

“God’s Dream for Our Church”

Exodus 3:1-6, Matthew 16:21-28

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Last Sunday, I explored personal mission plans in our daily routine. I will continue to talk about God’s mission for the church today. Let me ask you a question: *What could God’s dream for our congregation be?* My response to this question will be my message this morning.

What is the church? To begin with, let’s refresh our definition of the church. We sing this song every Sunday: “I am the church! You are the church! We are the church together! All who follow Jesus, all around the world!” When the people gather, there’s singing and there’s praying; there’s laughing and there’s crying sometimes. At Pentecost, some people received the Holy Spirit and told the Good News through the world to all who would hear it. Yes, this is it! We, the church are people of God who experience a wonderful, gracious and loving God in Jesus Christ and share the good news through God’s mission. The church is all about **God and God’s mission!** But we often forget the essence of the church. Without Jesus, there is no church and without mission, our gathering is not the church.

At church, we enjoy fellowship as brothers and sisters on Sundays, but fellowship is not our main purpose. We pray and care for one another, but prayer and caring ministry are not our ultimate purpose. Studying the Bible is important and helpful for our spiritual growth, but we read the Bible not for information, but for transformation. Jesus already made a radical definition of church and Christians: Love your God with all your hearts, with all your minds and with all your souls. Don’t miss the second part: Love your neighbors as yourself. In our Scripture readings, Moses and Jesus remind us of the meaning and purpose of the church.

Let’s revisit the scripture readings. Our first Old Testament story is about Moses’ personal encounter with God. It is obvious that God didn’t call for Moses just for the fellowship hour with him. God has a clear purpose for him. When God observed the misery of His people’s suffering and heard crying from the slavery for four hundred years in Egypt, He decided to deliver them from the Egyptians to a promised land. God chose Moses to fulfill God’s mission for His people. Moses discerned God’s signs and voices and obeyed God’s call. According to the reading, when God appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of a bush, the bush was blazing, but yet it was not consumed. This describes a

mysterious presence of God, but there is an important point that we should not miss! Bushes are ordinary in the wilderness and spread everywhere. Moses was guiding sheep and goats here and there. The one miraculous thing is that God came down and called his name, “Moses, Moses!” We should also be aware that this is where God met Moses. It was “in the wilderness” while he was shepherding flocks. “Wilderness” is not a special place for Moses. It was an ordinary place where his daily life was happening. Our ordinary Sunday service is a place to meet with God. Without meeting God, we cannot understand God’s dream.

How can we meet with God? In 1952, British Scripture scholar J.B. Phillips wrote a book with the provocative title *Your God is Too Small*. He said: “The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs.” How about our God? The challenge for many people today is that they feel their God is not only too small—**but also too Distant**. Our God is not a distant God. God felt for His people’s suffering and pain and ‘came down’ to rescue them finding Moses as a leader. Our God is a vast and loving God rooted in love. We Christians often say that God is always with us. I wonder how truly you feel God’s presence in your daily lives. God is real and alive, but sometimes, we are not sensitive enough to God’s signs and voices.

A well known German poet and writer, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875 - 1927) wrote a children’s story about God. The title is “How the Thimble Came to Be the Dear Lord.” The story tells about how, although it is true that God is important and He is always with us, adults sometimes forget this and don’t care about God anymore. One day, all seven children in a small town gathered together and discussed how they can keep and protect God being children. After a long discussion, they decided to take turns in looking for symbols of God in their lives every day. They believed that God is almighty and he can become anything even their belongings. When they saw the thimble among one of the girls belongings, everyone agreed that the thimble will be a symbol of God. They took turns keeping the thimble for the entire week. This story is a little silly, but it makes us think about our faith. Are we sensitive to God’s presence like these little children? Actually we often forget that God is real and alive.

In the New Testament reading, Jesus taught his disciples how to become his followers. There are two important points: First, in our reading, there was a conflict between Jesus and his disciple, Peter. When Jesus told his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering and be killed, Peter said that should never happen, but Jesus rebuked him saying, “You are a stumbling block to me!” This is a very confusing reaction to Peter. What was wrong with Peter? The point is that Jesus is not rejecting Peter’s caring act for him, but he

emphasized the priorities. Simply speaking, if I use an image of driving a car, Jesus would say, “Peter, you’re not in the driver’s seat! You have no idea how God works.” Discernment is very important in our spiritual lives. Spiritual discernment is to decide what to put as our first priority moving toward God’s direction. There are many stumbling blocks to get out of God’s way. What will be stumbling blocks or stepping stones to do God’s work? What will be God’s dreams or our wishes?

Last month, our church formed our Finance Task Force team. This Finance Task Force for the next two years will explore possibilities to erase our deficit. Our Stewardship campaign along with the Finance Task Force plan is going to begin on Sunday September 14 through 28. Our theme is “Embrace the Change”. Changes are not fun and enjoyable, simply because we are not used to it. But we need to know that spiritually speaking, sometimes, the desire to stay at a comfort zone can be a stumbling block to God’s dream. God may use change as a way to move us forward to God’s direction. We must pray and discern what God’s mission and wishes are for us.

The other lesson that Jesus taught us is about discipleship. Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Jesus reminded his disciples of a basic spiritual principle in our Christian life. That is simple, “Self-help is no help at all. We are not in the driver’s seat, but Jesus is our driver.” Jesus added to say, “Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self.” Self-sacrifice doesn’t mean that you give up your belonging or give away your possession, but reminding us of trust in Jesus. Jesus said, “Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead.” Moreover, Jesus said, “Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how. Don’t be in such a hurry to go into business for yourself.”

Discipleship is all about absolute trust in God and Jesus following his footsteps and guidance. When Jesus told us to take up our cross, it doesn’t mean any personal burden or private challenges, but it means God’s dream that will change people’s lives. The cross is a metaphor of transforming power to change people’s lives. God invites us to join his dream for the work of transforming the community and the world. The church is neither a building nor fellowship gathering. Church is an active people of faith who focus on God and God’s mission for others. David Foster points out in his book, *A Renegade's Guide to God: Finding Life Outside Conventional Christianity*. He says, “A gathering called a church is not a clubhouse; it’s a lighthouse. Church buildings are not

hotels for the holy, but hospitals for the hurting. Our gatherings should be more like an emergency room than a luxurious hotel.”

Last week, I read a report about your generous support for Food Drive Sunday for the Sunrise Christian Food Ministry. I appreciate your great support. As of mid-August we have collected 11 bags of groceries and cash donations. We set a goal to beat our July total of 19 grocery bags before the end of the month. When you bring any grocery bag, I believe that is an act of worship.

God’s dream for our church is to know God and to do God’s mission following Jesus Christ. This is discipleship! We want to meet with God in this hour of worship and to become disciples of Christ for a positive change in our community. During this change process, we may run into stumbling blocks that will try to stop our race. But as Jesus commands us to go, let us not run from suffering, difficult reality and uncertain future, but be bold and courageous to embrace it and move forward taking up our own cross with joy and thanksgiving. This is what Jesus asks us to be, followers of him and God’s dream for our church. Amen.