The theme for the 2021 CN Summer Camping Program came from the Book of Genesis 8:15-16 – “Then God said to Noah, ‘Go forth from the ark...’ While at Camp, our kids learned a lot about the theme and how it applies to their lives. It was a timely theme for lots of different reasons. No doubt Noah experienced a lot of uncertainty in his life before he built the ark, while he built the ark, while he lived in the ark, and when he had to ‘Go forth from the ark...’ with his family and with the animals that God had saved together with him and his family. No doubt our kids (and the rest of us) live in a time of great uncertainty about everything. Noah certainly experienced what it meant to believe when no one else around him did – Scripture essentially says that ONLY Noah was blameless and righteous in his generation. And we can say that our children also experience, in this day and age, what it means to believe God (and believe in Him) when no one else around them believes God (and believes in Him). As Noah, so often our kids feel they are alone when it comes to believing in and trusting God. Noah also knew what it meant to act in a way that others called “crazy” – after-all, he built an ark at the command of God, when there was no rain, there was no Flood. “So why build an ark, you old fool!” might have been something Noah heard as he constructed a huge ship on dry land. “So why go to church?” is something our kids might hear as they live their faith. Again, the Summer Theme was a timely one for lots of different reasons.

Just the act of coming to Camp this past summer was like Noah going forth from the ark. As Noah had to have faith that everything was going to be ok, that God would preserve and help him outside the ark, as He had done inside the ark, so too our kids had to believe that Camp was going to be enjoyable and fun, that everything was going to be ok if they stepped outside their house and stepped “inside” Camp. Noah had stepped outside the Ark into a brand new world, believing that God would provide for him, preserve him and help him. Families and campers also took a “leap of faith” coming back to Camp, not only being worried about the health of their children, but also concerned that the Camp program would not be a great experience given the constraints on numbers and the guidelines and protocols it had to follow regarding all things COVID-related. Again, the theme from the Book of Genesis about Noah was a timely one for our kids and their families for lots of different reasons.

It was also a timely theme for the Camp Staff. We had a Zoom meeting with the 2021 Summer Camp Staff the other day, and they were asked the question, “Do you think more about the guidelines and protocols you had to follow when remembering Summer Camp, or do you simply think about the great memories and experiences you had?” 100% of them just think about the great memories. The guidelines and protocols aren’t even a consideration. For the Staff, the point was, as always, trust God, have faith in Him, do the work He puts in front of us, and He will provide. Again, not unlike Noah and what was asked of him: Noah build the ark, Noah get in the ark, Noah go forth from the ark. Each step of the way, a great faith was required of Noah. For the 2021 CN Staff, planning the Camp Program, making the Camp Program and performing the Camp Program, required a great faith. But there was a further lesson in the theme: There’s something (really some-ONE) in the world greater than a natural disaster, greater than a pandemic! Believe in Him, trust Him and keep GOING just like Noah!

And that lesson, was not just a lesson for the summer. That lesson needs to be carried forward by the Staff (really by all of us) in every aspect of their life, including Church. Because, frankly, ALL OF US are having a difficult time stepping back INTO the Church (which is referred to by our Church Fathers as the “Ark of Salvation”). The story of Noah and his faith is timely because he built, stepped into and stepped out of the Ark in a time of great uncertainty! But one thing WAS CERTAIN to Noah...God provides, preserves, protects and SAVES! That was truly the most precious “cargo” onboard the Ark. It wasn’t
Noah. It wasn’t his family. It wasn’t the animals. It WAS the MESSAGE Noah carried with him: GOD is a SAVING God. Simply, God SAVES!

Noah believed this so strongly that the moment he stepped out of the Ark, he built an altar to God, and (if you can believe it) sacrificed to God some of the very animals which had been preserved on the Ark! God SAVES me (and my family)! God is a SAVING God! And so, I will offer sacrifice to Him of even the animals that are meant to keep me alive! ONLY Noah could have carried that MESSAGE. He was the only one righteous and blameless in his generation; the ONLY one who believed God and believed in Him. When Noah went forth from the Ark, that MESSAGE went with him into the world. And in his heart, that message was certain, it was fixed, it was immovable, it was unshakeable. No matter what happened, no matter the Flood, no matter the destruction, no matter what, that message (God SAVES us) went with Noah into the world. While Noah truly believed in God before the Ark was built, before the Flood came, it was IN the Ark, BECAUSE of the Ark, that he truly KNEW God as the SAVING God. Likewise for us, it is only IN the Church, and BECAUSE of the Church, that we truly KNOW God as the SAVING God. Only IN the Church, and BECAUSE of the Church, do we KNOW for CERTAIN that Jesus Christ, the very Son of God in the flesh, SAVES us! Why? Because no other “place” on earth, believes and tells us that. In other words, the most precious “cargo” of the Church (the “Ark of Salvation”) is the MESSAGE it communicates to us EACH AND EVERY time we enter it: God SAVES us!

Noah couldn’t survive without the Ark. We can’t survive without the Church because no other place, no other entity, no other person, place or thing is FOUND on the same message and reality of the Church that Noah experienced IN the Ark: the God we believe in SAVES us. And no other place or entity or thing in the world delivers that message to us. In fact, the rest of the world, outside the Ark/Church, typically delivers a message AGAINST the precious message of the Church. Ultimately, the message delivered to the Church, which now delivers it to the world, came in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was SENT into the world by His Father to SAVE it; and He died on the Cross to accomplish and do His Father’s will; He died to save us. We see, hear, taste, feel, know, witness and experience our SAVING God in the ark of the Church every time we’re in it.

We’ve got it ALL wrong! Many are staying away from the Church because they believe/think they won’t survive IN the Church (because of the things related to the Pandemic). The EXACT OPPOSITE is true. Not one of us “survives” except by our life IN and BECAUSE OF the Church, just like Noah survived by being IN and BECAUSE OF the Ark. We’ve allowed ourselves to retell the story of Noah and put the Flood INSIDE the Ark, if you can believe it! We’re staying away from the Ark of the Church because we think being IN it is NOT safe. We’ve got it ALL wrong! The Flood is not INSIDE the Ark of the Church. THE Flood is OUTSIDE the Ark of the Church and our God is STILL saving us INSIDE the Ark!! We need the precious “cargo” of the Church, its precious message, more than ever. But we ourselves are actually letting the Flood IN!

The lesson the Staff learned at Camp this past summer (the same lesson the campers learned, hopefully), is a lesson for them to carry forward, and for us to learn and carry forward as well. They learned it by taking a “leap of faith” INTO Camp, at a very uncertain (and still uncertain) time. They learned it BECAUSE they trusted and had faith in God BEFORE they ever did one thing to help build the Camp Program. Again, in that way very much like Noah and the story of his faith.

The rest of Camp 2021 is probably what you know from the pictures posted online, and the stories of your campers and the Staff. Services, prayers, sports, Faith Enrichment lessons, meals (mostly outdoors!), evening events and activities, campfires, Olympics, The Nazarene (the daily Camp
Newspaper), painting the ceiling tiles of the Rec Room and Craft Room as the Craft!, hiking, time with the Metropolitan, learning Plain Chant, Camp’s version of America’s Got Talent, constructing arks, life-size game board games, relays camp-style (which means water balloon and corn cob tosses, cotton ball relays, and cups full of popcorn!), C.A.T. Time (Cabin Activity Time – which was an extremely well thought-out version of free-time that factored in the necessity of keeping cabins physically distant from one another), Rusyn history, games and dancing, star-gazing, clergy performances, and so much more!! Telling you how hard the Staff worked to plan, develop and execute all of the Program elements is simply impossible. Telling you how creative they were and how supportive of one another they were is simply impossible. Telling you how proud I am of them is simply impossible. Suffice it to say, the Staff delivered an incredible summer program to the campers, and the campers took what they delivered and “ran” with it! It was great to see and great to be a part of. Thanks be to God for everything!

The campers, their families, the Staff, and everyone else involved with Camp this past summer, dealt with the “Flood”, so to speak. They dealt with something that threatened to cancel Camp altogether. They dealt with something that threatened to shut Camp down during its operations. They dealt with something that made them worry at the slightest cough, sniffle or sneeze. Each of us understands what that means because we’ve been experiencing that every day for a long time now. However, to their credit, by the grace of God, the support, care, love and encouragement the Staff showed each camper and each other, made the difference between a summer overcome by obstacles, worry and anxiety, and a summer overrun with fun, fun-in-Christ, prayer, joy and enjoyment, good-times, great memories and an overwhelming gratitude at just being able to be together. Let me illustrate this (i.e. how the “Flood” was dealt with) by leaving you with some snippets from our parents and the Staff:

From a parent:
You did it! Another successful opening week at Camp Nazareth. While I am still trying to finish up the piles of laundry, I keep thinking of one thing and in a way felt obligated to write to you. You - were – wrong!
I don’t mean to come across harshly - but you were. We really do appreciate that you tried to prepare the families for what would be a different Camp Nazareth experience this year. But different it was not! Nope, not at all. You see, we still had 2 excited campers talking all the way home and 2 kids talking over themselves at dinner because they both had so much to say. And while I expected to hear “I wish we could have...” and “this year we didn’t...” we instead heard about how this was the best year of Camp Nazareth EVER! No mention at all about having to wear masks, nothing said about not doing the ropes course but rather we heard endless stories of dizzy bats, building arks (which was the most fun ever, by the way), the most delicious breakfasts, Alex singing his heart out at Camp Nazareth’s Got Talent, the Olympics, following notes and singing Plain Chant with Sam and true, quality time with Metropolitan this year which was described as really awesome...
Nothing was different at all. And for that we are truly grateful to all of you.

And from the Staff:
I have never worked so hard in my life yet it did not feel as though I worked one single day this summer. I enjoyed working with everyone on the CN staff and all the kids that came to camp. I learned a lot about myself, my friends, and my religion. I enjoyed my time at camp and did not want to leave.

I was THIS close to not working at Camp because I didn’t feel like it was something I would be good at. But I’m so happy I did. I got better at the things I didn’t think I would be good at, and learned a lot of new skills. I made great new friends and had the most fun I’ve ever had.
I believe the 2021 staff was superb. Each person brought their own talents to the table and it was beautiful to see. "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!" (Psalm 133:1) I've never worked at a place where there was such unity. Yes, there were some hiccups but this group rolled with the punches and lifted each other up. I'm not sure if this is how your staff is every year (being that this was my 1st year), but I was just blown away and will forever cherish this experience.

My 2021 Staff experience at Camp Nazareth was actually life-changing. I have never been around Orthodox Christians in my age group for such an extended period of time. Although it was of course a job, my counseling experience primarily helped me grow in my Orthodox faith. It also provided me with friendships that will last forever. I learned a lot about working with kids, which is invaluable to my future career as a professional working in schools.

I’ll leave you with those thoughts because they illustrate (I think) how the Summer Theme “Then God said to Noah, ‘Go forth from the ark...’” was experienced and lived during the summer. The theme was timely because of the uncertainty the Camp, its campers and their families, and the Staff dealt with in planning, producing and ‘pulling off’ the 2021 Summer Camping Program. Noah’s faith helped us learn what it means to trust God in the midst of difficulty, struggle, and uncertainty. Those three words could certainly be used to describe what we have all (and are all) living through right now. But even for the rest of us, not just those at Camp, the lessons Noah teaches us are timely. You can still talk with your campers about the summer. I’ll leave to them and the Staff whether or not it was the BEST summer ever. I do know, though, that among the reasons to be grateful for Camp, the lessons we learned from Noah’s life rank as some of the best parts of the 2021 Summer Program.