

Genesis 1-11
Costly, Messy, Beautiful Obedience
Chapter 6:1-9-22
November 12, 2006

You'll notice that the key word in the title of my message for this morning is the word "obedience." When I did a Google search on just the word "obedience" the most popular sites fell into two categories: dog obedience (as in "Obedience is a term used to correct misbehavior in dogs or other pets") or the Stanley Milgram experiments. Back in the early 1960's Stanley Milgram, a PhD. student at Yale, started a series of experiments called "Obedience to Authority." His experiments consisted of a "learner" and a "teacher" and an "experimenter." The experimenter represented the voice of authority. The "teachers," who were ordinary people like you and me, were supposed to administer electric shocks to the "learners" whenever they answered a question incorrectly. The teachers didn't know it, but the learners were actually just paid actors. So when they received the shock they would cry and groan, but in Milgram's most of the teachers obeyed the instructions of the experimenter (after all, he had a clipboard and a white coat on!) and kept increasing the level of the shock. Ultimately over two-thirds of the teachers kept obeying the experimenter in the white coat unto they punished their learners with the maximum shock of 450 volts.

So based on this little survey, apparently obedience is a nasty word. We're suspicious of obedience. It's something that you do for dogs but not human beings. It's also mindless, scary and it hurts people.

Or is it? In our Scripture reading this morning we find a story of radical obedience from an ordinary man named Noah offered to the Living God. In Noah's life we discover the secret to authentic, gutsy, real Christian living: loving God and knowing God and experiencing God means that we're living a life of active obedience for God. In Genesis 6 we find Noah's story of a lifestyle of messy, costly, beautiful obedience. And it's not what we might expect about obedience.

To begin with, the story of Noah's obedience – like every story of obeying God – does not begin with Noah; it begins with God. Notice verse 8 – In the midst of the disaster of verse 5 ("The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time"), there is this bright ray of hope: "But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord." Noah found grace. Of course the stress on this verse is that God in His grace found Noah.

As you may know, the world is filled with ancient flood stories. But there are crucial differences and themes in the biblical story that set it apart. One crucial difference is this: the Babylonian flood stories, for example, emphasize the heroic image of the main character. The biblical story begins with God and emphasizes God's grace. And then it tells us about Noah's simple, humble but costly response to God's grace. But it all begins with God. Here we have a foretaste of the Good News of Jesus. In the New Testament we're told over and over again that God saves us, favors us, chooses us, forgives us, sets

us free from the power and penalty of sin and the sting of death, not by our own moral effort or progress; it's all by His grace (see Ephesians 2:8-9). Now some people say, "Yea, yea, I've heard this before; now I want to move on to the 'deep stuff.'" I'm sorry but there's nothing deeper than the Gospel. And nearly every problem in the spiritual life – from pride, to elitism, to a failure to love others, to joylessness, to impatience, to lust, to greed and a failure to be generous – can be traced back to a failure to apply the work of Jesus on the cross and the sending of His Spirit.

But that raises another very important question which I hear often: *If I'm saved by God's grace in Jesus and it isn't based on my good deeds, then why would I want to be good? Couldn't I just live the same life I've always lived – or even worse – and then just ask forgiveness?* No, because once you understand God and His grace, you want to change. Jesus is the One who set you free from the bondage of sin; he redeemed you when you were utterly lost; as a result, you love him. And when you're in love, it changes everything about you - your actions, your attitudes, your motivations, your affections. It changes everything! So this story of obedience is first a story of God's grace. Because when you're chosen and when you're loved beyond your wildest imaginations, when you receive what Jesus has done for you, you will love Him in return and when you love Him, it changes everything. You will live a life of costly, messy, beautiful obedience.

All of this leads us into the story of Noah, the man who epitomizes costly, messy, beautiful obedience. Verse 9 begins by telling us that "Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God." The word for blameless meant free from defect, wholesome, sound. It does not imply that Noah was perfect or sinless, but it does imply something special about Noah. There's a theme running through this whole story: Noah obeys God. Notice the following verses:

- 6:22 – "Noah did everything just as God commanded him."
- 7:5 – "And Noah did all that the Lord commanded him."
- 7:9 – "... as God had commanded Noah."
- 7:16 – "... as God had commanded Noah."
- 8:15 and 18 – "Then God said to Noah, 'Come out of the Ark ... (verse 18) "So Noah came out."

Noah has a motto: just do it – God's way. Did you notice that Noah never speaks for the entire story? God gives four little speeches, but Noah just keeps his mouth shut and does his job.

But he's not a mindless robot; he's a flesh and blood human being with real problems and struggles. And when you come to Christ, God doesn't expect you to be a mindless robot either. The brilliant physicist John Polkinghorne recently said, "Many people think that faith involves shutting one's eyes, gritting one's teeth, and believing six impossible things before breakfast, because the Bible or the Pope ... tells us so. Not at all! Faith may involve a leap, but it's a leap in the light, not the dark. The aim of the religious quest, like that of the scientific quest, is to seek motivated belief about what is the case ... It's not a technique for whistling in the dark to keep our spirits up."¹ Noah may well have questioned, doubted, argued along the way, but all we have is the end result of his

¹ John Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity*, page 10.

journey: he received God's grace and then he responded by listening and obeying God. Noah has perfected the art of obedience not the art of thinking about obedience. He acts. He puts us faith into practice.

And as he puts his faith into practice Noah's life shows us that obedience is costly, messy and beautiful. First, it's costly. Obedience will cost you something. Notice in verses 14-16 the details of the ark. Someone has estimated that the dimensions imply that Noah's boat was 95,700 square feet. That's much smaller than the modern ocean liner *Queen Elizabeth II* but it's also much larger than Columbus's *Nina, Pinta* and *Santa Maria*. 450 feet equals one and half American football fields. This is a massive project. Imagine what this cost Noah to obey God. It wasn't a hobby to Noah; it would consume his time, his money, his energy, his life. As we saw in our opening reading, when you're in love it affects everything about you. Obedience is the flow of God's love in your life.

The Christian life will cost you. Recently, my 19 year old son has been my teacher in this regard. My son wants to spend the next semester in Nairobi, Kenya. This declaration came right after a friend of mine who recently visited Nairobi told me that she considers it one of the most dangerous places on the earth. So I told Matt I'm reconsidering where he's going to spend next semester. He replied nonchalantly, "Dad, you better get used to me facing danger. God has called me to the mission field, so you can say no to Nairobi now, but you can't protect me forever." I hung up the phone, got down on my knees and prayed, "Father, change my heart. Let my faith cost me something. Make it a daring and dangerous adventure of following you." Does your faith cost you anything? Does your giving cost you anything? Does it cut into your lifestyle at all? Does your service to God and for God cost you anything? Does your worship cost you anything? When King David entered a worship service, he said, "I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God offerings that cost me nothing" (2 Samuel 24:24). So if you come up to me after a worship service and say, "Thanks, that was a perfect service. That was exactly what I wanted." I will say (and you can say the same thing to me), "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry that worship cost you nothing this morning. I'm so sorry that we had cheap worship and you didn't offer anything valuable to God." True worship will cost you something.

Noah's obedience was also messy. Verse 9 describes Noah very simply with these words: "he walked with God." Chapter 5:24 describes someone else who walked with God: "Enoch walked with God, and then he was no more, because God took him away." Now that's neat and clean obedience. We obey and God just removes us from the mess of life. So whenever the culture starts to slide into the sewer, we say, "Scotty, beam me up" and God removes us from us from this fallen world. That's not normal biblical spirituality. Normal biblical spirituality means living for God and walking with God right in the midst of a hurting, broken, messy world. Jesus said that normal Christian spirituality means letting your light shine right into the midst of darkness (Matthew 5:13). "Go back into the darkness," Jesus was saying, "form a community of My people who as they love one another will reach outward and shine my light into the darkness."

I always get agitated when we – the people of Jesus – slip into an ark-mentality. An ark-mentality says, “We just have to get inside, shut the doors, keep the bad influences out and then hold on until Jesus comes and God opens the doors and lets us out and, thank God, we’ll be free at last!” In the midst of a flood, an ark is a wonderful thing. We all need time in the ark. I love the ark. But, first of all, the ark is also a very messy place. There are bad people – like me, for instance – inside the ark as well. Can you imagine the mounds of poop that Noah and his family had to clean up and throw overboard? When you join Three Village Church please be forewarned: there’s poop in this ark. It’s part of life in the ark. But, secondly, the whole point of the ark was not to permanently escape the world; it was so that Noah and his little community could reenter the world as bearers of an alternative reality. In other words, the church isn’t a refuge from the culture around us; it’s the place that helps us enter into and engage the culture.

So at this point you may be thinking – *hum, costly, messy obedience, why would I ever want that?* Noah’s life shows us something else about obedience: it’s beautiful. It brings life to himself, to his family and to God. Perhaps that’s one of your fears about obedience: it’s ugly and hurtful and painful. We’ve all probably heard awful stories of people who said, “God told me to do this. God told me to leave you. God told me to hurt you.” In other words, obedience turns people into total creeps. But that’s not what happened with Noah. God’s call and Noah’s obedience will produce a thing of beauty for Noah, his family and the whole earth. Obedience leads to blessing.

Notice chapter 9:9-11. Through his obedience Noah will become the bearer of a new, alternative reality – the reality of blessing, the reality of God’s grace. Through his obedience, Noah will bear witness to and point people to and leave a legacy of God’s grace to his family and to others and even to every living creature on the face of the earth. Example.

Does this mean that Noah is perfect and sinless and doesn’t need grace? No! He is a fallen sinner, just like us. Notice the sorry twist that this story takes after the great flood. Turn with me to chapter 9:17. Noah has experienced God’s grace, he’s witnessed God’s loving faithfulness, he even personally heard God give the promise of a rainbow as a sign of God’s enduring, loving covenant with all of creation – and then in this section he falls flat on his face. Read verses 20-23. Now some people protect Noah by saying that he was a new farmer and he didn’t realize how strong the wine was. Hog wash. He’s hammered with wine! And then it gets worse: his middle son Ham finds him naked and runs off to tell his brothers. “Hey, guys, you won’t believe this but don’t is sloshed and he’s lying on the floor totally naked!” Then Noah wakes up and curses Ham and blesses his other two sons. In other words, we’re all sinners who desperately need grace.

But more than anything we see that Noah obeys. Do you know one thing that blocks us from the beauty of obedience? We always think we need more information. So we say, “I’d like to obey, but I need some deeper teaching on that issue. So if someone would feed me, then I could obey. Obedience is out of my grasp; it’s someone else’s responsibility and I’m a victim of my own disobedience.” Yes, we do need to question, explore and get answers. The Bible isn’t always easy to understand. We need to

understand the principles of biblical interpretation, read the verses in context, grasp the historical and cultural context and define biblical words with care and patience. That's hard work and God wants us to engage our brains. That's why we at Three Village Church we emphasize clear thinking, and Bible study, and small groups where you can study and learn and question and grow. But there comes a point in our lives when we're no longer seekers or infants; we're the mothers, fathers, big brothers and big sisters of the faith. At that point we need to ourselves, "How much *more* information do I need before I can respond to God with costly, messy and beautiful obedience?"

So I'll ask myself: Do I need more information about forgiveness before I let go of my grudges and release those who have wounded me? Do I need another teaching on Christian community before I decide that I need a small group? Do I need more training on how to pray before I actually set aside time to seek God in prayer? How many more Bible studies do I need before I decide that it's time to downsize my lifestyle and give the money towards something that will last for all eternity? Do I need more information before I share my faith in Jesus with other people? For instance, I have a friend whose son is on my son's travel soccer team. We've known each other for almost four years. I have stood beside him for over a hundred hours in the rain and sun watching our sons sweat and run and kick and dive in the grass. Last week my friend told me about his two best friends who just died. These sudden deaths have rocked his world and left him with a deep and empty and unquenchable sadness. Now I claim to have a story of good news for him, a story of forgiveness and a new creation in Jesus. Through Jesus I have found favor with God and he can have that too. And furthermore, according to my theology my friend is now lost in sin. Do I need another sermon on sharing my faith or the theology of evangelism? Do I need someone to feed me so I can share my faith? The problem in my life is pretty simple: obedience might get costly or inconvenient. It might get messy. I might get hit with questions that I can't answer. I might invite him to church and he might say, "Sorry, but I found your service irrelevant. It's not just for me." For many of us, our problem is summed up in one word: disobedience.

I have a neighbor – an atheist by the way – who told me something very profound. I was admiring the many projects that he's completed in his back yard. So I asked him, "How did you figure out how to do all this?" "It's pretty simple," he drawled, "" I just read the manuals and then I do it. Of course there's an important element in between: it's called courage." As a Christian I would put it this way: We read God's word (and, again, this isn't always easy to understand – it takes hard thinking and discipline and study over a lifetime), and then we obey it. But there's an important element in between: it's called love. God loves us and showers us with grace and it changes everything about us. We want to respond with love for God and others.

So I want to offer an invitation and a challenge this morning. First, the invitation: do you know God's grace this morning? Can you say with the Apostle John in the New Testament, "Look at how much the Father loves us that we should be called children of God?" Maybe you're like Noah: you feel flat on your face this week. Maybe, literally like Noah, you got drunk or you battled some other addiction – and you lost. Maybe your family is a mess or you're in the grip of grief or depression of illness or fear or anxiety.

Maybe you're struggling with sexual issues – pornography or homosexuality or some other secret sin. Maybe you were abused as a child or battered as a spouse and the trauma hasn't healed. Maybe you're so self-righteous that you can't love anyone who doesn't meet your standards. My friend, you need God's grace more than anyone else here this morning. To all of us broken sinners, here's the good news: "Christ died for us while we were still sinners. This proves God's love for you." The Father-God is waiting for us right now. We've been in the far country. We've been wandering in the land of disobedience. But there is a Father and because he is calling us, we can come home. Every time we look at the cross we remember that this love is vast, deep, unconditional and everlasting. And when we look at the cross we remember that this isn't mindless, wishful thinking. No, at the cross the love of God came down in history, in space and time, in a real body that shed real blood. So turn and run home. Run into your Father's arms. Romp in our Father's house – all because Jesus has invited us in.

Secondly, because God loves us, flowing out of that love, based on that love, I want to issue a challenge: where does your obedience refuse to go? Where do you say, "Nope, sorry God, but that's too messy, too costly, too inconvenient?" Let me be blunter: if you consider yourself a follower of Jesus this morning, if you consider yourself to be under his loving authority, where are you in active or passive disobedience this morning? I don't need to give a hundred examples of disobedience. If you have put your faith in Christ, you have the Holy Spirit dwelling within you – the One who will guide you into all truth. So let him guide you.