth two by two and bring them on to the ark. And as they all get on for 40 days and 40 nights, it rains and the whole earth is flooded. And Noah and his family are saved and spared. And afterwards they are released from the ark to rebuild the entire world.

It's one of the greatest stories in the Bible. And it's not just a story in the Old Testament, it's not just a children's fable. In fact, it's a real story that really happened. And it couldn't be any more relevant to your life and mine right now.

You see, if you jump into the context of the story of Noah and the ark, here's kind of the setting of what was happening in Noah's day. It says, "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become. And that every inclination of His thoughts, of the thoughts of His heart, was only evil all the time." That doesn't sound like Noah's day, that kind of sounds like today, doesn't it? Darkness and brokenness and evil and destruction and all kinds of chaos in the world around us. And yet, in the midst of all of that, look at what it says, "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God." Now, that's a really interesting verse, isn't it? It says Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time.

What does that mean? Does that mean that Noah was perfect? Does that mean that Noah never messed up? Does that mean that Noah never made any mistakes in his life? No, no, no. Jump back up here. Look at what it means. It means Noah found grace. In fact, this is the first time in the Bible the word grace is used. What this means is that Noah of all peoples of the earth understood his desperate need for the goodness and the grace of God. And because he was humble enough to receive the grace of God, the grace of God came into his life, changed him, and made him a righteous man, blameless in his day, and he walked with God. And the same is true for you and me. You see, you have to remember that grace changes our identity. Grace changes our reality. And grace changes our eternity. I mean look at this next verse, talking about Jesus, "God made Jesus who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

When we receive the grace of Jesus, we become righteous, made right with God, blameless, holy, perfect in God's sight. Look at this next verse that says, "For He chose us in Him, when we receive the grace of Jesus before the creation of the world we become holy and blameless in his sight." In the midst of this wicked and broken and crooked generation, when we receive the grace of God, we are set apart, holy, blameless in his sight. So look at it one more time. And now, take Noah out and put you in. But you found grace in the eyes of the Lord. You are a righteous man or woman, blameless among the people of your time, and you walk with God.

Some of you need to be reminded of that truth today. You see, Noah found grace with God. And he was made right with God. And God invited Noah and his family to build this big, wooden ark because of the coming destruction of the world. And so they did that and got all the animals on and they got into the ark. And here is this big, wooden ark, and then it starts to rain. And for 40 days and for 40 nights, seemingly out of nowhere, the skies open, the underground aquifer is released and the whole earth is flooded. And you have to jump back into the context. We read it in a quick, little story, and we think it takes five minutes. No, no, no, week one was like panic. Week two was like, is this really happening? Week three was this like, is this ever going to end? Week four is what on earth is happening? And Noah and his family watched the storm overtake the world.

And in front of their very eyes, they watched everything that was comfortable, everything that was convenient, everything that they can control was washed away in front of their eyes. And yet in the midst of that storm and that chaos, look at what this next verse says, "The flood kept coming on the earth, and as the waters increased, the y lifted the ark high above the earth and the ark went gently floating upon the surface of the waters." In the midst of the chaos and the storm and the destruction, God provided salvation for Noah and his family, and the same is true for you.

You see, the wooden ark is a picture of the wooden cross. The wooden ark is a prophetic picture of the wooden cross of Jesus, that a savior was going to come to save you and me from the destruction of this world.

And in the midst of this coronavirus, in the midst of the storm, in the midst of the chaos, in the midst of the brokenness, when we grab a hold of the wooden cross of Jesus, even though it feels like the flood keeps coming, we are lifted up in the name of Jesus, high above this earth, high above the storm. And we can gently float along in the midst of the chaos because of the grace of God.

You see, you and I, we can't control the flood right now, but we can control whether or not we choose to get on the ark. We control whether or not we want to grab a hold of the cross Jesus. And so right now, I know so many of you, you're struggling. And the storm has come, and the anxiety, and the stress, and the sickness, and the job, and the pandemic, and the chaos, and all those things are real. But remember you have the wooden cross. You have the ark, the thing that lifts you high above the chaos of this world so you can gently float along in the midst of the storm.

And if you jump back to them in the ark and you think about it, the question I would ask you is, do you think they were more focused on the flood or the fact that they were in the ark? So the question I want to ask you is this, are you more focused on the pandemic or the Prince of Peace? Are you spending more time grumbling about corona or being grateful for the grace of God in your life? You see, we're not the only ones to have gone through something like this.

Noah and his family know what it was like. And it wasn't just a day or two. I mean the storm goes on and on. And you can only play so many games with those animals. And what was it like on the days the internet went out? I mean 150 days floating all around the earth and then after 150 days, the ark finally comes to rest on the top of Mount Ararat. And as they're sitting there, day after day go by and they slowly watched the water starting to recede and they could see the tops of other mountains.

And don't you know that Noah and his family, they were anxious to get off that boat? They were anxious to get back on to life, to keep moving forward. And so Noah does something really interesting in the story if you remember it, or maybe you've never heard it. You see, after a while of sitting there, he takes a dove and he lets the dove go out the window. And the dove flies around but it can't find any place to land, so it comes back. And then seven days later, Noah does it again and he throws the dove out and the dove flies around and it's gone for a little while and then it comes back and it has a little olive branch in its mouth. Hope. The dry land is rising somewhere out on the horizon. And then seven days later again, he takes the dove a third time, he throws it out, only this time it never comes back.

You see, what I think is really interesting is the dove is a picture of the Holy Spirit. Following the dove was like following the cloud.

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JOHN STICKL: The Old Testament cloud that led the Israelites, the dove is a picture of the Holy Spirit before the cloud. It's a picture of the Holy Spirit before Jesus released it to us. And so Noah in a sense, he wasn't listening to what the world was saying. He was listening to what God was saying. And don't you know every time he threw that dove out, the whole family was sitting there like, please, Jesus, let this be the time we get to come out of the ark and get back on with our life? And don't you know that every time that was happening, one of the daughters-in-law that was on the boat was like, well, I heard on the news, it's safe to come out. And then another one of the daughter-in-laws was probably like, well, I heard on the news we can never come out again. And then the other one was probably like, well, I saw on Facebook that my friends on the other mountain, they already got out of the ark. And everybody had an opinion and a perspective. But Noah was interested in what God was doing. And so after 150 days of floating, and then almost another 150-plus days of sitting there waiting for the waters to recede, the dove flies away signaling it's time to come out.

They -- jump to the next Genesis verse for me. And so they come out and it says, "So God blessed him and his sons and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.'" They come out and the flood has completely changed the face of the earth, and they're now blessed by God to go and be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth. The same thing God said to Adam and Eve. There is a new vision, a new horizon, a new opportunity that lies in front of them. There was an entire new life sitting there for them because they had been protected by the grace of God and waited on Him in the midst of it all. And I think Noah's story is so applicable to you

and me today. Because if we're honest, it feels like the flood keeps coming and we want to get off the boat and we all got opinion and we all got a perspective. And we want to move on with life.

But when it's time, God's blessing us, and He's going to give us the opportunity to rebuild this world with the hope of Jesus. And so what does all of this mean for you and me and for where we are at Valley Creek? Well, if you know anything about us, what we always do as a church, we always follow God. We always follow the cloud, follow the dove, follow the presence of God. And if you jump back with me all the way till May, when it felt like this whole storm was kind of coming down, we prayed about it, we found unity together as a team. We sought God and we said, hey, we're going to go ahead and re-gather, in-person gather on July 26th. And at that time all the way back at the end of May, that felt like forever away. That felt like, bro, how long are you going to make us wait until we can get back together? And then all of a sudden, all of it has kind of changed, hasn't it? And so if you remember what I told back then, the reason we waited so long is because we're a Jesus-focused church.

And I can't see a way for us to gather to be a COVID-focused church, to spend all the conversation, and the energy, and the dialogue, everything about COVID, and all the restrictions, and the spaces, and the masks, and the frustrations, and the tensions, and the temperature checks, and the registrations, and all the things that go -- and so I just said, we're not a COVID-focused church. We're a Jesus-focused church. And so right now, as what I told you back then, is it would be a COVID-focused church to open up the doors. Well, unfortunately that's kept going until now.

And so where we sit today after praying and seeking God and talking to lots of different people, medical professionals and governing officials and other churches, we've made the decision to go ahead and delay our in-person gatherings until at least October. Now, I know when some of you hear that, it creates a lot of disappointment.

And to some of you, it actually creates a lot of peace. And there's a whole lots of us with a whole lot of thoughts in between all of that. And like I get all of that. Here's what I want you to understand from me. If we try to gather next weekend, it would be a really bad experience. You may not get that, you may not understand it. But if you can just trust me based on all of the COVID stuff, it would just be a bad experience. And as we've talked to other churches our size that have opened, there's only about 20% of people that are actually even coming back to the gathering right now because of corona and all the restrictions, and the fears, and the realities. So it would actually not only be a bad experience, it would be bad stewardship for us to take all that time and energy to put it into a weekend experience that isn't even really good, that's only for 20% of the people. And so we're just going to go ahead and say, we're going to delay in-person gatherings till at least October. And I know some of you, you want to know, well, October? Like where are you getting that and where is that coming from?

Listen, right now the thing that people can handle the least is calendar whiplash. And if you've experienced this, you know what I'm talking about. This is why there's so much tension right now around schools and work, and all the different stuff. It's like the constant changing of the dates, and the constant waiting and the unknown, and I don't know, and are we going to ever, and what about this, and how -- and I don't want you to live that way with us. That's why I told you when we picked July 26th was I wanted to put it so far out that you don't have to wonder. We don't want to overcommunicate to you, we don't want you to sit there and wonder every week when something changes, so we're just going to go ahead and say, with strong leadership and clarity to bring peace into your life, into your world so you don't have to live in calendar whiplash that we're just going to delay until at least October. And again, I get it. Some of you are over here and you think this whole thing is a joke. You think it's a conspiracy.

You don't get it. You think we should go back to life. That's a real perspective and an opinion. And some of you are way over here, you think this is the scariest thing that's ever happened in your life. Like no one should leave their house, and everyone should wear masks. And then there's a whole lot of people in between. Okay. But can I tell you right now, it's not about your opinion or your perspective, it's about honoring one another and loving one another.

In fact, if you remember the greatest command that Jesus gives us, he says, "Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself." The decisions we all as individuals and as a church and organizations have to make in this season is how do we best love our neighbor? So here's a great question for you, if you're over here and you think this whole thing is a joke and we should get back to it, can I ask you a question? How right now can you best love your neighbor who feels like we should go back to shelter in place?

And if you are, everyone should go back to shelter in place, can I ask you how right now can you love your neighbor who thinks this whole thing should be over? And I'm not going to answer that question for you. You need to ask the question, how are you going to best love your neighbor? But I can answer it for you how we're going to do it as a church. You see, the problem is right now the fear is fear of crowds. And if we opened up our campuses right now, we would have one of the largest if not the largest gathering in every city we have a campus in. Well, right now, that doesn't feel like a really good way to love our neighbor. That doesn't feel like a really good way to serve the city. Remember, our vision is to be a movement of hope for the city and beyond. And it's really hard to be a movement of hope for the city when it feels like you're dishonoring the city. Remember, hope flows through honor. And so even if we don't get it and we don't like it, we can choose to honor one another so hope can cascade into their lives.

And hear me, this isn't about faith or fear. This is not about politics. This is not about to mask or not to mask. This is about honoring the city and being a movement of hope for the city and beyond, and making a decision to love our neighbor right now by not having the largest gathering in the area which is the thing that everyone is really concerned about, to allow hope to cascade and to flow. And so then I know some of you are sitting there, you're like, okay, so

what then -- well, listen to me, we're not sitting around waiting for an in-person gathering someday, we're following Jesus like today. And so here's what we're going to do, we're going to delay our in-person till at least October, but we're going to start something new called circles. What we need now more than anything is actually not to come and sit in rows, we need to engage in circles.

We need to get in small circles where we look each other in the eyes and pray for one another and talk about Jesus and process our faith and be encouraged and strengthened. And so we're going to start on campus circles at all of our campuses for you to be able to engage your faith in this season. And what I think is so cool is if you'll read through the gospels with me and you look through it, what you'll find is that Jesus was always taking large crowds and turning them into small circles. And so if right now large gatherings are the problem in our world, well, Jesus has already given us a solution by showing us, taking large crowds and turning them into small circles. I mean do you remember the feeding of the 4,000? Jesus has got 4,000 people, giant crowd, they're all in rows, they've had the best church service like ever, man. I mean this is Jesus teaching, best communicator in all of history. And he's teaching them, and yet, look at what Jesus says. He says, "I have compassion for these people."

"They have already been with me three days and have had nothing to eat. If I send home hungry, they will collapse on the way because some of them have a long distance." Okay, wait a second. If all we need is to sit in rows and hear really good teaching, then these people shouldn't be hungry. They shouldn't collapse, they shouldn't be overwhelmed, they shouldn't need compassion. Why? Because they need more than a row, they need a circle. So Jesus breaks up these 4,000 groupings of people in these rows and turns them into small circles. And then look what happens. The people ate and were satisfied. It's in circles where we're satisfied, not in rows. And that's why even before corona, if all you ever did was come in and sit in a row and receive, you really weren't satisfied with your faith. You aren't satisfied with the spiritual journey that you're on because we need more than that.

We need circles where we engage with one another. In fact, 1 Thessalonians tells us, "Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up." This is what we need right now, guys. And right now, if we would have in-person gatherings and come back and we have all the restrictions, and the masks, and the limitations, and the temperature checks, and all the stuff that goes with it, guess what, we couldn't encourage or build each other up. If you're sitting there with a mask on, and an empty row in front of you, an empty row behind you, and empty chairs next to you, and you come in and you get a one hour sitting in a row experience, I mean no one can minister to you. No one can serve you. No one can encourage you or build you up. That's not a good experience. And so we need to create an alternative to get to what we really need and that's circles. It's Jesus' method and Jesus' model.

So let me show you how this is going to work. A circle is a one hour on-campus experience where we will sit in small circles and discuss the weekend message, read the Scriptures and pray together.

Genius, huh? It's that simple. We're going to get together at our campuses. We're going to sit in small circles that have like safe social distancing, only a few people at a time with other people at other tables. And we're going to discuss the weekend message, read the Scriptures and pray together and move forward on our journey with Jesus. So let me show how this whole thing is going to work. Here's what it's like. We are now officially moving from just like kind of the Sunday one hour experience to 167 church, if you remember in the last series what we talked about.

Check this out. Every Monday at all of our campuses, there will be men circles at 7 AM and 7 PM. Every Tuesday, we will have prayer at 7 PM sitting in small tables, again, at circles, but we're going to pray and we're going to worship together. Wednesday, we will have student circles at all campuses at 7 PM.

Thursdays, there will be women circles at 10 AM and 7 PM. On the third Saturday of the month, we will have served the city initiatives at all the campuses. On Sunday, we will have online services just like this, both the adults and the kids version. And then every day of the week, we will have groups, resources, and you can be a hope carrier. This my friends is a movement of hope for the city and beyond. This is Jesus' vision for the church. So could it just be that all of these restrictions and all of these things that are kind of in our way are actually there to help us become who God has wanted us to be all along. You see, what if we put the same level of excellence and engagement in Monday through Saturday that we used to do on Sunday? This isn't about sitting around waiting for in-person gatherings to start again, no, no. This is about following Jesus today.

This is about being good stewards of our time and our energy. This is about taking our faith serious and activating it in the 167 of our life. This is -- can you image like what we can do for this city. We used to have thousands of people sitting in rows. What if we had thousands gathering in circles? And so here is the deal, this is how we're going to start. My hope is that so many of you will want to be a part of it that we'll have to add more days and times for each of the people groups because there's only so many people we can take. We're not registering for this because honestly people don't honor registrations. They register and don't come or don't register and show up. So here's the deal, it's going to be first come first served. For all of these deals, there's only so many seats in a room. If you're in the Lewisville Campus, think of the Lewisville Worship Center, tables and a few chairs around each one, as many as we can put in the room. For the Denton Campus, same thing. Flowermound Campus, think The Venue. That's what we will do.

And when it's full it's full. So you'll have to get there early. Same is true with Tuesday prayer. Same amount of seats. And literally, there will be like a staff member at the door with a little clicker, so if we get full, we get full, because we have to honor each other with all of the restrictions and the safety stuff. So you don't have to stress out about it. But come on, can you imagine what we could do if we started to engage in circles instead of just sat around and waited to come and sit in rows?

This is church. This is the invitation from God in this season. And again, I get it, we all have different opinions and different perspectives. Your opinion and your perspective is valid. It's real. But this right now is about being a movement of hope for the city and beyond. See, the question we ask to get to this conclusion is not what do we want, not what's best for Valley Creek, not what do Valley Creek people need.

The question we asked was how do we best fulfill our mission of being a movement of hope for the city and beyond? And we really believe right now in this season, it's this. And so men, can I challenge you? You're called by God to lead your family. Time to step up, activate your faith, get in a circle. Students, can I challenge you? You're getting ready to go back to school. Who knows what the days and times of all that look like? But you're called to be set apart in a very broken generation. And parents, your student, if you say, do you want to go to a student circle? They're probably going to say no. Can I just encourage you? Take authority over your family and be more worried about their spiritual health than their education. Women, you are the ones that hold us all together. But who's holding you together? And so let me encourage you to come and be a part. And I get if you're not even ready to come and sit in a small circle, no problem.

Get in an online group, use our resources. Use our online services every single week. No problem. No pressure. No expectation. We just want to start opening the door to sit in small circles that are safe, that are responsible, that love our city and allow us to make disciples of each other. I am so excited about the direction of our church in this season. We don't want to sit around and wait for someday, we want to follow Jesus today.

I mean come on, check it out, Acts chapter 2, this is the 1st Century church, "They devoted themselves," devoted means to continue to do something with intense effort despite difficulty. They were devoted. They continued, even though it wasn't convenient, comfortable, and in many ways felt out of control. "They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching, the Word of God, to the fellowship, relationship with other believers, to the breaking of bread, serving each other with the grace of Jesus, and to prayer."

Come on. This is church. I know this is old school. I know this is like, oh, that's like ancient history. Nobody do that now. We come and we sit in rows and have lights and cameras and production and loud music. I know. Our weekend gatherings, they're so good. That's why we all want to come back to them. They're awesome. Okay. But right now, I think God is inviting

us to go old school, to actually get together and activate our faith and engage the Scriptures, build relationship with each other, serve each the grace of God, and pray with one another. I mean, come on, man. 1st Century church, they had no buildings. They had no buildings. You know what they had? Circles. And they were in small circles and those circles brought the grace of God all the way to you in 2020.

Because they were willing to engage their faith in circles. I mean you realize when Noah got off the boat and God says, "Be fruitful and multiple, fill the earth," the same exact thing He told Adam and Eve. So after the flood, it wasn't a new thing. It was the original thing. It was old school. The old school became new school. What was vintage became fresh. This is old school, but it's new school. This is vintage, but this is now fresh. This is what God is doing. Come on, one last verse for you. "But Noah, but you, found grace in the eyes of the Lord. You are a righteous man or woman, blameless among the people of your time and you walk with God."

The grace of God empowers us to walk with God. Not just by ourselves but together as a family on mission, as a people on a journey together. And I know this hasn't been an easy season. So cling to the cross. We can't control the storm, but we can control whether or not we get on the ark. Hold on to that wooden cross. It's lifting you up above the storms of this world. And you can gently glide along by grace even though the world is in panic and in chaos. And this isn't the time to check out, this is a time to lean in. This is a time to engage. Listen, engage with the shoe drive not because kids needs shoes, but because your heart needs to serve someone else. Keep giving not because God needs your money, but because your heart needs to trust God with your money. Keep watching online not because the service needs to be watched, but because you need people to serve you.

Get in a circle not because the circles need people, but because you need a circle. Keep engaging the Scriptures not because the Word of God needs to be read, but because you need the Word of God in your life. This is a time to engage and lean in, not lean out. And I can't speak for any other church or for any other family, but I can take responsibility and clarity and try to lead this family into the future. And I really believe that God is inviting us to do what Noah and his family would have done while they were waiting. You see, you have to understand 150 days and they landed on Mount Ararat. This is the last thing. And as they sat there, you understand they were still on that boat for like another 200 days. Ain't that interesting? God was done doing what He was doing in the world. But He wasn't done doing what He was doing in their hearts.

So even though they wanted to get out of that boat, God was saying, hey, I need you to engage in a circle a little bit because I'm doing a deep work in you. I think God is doing something deep inside of you in this season, inside of me in this season. So He's inviting us to lean in, not to lean out. Because this is a moment in time to be a movement of hope for the city and beyond, and to find grace with God. Have you lost sight of grace? Have you lost

sight of the fact that there's salvation for anyone who is humble and desperate enough to receive what God freely offers in Jesus' name. Have you lost sight of the fact that it changes your identity, your reality and your eternity?

Have you got so focused on the 40 days of rain that you forgot that you're actually on the ark? You don't have to be afraid of the pandemic because you're included in the Prince of Peace. This is the next step for us as a movement of hope for the city and beyond. We got this. The church is great. The church is healthy, and alive, and vibrant. And the spirit is uniting us, activating us, and launching us into the destiny we were created for. The best days of Jesus' church, the best days of Valley Church, and I believe the best days of your life are yet to come. Come on, Valley Creek. We're a movement of hope for the city and beyond.

We can trust in the grace of Jesus and move forward together. So will you close your eyes with me? And let me just ask you right now, come on, what does God want to say to you? What is He stirring up in your heart and in your mind? I think right now some of us just need to re-receive the grace of God, fresh grace for today. In a season where there's lots of disappointments and lots of discouragement, and it feels like the storm keeps going, I know, I get all of that, and it's all real. But guess what, come on, we're safe in the ark. We're safe in the finished work of Jesus. We rest in the cross of who he is and what he has done. And in this time in this place, he's inviting us to change our perspective of church is a one hour Sunday sit in rows, to church is every day of the week in small circles.

And he is inviting us to love our neighbor and to honor the city, and go to a new place in this time. So Lord Jesus, I just pray a blessing over every one of us. Thank you that you have rescued us, that you have saved us, that you have called us your own, and that you are going to bless us and commission us to rebuild this world with the hope of Jesus after this flood. And so we look to you, God. We choose to lean in. We're not afraid, we trust you. And we walk forward by faith. And we know wherever you're leading us is better than where we have been. We love you Jesus. Thank you for unity, thank you for clarity, thank you for grace. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.