

Series: **OLIVE BRANCH DNA**

**Sunday January 8, 2006**  
**A SAFE PLACE**  
**Genesis 6-9**

**I. INTRO**

- A. It was Thursday, September 25, 2003. About 30 of us sat in a circle in a living room—convinced that God was calling us all to do something new. We were from all different walks of life and backgrounds. Different political persuasions and different economic situations. We were at different ages—and stages in life. The one thing we had in common was that we all had friends and family we deeply loved who, as yet, were undecided about following Jesus.

-We knew one thing if we knew anything; like us, it would take them time to make a decision. They would need a safe place, where they could feel God's love in a warm embrace and see His life shining in the eyes of others. It might take months—or years of hearing the Great News of Jesus—and of seeing His grace through frail people like us.

1. That night, we agreed unanimously to create a safe place for that to happen. We all sensed that God was calling us to start a new, different kind of church. Not in any way thinking that we were better than any other church, but as a church that could potentially become a movement of God; a unifying, serving, gracious force cooperating with other churches and other believers to see the work of God in the GTA and beyond advanced in significant ways.

-We knew that if this Church had a prayer of living the dream, it would take significant sacrifice on our part. But, then, that fit our vision. That this church would ***not be about us!*** That we would call people to be partners in the movement—not just consumers. So, we would have to set the example—the DNA would be created in these early moments.

- But, way more than that, God would have to show up in power and kick down the doors that we couldn't budge. Our goal, totally unrealistic by reasonable standards, was to start at the end of November. Two months—60 days--away!
2. One of the defining moments of that night was the presentation by Nancy Vamvakas of 12 different areas of ministry that needed leadership and development.

-What was amazing to watch was that as Nancy ticked off the items one by one, at least 2 hands went up, and every item was cared for by people who were competent and gifted. Then we started making the myriads of decisions that needed made—everything from incorporation to who we would align with.

-You would not ***believe*** the number of decisions that needed to be made in the next two months. We had to decide on whether we would be independent or align with an already existing group. We chose a new group to identify with that would give us the space we needed to develop. Congregational Christian Churches in Canada. The **4 Cs**. We had to get incorporated and adopt by-laws to gain charity status. We had our hands full!

3. The biggest hurdle, for us, seemed to be finding a pot for the plant. **Where would we meet?** We checked **everything**. And I do mean everything. From schools to theatres to warehouses. It was like being Mary and Joseph looking for a place to spend the night. **No Room! (Slam) No Room! (Slam).**

-Then we asked at Angus Glen Golf Course—and they opened their arms more widely than we would've **ever** guessed possible! In a dizzying array of meetings and emails and phone calls and papers—we made our target date. On November 23 we had what we called our **Braxton Hicks** service—you know, using childbirth terminology. We talked that day about how, if anything worthwhile was going to come of this adventure, it had to be initiated by God, empowered by God, and filled with God. No one gets changed without God. No one.

4. The next Sunday, we “dove in.” No more practices; no more planning for the first service. We were in. And guess what happened? **GOD SHOWED UP!** We were pretty small and weak and unimportant—but **God** was there—and that's all that mattered. That morning, November 30, 2003, close to 400 people showed up. And The Olive Branch was born. How many of you were there? God is **so** good!
5. About a year later, we had our first congregational meeting—and many of you weighed in as ministry partners. You said, “I will be a significant part of this church. I will give of myself, my time and my resources so that we can become all we can be!” Over 150 people became partners that day. How many of you were a part of that?

-Then, just months after that—we had the chance to buy this building. We asked, again, that people make sacrifices of their resources and time so this would be possible. Harry James called it, **uncomfortably affordable**. It was amazing to watch God at work. In the space of about 3 weeks, people pledged, in gifts and loans, 2 million dollars. Then people came out, tore out walls, carried urinals and toilets and insulation—and carried in studs and drywall. How many of you were part of that?

-I think it's very important for people like us, on a regular basis, to think about our beginning—and our calling and ask, “Am I keeping my promises?”

-You may be a little curious about us using the word, **DNA**. As you may know, our DNA is found in every cell of our bodies. Even saliva and hair. We want the core of what we are about as people to be alive in the hearts of every person who calls **The Olive Branch** home. We want **The Olive Branch DNA** to make it out to the farthest edges—out to where we all live and work and play and influence others. That's what we mean. So, for the next few weeks, we're going to talk about those characteristics we want and need to see at the core here. If you weren't there when The Olive Branch was born—this is your chance to sign on!

## II. THE STORY OF THE OLIVE BRANCH

- A. A unique part of our story is the story of our name. Early on, we realized that we needed a name for this new baby church. There are, however, no “baby name books” for churches. We thought of everything from the incredibly serious to the incredibly silly. Then it was like God gave us this name and, almost in unison we thought, “That's it.” **The Olive Branch Community Church**. There's a very familiar Bible story behind this name. He was the very first sailor in the Bible—anyone know who it was? Noah.

1. Whenever we hear that name, there's another word that immediately comes to mind. Noah's...**Ark**. And, of course, with that comes the imagery of elephants, giraffes and rainbows.  
-But that's the kids version. The story of Noah and the ark he built is the story of a catastrophe. Many of you remember the horror of images from the recent Tsunami that took 225, 000 lives. This catastrophe dwarfs that. It's a story that goes to the core of our identity and name—because it's a story of finding hope and safety in unexpected places.

2. Noah's story starts with an assessment from God of life on our planet. A planet infected with sin and deteriorating rapidly. Listen to what He says:

**<sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. <sup>7</sup> So the LORD said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them." <sup>8</sup> But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD (Genesis 6:5-8 NIV).**

3. The core of the story is found in vss. 5-6. There is **great** wickedness; God is so **grieved** that His heart is filled with pain. Those are the words of a parent, aren't they?  
-Notice the extent of the problem—and the Bible doesn't exaggerate. Every single inclination of people's hearts was **only** evil, **all** the time. Extreme evil. I've thought about that—why things got so diseased—and I realized that the average pre-flood life expectancy was over 900 years. Think of someone really evil—like Hitler. How many of you think that if Hitler had lived to be 900, he would've made a turnaround? Unless it's stopped, evil is progressive in our lives.

-That was Noah's world. And the wickedness was **so** great and **so** violent that it caused the God who created everything continual pain. From everything I know and read, it seems clear that the whole redemptive future of this planet—including you and me--was at stake, and that's why God took radical action. He made two decisions: #1—the human lifespan would be capped at 120 years. #2—He would start over.

-By the way, something important to note about God. Whenever he has a problem to solve, he always chooses a person He wants to use. In this case, a man named Noah.

4. After God chooses someone, He then speaks to them, tells them what's going on, what He wants them to do—and what it will cost. God tells Noah his plan to bring judgment, and He tells Noah what He wants him to do. **So, make yourself an ark of cypress wood and coat it with pitch, inside and out (Gen. 6:14 NIV).** He didn't ask Noah if he knew carpentry, shipbuilding, zoology, veterinary medicine or survival techniques. Just—build an ark—and make it 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high.

-Then Noah understood. This plan wasn't just to save him and his family; he was to save **all** life. By the way, as a side note on this—these dimensions were not

used again until the days of modern shipbuilding—and they were the perfect dimensions needed to give a ship stability on the high seas. Imagine God knowing that ahead of time!

-Anyone have any idea how big this thing was? It was 15 feet higher than our ceiling, about 10 feet wider, and over 150 feet longer than our whole building. It would hold the equivalent of 569 modern railroad cars. This job God gave Noah wasn't just difficult. It was impossible. He had to gather two of **every animal—male and female**. Now, that isn't real tough to figure out when it comes to cows and bulls. But what about hamsters and squirrels? I can imagine Noah sayin' to God, "I ain't a checkin' the cobras!"

-What Noah could have never known, except in faith, was that God's plan was, "If you build it, they will come." They did. **Pairs of all creatures that have the breath of life in them came to Noah and entered the ark (Gen. 7:15 NIV)**. And then God shut the door.

- B. What happens next in this story is a catastrophe that goes way beyond our comprehension. This was not 40 days of spring showers in Vancouver—or even a class 5 hurricane.

It was a catastrophe so big that almost every culture on the planet mentions it in their history. Listen to the record. **...On that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened and rain fell on the earth for 40 days and 40 nights (Gen. 7:11b-12 NIV)**.

1. We often see all these cute pictures of Noah and all the animals sticking out of the ark with a rainbow over head. People ask dumb questions like, "Did Noah let carpenter ants and woodpeckers on the ark?" My guess was that he pleaded with people for the 100 years it took to build the ark to take what he said seriously—that the flood would take every life. But, in the end, no one person believed what Noah had to say.

-Ever thought about what it would be like to lose all your friends, all your aunts and uncles and cousins, all the people at work, all the people in your neighborhood—everyone you know who's not in your immediate family? I can't **begin** to comprehend that. The Bible record says no one—**nothing** escaped.

2. Then one day, the rain stopped—and there was this dead silence—apart from the waves splashing against the ark. And after the water began to subside—just hundreds of miles of mud—probably somewhat like some of the horrible images you saw in New Orleans.

- a. It's in the context of this mixture of mud and debris and death that the story of Noah's olive branch comes in. This huge ship Noah's built came to rest in the mountains of Ararat—but they don't know what's down in the valley. So Noah sent out a raven—which doesn't come back. I wondered about that—then I realized what raven's eat. Dead stuff.

-Then Noah sent out a dove—and it came back with nothing. A week later he sent it out again—and **this** time he can see something green in its beak as it approaches the ark. Guess what it was? An olive leaf. Something's growing right in the middle of all the mud. It's from one of the few trees that

can grow underwater; an olive branch. To Noah, it was a sign—that once again, God would bring life. Crops would grow; there would be grapes and wheat and oil—and the blessing of God.

- b. Two months later, Noah and his family—and his zoo--were able to leave ark. For the next 350 years of his life, Noah had three symbols of God’s faithfulness. The first was the rainbow. God told Noah that every time a rainbow appeared, it would be His signal that never again would the earth be destroyed by water.

-The second would be this colossal, dark monstrosity of a ship that took 100 years to build—stranded high in the mountains as a symbol of God’s offer of mercy in a time of judgment.

-And, of course, the olive branch. A sign of God’s blessing. A sign of the love and reconciliation and peace God offers the people of this world. A sign that, as awful and messy as life can get, there is always, **always** hope.

### III. A SAFE PLACE

- A. I’ve retold that story this morning, not just out of nostalgia, not just because our name, The Olive Branch, comes out of that story—but because I believe it is, to some extent, a parable of our calling to be **a safe place for the undecided—to decide to become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.**

1. We’ve always promised you that we would tell the truth here. We would be gracious—but we wouldn’t play games. And that truth is that, just like with Noah, there is a catastrophe in life to be averted—and there is one way out of it.

-Jesus, Son of God, stated it in a couple of ways, but essentially the catastrophe is life without God—and the greater one beyond that, eternity without God. We used the word **salvation** around here a lot. That’s what salvation is about—being saved from a **life** without God, and an **eternity** without God. Jesus Christ, God’s Son, was sent to this planet to be the **Savior**. Please understand me, friends—if what He taught was right, and I believe with all my heart it was and is—He is the **only** Savior. In a flim-flam, maybe-maybe-not, your truth and my truth world, He **is** the **Truth**.

-You have to understand, life without God on this planet is bearable. But life without God in eternity is absolutely unthinkable. God is the author of every good thing, every good gift we enjoy.

2. One of the statements I hear on a regular basis—especially in a politically correct place like Toronto is, “You can’t **possibly** believe that Jesus is the **only** way to eternity with God. That’s so **narrow!**”

-In response, let me make a few observations.

- a. The first thing is, **It’s not my idea!** That’s what Jesus, who showed up on this planet said. I believe the evidence is conclusive that He’s God—so I simply take His word for it.

-See, the issue we face is **not** “how can I be religious and live a better life.” Lots of religions deal with that. The issue is sin. The only antidote for sin is Someone who came and died for it—died for my sin. If sin wasn’t such a big deal—I can’t, for the life of me, figure out why would God allow His Son to suffer an agonizing death on a cross to pay for it.

- b. I don't see it as God or His followers being narrow. I see it as God being kind to people who will never find their own way out of the mess they're in. Jesus said the odds of us finding our own way into heaven are about the same as a camel making a flying leap through the eye of a needle without getting bruised.

-That's why Jesus, Son of God, the only One who's lived a perfect life, had to go to a cross and die a bloody, shameful death. With that cross, Jesus laid the keel for a new kind of ark that is the **only** way off this planet to life with God for eternity. That's why the cross is a symbol of **hope**. Incredible hope—for the very best **and** the very worst people who have ever lived.

3. You may be thinking, "Ken, why, in a **vision** message are you emphasizing this point?" Well, I'll tell you why. What we do here is **extremely** urgent. We are on a mission that has eternal consequences. The stakes are higher than you can I can possibly imagine. We don't **dare** just play church.

- a. Anyone here ever watch Canadian Air Farce? I want you to imagine a kind of "air farce" concept. It's the **St. "It's-all-about-me" Hospital**. For physicians, nurses, orderlies, surgeons, X-ray technicians, lab workers—it's the most amazing place in the world to work. When patients come, the staff has to have their love-in, their lunch, their coffee break first. When there's a surgery, every hour merits a 15 minute coffee break, wherever they're at. Lab technicians—well, they are required to only handle specimens they **want** to handle! If you're a patient and complain too much, they'll give you a needle to shut you up.

- b. That's a little over the top, right? Well, in my humble opinion, a church that is all about fattening up and shining up the already gathered, already convinced, is in the very same category. Do we love and care for and help and feed and enjoy those who have already chosen to follow Christ? Of **course** we do. But the ones who are far away come first. Know why? Because that's what Jesus said. We **can't** focus totally on the "already gathered" and still call ourselves the **Body** of Christ.

The Body of Christ, by definition, does what **Jesus** did when he was here.

-Remember what He said his mission was? To **seek and save what was lost**. And that's what you find him doing. He was always being accused of being a friend of some of the worst sinners around. Anyone know why? Because he **was!** Right up to the moment he died, death, he was reaching out to the criminal on the cross next to him.

- B. Let me bring this into what I'm saying. I believe that we, The Olive Branch, are called by God—just like Noah—to build something that is way out of our league, way beyond our capability. That's okay, cause we're not on our own. And it's not about us. It's about others.

1. It's very easy to think selfishly about God's mission. It's also very easy to think in small ways—ways that don't require sacrifice. Things that can be done in our spare time as a kind of hobby. As if a church or a gathering is all about **my** comfort level—or yours. It's not. What we're doing here is building a safe place,

not so much for **me** or for **you**—but for the undecided. Those who, if nothing changes in their lives, will be lost to God forever.

-It's my experience that God almost **always** calls people out of the safety zone, out of their easy chair—way, way beyond their comfort level. He asks them to sometimes make outrageous sacrifices, do difficult things that make their hearts beat really fast...and sometimes exercise real **faith!** Like build an ark in a place that's never even **seen** rain, as such.

-If The Olive Branch ever turns into a place that's about the "already gathered"—not only will it be **way** off mission, I believe that it will become an **unsafe** place for the undecided. Not only will it become boring and consumer oriented, I believe it will miss the blessing of Jesus Christ—which comes to those who love and reach those Jesus died for. Those who are far away, undecided about who Jesus is and what He came to do.

2. Let me talk just a little about what it means to be a "safe place." It means that we will always be thinking about the huge diversity in the group that gathers here—from seminary professors to people who've just come back to church after a lot of years; from people who teach English—to people for whom English is a third language. From the politically ultra-conservative—to those who think communism is a pretty cool idea. That doesn't mean that we will water anything down or dumb anything down. It just means that in our language and our presentation, we will keep the food on the bottom shelf.

-Now, this may be kind of a lame comparison, but imagine Noah and his family treating every guest on the ark as if they were just like them. Noah saying to the lions and cheetahs, "We like Kraft dinner—you ought to like it, too!"

3. There's something else that we will be very careful to do. Keep people from wounding each other. I would imagine that with cheetahs and cobras and lambs and guinea pigs on the same boat, Noah had to get a little creative to make the ark a safe place. Don't worry, we don't plan on building any cages here. But if we see racism or unkindness or snobbery or snarkiness or predatory behavior in any form, we will go after it. We will do our best to create a group of unselfish, loving, gentle, gracious passengers on this ship. But, that also means that it will **not** be neat and tidy here. Everyone okay with that? Good!

-You have my word that when you bring an undecided friend or family member here, simply because you love them and want them to see how Jesus changes lives, we will treasure that opportunity, and we will do our very best to **never** embarrass them or you. **Let's all agree to do that for each other, okay?**

4. Let's take it a step further, not only will we not **hurt** or **embarrass** people—we will love them. If you're fairly new here, you may notice that we hug each other. Don't feel intimidated or obligated if that's outside your comfort zone. My sense, however, is that most people are looking for a place where they are loved and valued and accepted--just as they are. I know that's what Jesus was like. His teaching was very straightforward—I mean, it would set your hair on fire—but He was so incredibly loving and filled with grace, people who had blown through all their opportunities **wanted** to be with him.

-The combination of truth—and loving acceptance is extremely powerful. So. **So...**I want to ask us all to practice doing something to keep us a loving and accepting place. How about if we all agree to take the first five or ten minutes after each service—not finding all of our friends, but looking for those who may be new and getting to know them.

5. I want to say two things in closing. First, God asks people, no matter how old or young they are, to step out of their comfort zone and do the seemingly impossible. We just have to remember that God knows all the engineering specs—and exactly what He’s going to do—and how He’s going to do it. Our job, like Noah’s, is to just get started.

- a. Is our job an impossible one? Of course it is—if it’s all up to us. Think about it. “Go out, talk to people from all walks of life—convince them to consider the claims of someone who lived 2000 years ago; that He was God, that he rose from the dead, and that everything He taught was absolutely true. Teach them that, if they’ll humble their pride and believe, the Spirit of God will come and live inside them and transform their lives. Challenge them to lay everything on the line for His Mission—money, time, ego—everything, because the pay off, especially after they die, is unbelievable.”

-We’ve gone on record as saying that we believe God has called us, within 5 years, to be one of our community’s greatest assets. We’ve said that we believe God is calling us to become a movement of God. We’ve publicly said that we believe that God wants to use us to plant little safe communities within every neighborhood; that God wants to use us to reach ethnic groups not even represented here yet—and through them to reach around the world.

-Our calling is not to be a safe little church where we all get to know each other, hold hands and sing “cum by yah” until Jesus comes. It’s to be salt and light in a world that needs us. All of that, friends, is a **real** stretch—**IF** you don’t take God into consideration. But when **God** gets involved, well that really mixes things up! Nothing is impossible with God.

- b. One more thing—and this is really encouraging. God uses average, normal people. We tend to put people like Noah way up on pedestals and think, “Wow, I could **never** be like that. He must’ve been **special!**” Well, you need to know that the story of Noah ends with him drunk and naked in his tent, cursing a son who peeked in and made fun of him. I look at Noah and think, “Wow! He’s kind of a mixture of good and bad—just like me.” Now, don’t get me wrong. I don’t lay drunk and naked in my tent. I keep my clothes on when I get drunk. *Just kidding!*

-Do you feel very normal. Small. Frail. Insignificant, sometimes? That’s **good!** Because God says his strength is made perfect in our weakness. When we’re weak, we’re strong. After we burn down through all our excuses about why we can’t do what God asks, know what God wants to hear us say? “Okay God—but this will only work if **you** show up!” Know when I think God showed up for Noah? When he cut down his first cypress tree, simply out of obedience. I believe we always receive **power along the way!** But we have to take the first step.

#### IV. CLOSING

- A. We are ***The Olive Branch***. We know what our mission is—and it's not something we sat down one day and made up and then signed God's name at the bottom. It's our calling. Every one of the 30 who sat in the room that day—and everyone who's joined the team since--knows it. It's to be ***a safe place for the undecided—to make a decision to become fully devoted followers of Jesus***. Failure is not an option.
- B. If for some reason we reject that and choose to become a safe place for ***us***, well, God will raise up someone else. I heard these words from a leader I really respect by the name of Haddon Robinson a number of years ago. They still give me chills. I'm going to close with them:

**If we do not [take our mission seriously] God will go on and do other things. We always live in the light of his triumph. *He doesn't need us!* He doesn't need folks who are sure that they are going to do it the way they have always done it. He passes by churches; he blows out lamps; he moves on to other things. The only question is whether we are going to move with him, or stay where we are and let the fire fall some place else. *That is the challenge!* And if we do not rise to it--someone else will! God's work will be done--with us, or without us. I would pray that as men and women of faith we shall be where God is; to do what *God* wants; to penetrate our society on every level, so that when our generation has served its time we shall have made the impact for Jesus Christ that he has called us to make. That's what the mission is. That's what *our* mission is--and I would invite you to be a part of it!**