

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David Powers

Sunday, June 7, 2026

As we continue in worship this morning, we invite you to get comfy in your pews, and let's take a couple deep breaths together. Let's close our eyes, take our prayer posture, whatever it is, and take a deep breath in. And breathe it out slowly.

Another deep breath in.

And breathe it out slowly.

Breathe in God's mercies.

and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Breathe in God's mercies and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Gracious spirit, you are as close as our very next breath. And so we pray that you would dwell within us and around us in these moments. That by your power, you might quiet any voice within us but your own that we might hear the word you have for us this day, and that as we hear, by your power you might call us to lead lives of response. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

So, as we just remembered, this past week was Vacation Bible School for us, which meant we had over 80 little ones running around and over 20 middle schoolers joining in Club VBS. It was a wonderful energetic Monday through Thursday. And Pastor Mary and I had the opportunity to split up the storytime portion of the day's festivities. So on Monday and Thursday, I got to help lead the children in the story for the day from scripture. Every one of those children who gathered in Montgomery Hall, they gathered around Pastor David's carpet. We had a little rug there in Montgomery Hall, and each of them came and took a seat 'crisscross applesauce' there. I was reminded as I was sitting around that carpet this week of a time when I did so about 10 years ago in Madison, Georgia. I used to pastor there, did for about a decade before coming here to Memphis and to Idlewild. I was leading a story time in our Vacation Bible School around a brand new rug, and there were kids seated very much like ours all around. We were supposed to come in, and in order to have some order to the day's story time, we were going to sit on the letter of—I'm sorry, I should give you a little more um details here. This rug that I was sitting on, this was a rug that depicted Noah's ark, and it did so also with the alphabet. So there was A, B, C, D, E, F, G all the way around the edges of that carpet. And so when the kids came in, they were supposed to sit at least as close as they could to the letter that began their first name. So I sat on D. And of course, it was a carpet that illustrated Noah's ark. And so each of the animals on

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Sunday, June 7, 2026

each...or each letter was represented by an animal. And so I sat on D. And so my animal that was represented was....a donkey. Great guess. Dragon. Dragon was actually what I sat on. Don't take it personally. I was confused. I was confused. I looked just to my right to the end of the alphabet there. Nobody was seated on U. And what was the animal that was found on the letter U? Yeah, John. Unicorn. Yeah. So, I found out that morning that we had dragons and unicorns on Noah's ark. In the center there, all of those animals were perched together with Noah. I was confused. I sent a message to our director of children's ministry. I said, "What's up with this carpet that we're sitting on?" She said, "It was on sale," which made perfect sense to me.

We kick off a new series this morning entitled Tell Me a Story. It's a series that will take us throughout the months of June and July. It's our opportunity to reclaim some stories from our childhood, biblical figures and biblical stories. It turns out that sometimes when we introduce the stories of scripture to children, to make them accessible to our children, we have the propensity sometimes to turn them more into fantasy than into the myths and the stories that have shaped our faith in God's people over time. This is not necessarily a bad thing. And yet it is also hard for us to explain dragons and unicorns on the ark. What we forget, when we try to make the stories too accessible, is that these were some of the most important stories for the people of God early on in their journey. These were attempts to theologize their understanding of their God and the world. And so what we're going to do over the next couple of months is to reclaim those stories and those figures of our childhood and see the ways in which they speak to our lives here and now. This morning we start with Noah.

We're in Genesis chapter 6. The paricope is slightly different from the one that you find in your bulletin. I'll begin in verse 5 and go through 8. Then we'll move ahead to verses 13-22. Let us listen together for God's word to each of us and indeed to the church.

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humans was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humans on the earth and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the humans I have created, people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord. And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. Now I am going to destroy them along with the earth." So make yourself an ark of cypresswood. Make rooms in the ark and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you are to make it. The length of the ark 300 cubits, its width 50 cubits, its height 30 cubits. Make a roof for the ark and finish it to a cubit above, and put the door of the ark in its side. Make it with lower second and third decks. For my part, I am going to bring a flood of

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David Powers

Sunday, June 7, 2026

water on the earth to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life. Everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you. And you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons wives with you, and every living thing of all the flesh. You shall bring two of every kind into the ark to keep them alive with you. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind. Two of every kind shall come into you to keep them alive. Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up, and it shall serve as food for you and for them." And Noah did this. He did all that God commanded him.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So, our figure this morning is Noah.

And he is a figure, but this story for us, when we've told it to our children, is a...we've made it into a story about animals and an ark and a flood. You can tell from even our slower, more intentional reading this morning that it is much richer. There is something significantly more important going on than simply 2 by 2 animals and an ark with specific measurements and a flood that befalls the earth.

This is the people of God's earliest attempt to frame their history and the history of the world in a deep and rich theology. They are trying to make sense of how a world can know destruction and violence and yet, also, how they can claim a God that loves each of them and indeed has created everything. Like any work of theology, we have to ask one important question. What does this story reveal to us about the nature of God? So we turn to scripture. Of God this story reveals first that God can be grieved. That God's heart is indeed in this story grieved by the condition of the world and the actions of God's people in it. The Lord saw that the wickedness of humans was great in the earth, that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humans on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the humans I have created, people together with the animals, creeping things, and birds of the air. For I am sorry that I have made them." The Lord can look upon the world, this story tells us, and grieve what we have made of it. The ways in which we have sown division. The ways in which our hearts do not seek after love and peace and graciousness and kindness.

But that's not the only thing that God grieves in this story. God especially grieves violence. In verse 13, God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all the flesh, for the earth is

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David Powers

Sunday, June 7, 2026

filled with violence because of them.” It is because of the violence that God sees in the world, that God determines to destroy them, humans that is, from the face of it.

The early theology of the people of God was a recognition that violence grieves the very heart of the one who created them. There's multiple stories, not in the exact same shape as this one, but early on in the story of God's people as we get to read it this day, where violence becomes the hinge on which the entire story turns.

What this tells us is that not only does God grieve violence in the world, but if you find yourself grieving the violence of our world, of our nation across the world, you are in holy company. And so God decides, having seen the violence and the wickedness of humanity to destroy, to wipe them from the earth, to do so with the flood. But we must continue to ask the question, what does this story reveal about God? Even God determined as God was to start again, to wipe humanity from the face of the earth and begin again. Even that God, as the early people of God understood, even that God, it turns out in the end, cannot quit God's good creation.

God can be grieved to the heart and yet there is still room for hope. Noah found favor in the sight of God, scripture tells us, and then Noah becomes the vessel through which creation is saved. God determines, even says very clearly here in the early part of the story, that everything will be destroyed. And yet, that is not how the story goes. Not only will humans and creatures not be wiped from the face of the earth, God will construct a way for them to be preserved.

God can be grieved by the violence and the division of the world. And yet there will always still be room within the heart of God for hope. Hope for humanity and hope for the world. In 2003, while our country was at war with Iraq, Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister and theologian some of you might be familiar with, was interviewed by PBS on the grounds of the Pisgah Presbyterian Church in Versailles, Kentucky. The interview focused on the hope of the good news of Jesus Christ at Easter 2003 while our country was at war. The interviewer hoped to have some theological framing for how it is Christians navigate and understand the world in the midst of violence. Buechner began the interview by framing the situation with words from the great reformer Martin Luther. Quoting him, he said, "Luther once said, if I were God, I'd kick the world to pieces for all its violence and division." But Buechner points out, "Lucky for us, Martin Luther wasn't God. God is God and God has never kicked the world to pieces. Even in the midst of deep grief, God continues re-entering the world, keeps offering himself to the world by grace, keeps somehow blessing the world, making possible a kind of life which we all in our deepest being hunger for.” That is at least part of what this story is trying to communicate. God had a chance to kick the world entirely to pieces. But Noah's story reminds us that God did not. And

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Sunday, June 7, 2026

that becomes a corporate story, a corporate refrain for us communally, that when we look upon the world and we see violence and division, we must always hold in our line of sight a God who does not give up on the world writ large.

But then in this interview, Buechner makes it personal. He says, "Which of us has not suffered? Which of us has not had conceit in our hearts? Which of us has not known pain? I mean, we've all had our crucifixions where God seems to be absent and light seems to disappear and the world is dark and terrifying in our small small personal worlds. We've all known our dark times. We've all felt abandoned by God and felt that there was no such thing as a God even to abandon us. Just the emptiness and the craziness of the world."

I can imagine that's probably how Noah felt as well for the time he spent surrounded by smelly animals and a small group of family and water and all the destruction that that water represented around him day after day after day.

Buechner concludes the interview saying this. "I'm a terrible pessimist in many ways as far as the state of the world is today. But I feel ultimately that beneath the level of all the madness and horror in this world, there is a saving, lifegiving, nourishing, healing, beautiful mystery at work. authoring among us something that feels elusive but is ultimately a holy plan that is being worked out in the affairs of the earth."

And I want to posit to you this morning that that is the purpose of the story of Noah. We have made this story about a flood and an ark and animals walking two by two, but it's actually a story about a foundational truth that the God revealed in the story of Noah is a God who is never done with God's work of grace and renewal.

And that is true for you and for the world. So if you find yourself this morning feeling as if you are alone, maybe in a boat of your own construction, surrounded on every side by the continuous reality of the brokenness of the world. If you find yourself in that place, may you be reminded of the earliest theology of the people of God, that the God that we know in Christ Jesus, the God that is made known in the story of creation is still with you in that place. That regardless of the floods that surround you, you are on a vessel. You are making your way through the midst of the difficulty and destruction. And I don't know when the dove will appear, but a dove will appear.

And if you find yourself this morning more grieved by the division and the hurt that is so evident in our world, then this story has a claim upon your mind and your heart this day as well. And that is that no matter what it looks like outside, what we claim about the God who creates and

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Sunday, June 7, 2026

redeems and sustains us is that that God is never done with us. While the violence that we perpetrate toward one another and across our world grieves our God to his very heart. While that God might desire to wipe us clean off of this good creation, God won't. God still has a purpose for God's creation. God still has a purpose for community. God still has a purpose for Memphis and for our country and indeed for the entire world. We make this story about a flood and about animals two by two. It's a story, though, about a God who never gives up.

So wherever you find yourself this morning, may you trust and may you believe the good news of the gospel that the God made known in two by two marching animals, the God that was first made known to us around a carpet square when we were little kids, that God is still working even now. That God is not giving up on us.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.