waiting: meeting Jesus

Optional subtitle: Stepping in the right direction
Description
The life of a disciple begins with an initial encounter with Jesus. In that encounter two things happen: Jesus reveals a truth about himself, and he also reveals what is true about our lives. In this first sermon, you’ll explore Peter’s first encounter with Jesus. Peter moves from over-confident but discouraged fisherman, to broken, fearful sinner, to excited follower of Jesus. Peter is now in a position to wait and see who Jesus is. As your congregation begins this journey towards Easter, the sermon will position folks to take steps to follow Jesus through Lent.

As you prepare the sermon, reflect on how you initially met Jesus and how you’ve moved from being part of the crowd to a humble, worshipping disciple.

Scripture

Luke 5:1 One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. 2 He saw at the water’s edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. 3 He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.
4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.”
5 Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”
6 When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. 7 So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.
8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” 9 For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, 10 and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon’s partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.” 11 So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.
Sermon

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” - Chinese Proverb

Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu lost her father when she was about 8 years old. Her mother single-handedly raised Agnes and her two sisters, earning very little money selling textiles and making embroidery. Surrounded by Muslims in their small village in the Balkans, Agnes and her family held tightly to their Catholic faith.

Her mother and sisters would often take pilgrimages to holy sites in order to pursue God. At a young age, Agnes learned to take steps of faith. And she would be taking steps for the rest of her life.

At age twelve, she felt a call to go into ministry as a nun. Becoming a nun was a big decision. She would not only give up her desires for marriage, but she would also have to give up what little possessions she had and perhaps leave her family for the rest of her life. Agnes took about five years serving at her church, praying and basically being curious about God’s call in her life.

At age seventeen, Agnes took her next step to follow God’s best for her life. She applied for the Loreto order of nuns that served in Ireland but had missions in India. Agnes had no idea how she would get there, but she longed to serve in India, perhaps as a teacher.

After six weeks in Ireland, the order sent her to India for the rest of her preparation. It took Agnes two years to become a Loreto nun. At that point, she took on her new name, Sister Teresa, and settled in to teaching at the Loreto Convent Entally in Calcutta, India.

She had made it. She worked safely behind the white walls of the covenant but felt God calling her to more. She took her next step of faith as she felt God calling her to teach outside the convent (which was almost unheard of for Loreto Nuns). She was given permission and taught at St. Teresa’s school. After taking her final vows to become a nun, she officially became Mother Teresa and began as a principal of a new school called St. Mary’s.

Mother Teresa’s call to serve the poor is the stuff of legends. At one point, she felt God’s call to move beyond the safety of her school and move into the slums of Calcutta to care for the poorest of the poor. Along the journey of beginning her Missionaries of Charity, she took many smaller steps towards God’s call.

wait. receive. respond.
While most of the world knows Mother Teresa as an international Nobel Peace Prize winner, many forget that she began as Agnes, a little girl who lost her father who felt God’s call to take a step of faith.

Today, we are beginning a journey—a journey of discipleship—and it begins with a simple step. Are you ready to follow what God has for you?

Over the next ten weeks, we are going to follow the life of Peter. We’ll spend the next six weeks watching how Jesus prepares him as a disciple. Then, we’ll experience how Peter receives Christ on Easter morning. Finally, we’ll spend the three weeks after Easter seeing how discipleship plays itself out in Peter’s life.

Along the way, you’ll be changed. My hope is that at the end of the next ten weeks, we’ll all be changed into people who are more in love with God and better equipped to show God’s love in the world.

But it all begins with a single step.

Let’s pray and see how it all began with Peter. --- Take time to pray ----


Luke 5:1 One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. 2 He saw at the water’s edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. 3 He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

Imagine what it would have felt like to be in the crowds that day: Jesus standing on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (another name for Lake Gennesaret), fishermen tending their nets, and crowds of people continuing to show up to hear this young rabbi.

At this point, Jesus had become a local preaching celebrity. In fact, people were trying to push their way to the front. Picture your favorite rock concert and everyone rushing the stage. Jesus, not wanting to get crushed, asked if Simon (one of the fishermen cleaning his nets) would loan out his boat. Simon agreed and took Jesus away from the shore so he could preach to everyone.

The crowds were curious and they wanted a good seat for the show.

wait. receive. respond.
The First Step of Discipleship: Curiosity

Discipleship begins with curiosity. Luke paints a picture of a crowd that has gathered around Jesus not really sure who he is, but knowing he is offering something different than what they have.

They had heard about Jesus. People perhaps had even seen him heal and now they wanted to know more. They were intrigued by this man from Nazareth who taught unlike any other. He not only taught about Yahweh in a new way, but he did it with power. People were healed. Could this guy be the real deal? People came from all over just to find out. People are curious.

Curiosity may at times kill the cat, but it also begins the life of a disciple.

Are you curious? Why are you in worship? Perhaps you were invited by a friend and you just wanted to find out what it was all about. Maybe you went to church as a little girl, and you came back to church to find out what’s happening. Or perhaps, like the crowd in the gospel of Luke, you want to know if God can really have an impact in your life. You are seeking to know whether God really cares.

You’ve heard about Jesus but you want to know more.

Everybody begins as one of the crowd. Despite what people think, no one is born a follower of God. God does not have grandchildren. In other words, because your parents were Christian or because you’ve always grown up in church, that does not make you a follower of Christ.

Really, that just makes you someone who has been a part of the crowd for a long time.

We can sit in the crowd and remain comfortable with theological curiosity. We can remain anonymous. We can keep God at a distance.

That’s why I love the image of Jesus on a boat away from the crowd. Literally, there is a distance between Jesus’ teaching and the people who are listening. They will have to decide if they will follow this guy. Or they (we) can decide if they just want to remain at a distance from God.

wait. receive. respond.
Growing up as a “church kid” I lived in the crowd for a long time. I had heard about Jesus my whole life but never really wanted more than a good seat to watch. I would go to church each week, listen, and then go home and wait another week before I thought about God working in my life.

I remember that day that all changed. I was part of a huge crowd at a Christian rock concert. My friend had invited me and I thought it would be fun. Darryl Mansfield performed some classic 70s rock (this was 1981) with a Christian message. He then told his story of turning his life over the Christ with an attempted suicide (at a church!) after years of drugs, drinking, and rock and roll. I had never heard such a powerful testimony. Growing up Presbyterian, I was more used to hearing stories of my pastor’s trip to Israel and his descriptions of the Sea of Galilee.

After his message he invited anyone from the crowd to come forward and receive Christ. I didn’t go forward. I felt called to take a step but didn’t move. But I watched hundreds of others taking steps of faith. I was deeply moved and knew that my life had changed. I knew I wanted to move from just being curious. That night, I determined to know more. Church now became a place I was going to learn how to live.

Where are you this morning? Are you still just sitting in the crowd or are you ready to take a step towards God?

Listen to what happens next to Simon.
The Second Step of Discipleship: Obedience

4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.”

5 Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

While Jesus was speaking, Simon and his buddies were cleaning their nets. They had been fishing all night. Perhaps they were listening to Jesus, but more than likely they were simply tired, hungry, and ready to go home.

We can only imagine Simon’s surprise when Jesus tells him to row back out to deep water and drop down his nets.

At least we can imagine what we might have felt:

“I just got these nets clean; I don’t want to go out.”

“We didn’t catch anything all night; what makes you think we’ll catch anything now?”

“Ask someone else to do it. I’m tired and I just want to go to bed!”

When Jesus calls us out of the crowd, it’s easy to think of reasons not to listen.

Remember, Simon and his friends were not on a weekend fishing trip. They made their living on the Sea of Galilee. It was a hard life. A fisherman was dependent on the elements and the fish. Fishing was something you could become good at, but not something you could control.

Check out Peter’s response.

5 Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

He’s tired, he’s hungry, he’s frustrated, and yet he obeys.

The second stage of discipleship is obedience.
Let’s explore Simon’s words. He begins by identifying Jesus as his master.

The word for master in the Greek is “epistata,” which is peculiar to Luke. All the other gospels use a different word for master. Some suspect Luke uses this word instead of Rabbi. This word carries with it that Jesus had come through the ranks; perhaps Simon and Jesus knew each other from around town. Simon had seen Jesus in other situations, and he had decided that Jesus was worthy to follow.

He then replies, “But if you tell me to, I will let down my nets.”

Simon moves from one of the crowd to one who is willing to take that first step in following Jesus. Simon does not fully understand what Jesus is asking, but he’s willing to follow.

Simon was the kind of guy who was willing to do what it takes. He was fiercely loyal even if he didn’t fully understand.

Churches are filled with disciples like Simon. They are willing to do the works that God wants without fully understanding who God is. They are the “good boy scouts” or “girl scouts” of the church.

Following God is a matter of doing the right things.

Now, that’s good, but it’s not the best. This stage of disciple can become frustrating and boring. Working and working with no real relationship with God.

This is the stage when you wake up on a Sunday morning and you decide whether it’s worth it to go to church. After all, you’ve already been three times this month; let’s take a Sunday off.

wait. receive. respond.
I remember talking with a former sister-in-law. She had grown up Catholic, she married a Methodist, and she committed to going to church every week. She brought her children to Sunday school, and I thought she had a relationship with God.

We were talking one night when she was going through a hard time and I let her know that I would pray for her. She explained, “I don’t know how you do that.”

“Do what?” I said.

“Pray. I never pray except in church. I mean, I guess in desperate situations, I call out, “Oh God, help me,” but I never just talk with God. That just seems really weird.”

Here was a woman who attended church most every week, but it was out of obligation. It did not come from a relationship with God. It was simply obedience. That day, I remember praying that God would help her to see that life with God is so much more than following the rules.

Now, again, obedience is good, but God wants so much more for our lives.

Many people never go beyond this stage of discipleship. They still follow God at a distance but they do what God says, for the most part. They may even obey when they are tired, but they do not expect God to do great things.

One stage of discipleship: Curiosity.

Another stage: Obedience.
The Third Step of Discipleship: Humble Worship

Listen to what happens when Simon acts with obedience.

6 When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. 7 So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

Fish. Lots of fish!!

Now, remember, these were not very big boats.

What do you think were the reactions of the fisherman in those boats? They had been at it all night, they needed to make their living, and then suddenly they have the fish story to end all fish stories. They have huge amounts of fish.

What do you think they were feeling?

----- Give people time to answer -----

Check out Simon Peter’s response:

8 When Simon Peter saw this,

Notice the name change; up until this point it was simply Simon, but now, it’s Simon Peter. Peter the name that Jesus will give Simon. Peter means “the rock.” Simon’s next step of discipleship involves a name change, because Simon’s faith is becoming more solid.

Check this out:

8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” 9 For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, 10 and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon’s partners.

Whoa!! First thing Peter does is worship.

wait. receive. respond.
He kneels down in front of Jesus. Literally, he prostrates himself in front of Jesus. Simon Peter humbled by this huge catch of fish.

Simon’s name is not the only one who is called something new. Notice what Simon now calls Jesus. Before the fish, Simon called Jesus Master. After the fish, he calls him “Lord.”

Jesus has moved from Master—obedience—to Lord—worship.

“Don’t come near me.” In the original Greek, Simon Peter is absolutely emphatic that Jesus should not even come near him. Simon Peter sees his sinfulness.

“Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”

Why would Peter suddenly recognize his sinfulness?

Prior to the fish, Peter may have not have really believed. He had respect for Jesus. He may have even had admiration, but Jesus was no more than another man who happened to be a great teacher.

With the fish, Jesus speaks Simon Peter’s language of love and belief. Love because Peter’s deepest need may have been met to provide for his family (after all he was a fisherman by trade). Belief because skepticism is removed when Simon Peter sees a miracle with his own eyes.

Simon Peter has an epiphany; in other words, he recognizes God’s presence in the person of Jesus.

When we recognize God’s presence, we realize just how sinful we really are and just how unable we are to do God’s work.

You may remember that when Isaiah first encountered God, he had a similar reaction.

wait. receive. respond.
Isaiah sees the Lord Almighty and proclaims, “I am a man of unclean lips.” He knows that he is not worthy or able to do God’s work. He is unable to speak a word for God because he’s sinful.

This is a critical stage of discipleship: We recognize just how sinful or unworthy we truly are.

John Calvin described humanity as utterly depraved. In fact, we are so bad that we don’t even want God to be in the same room with us. We push God away because being close to him just makes us feel bad. We recognize we really don’t deserve any of this. We don’t deserve his love. We don’t deserve his healing.

The closer you stand next to God, the more clearly you see your imperfections.

Have you ever had a moment when you saw the glory and love of God and that made you very aware of your own sinfulness and unbelief?

That was Peter. “Just stay away!” he commands Jesus. Now look how Jesus responds.

> Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.” 11 So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Powerful scene. Peter is feeling totally unworthy, he’s been found out, he really didn’t believe God was God and what does Jesus say to him? He says, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.”

In other words, Simon Peter, you don’t have to fear rejection. You don’t have to fear being found out. I’ve already got a plan for you. I want you to tell others this good news.

You are accepted. You are loved. Now get up, let’s go tell others.

Simon and the others went from being fishermen to fishers of men.

It’s a great phrase in the Greek. “From now you will fish for people,” literally reads, “You will be catching alive people.”

You will be restoring people back to life.

wait. receive. respond.
What does it mean to be a disciple? It’s when we see God has called us on a grand adventure to follow him and to tell others about him. It’s when we hear Jesus’ call to give life to others. It’s when we are ready to leave everything and follow God so that others might live.

Jesus gives a gracious invitation. Come, follow me, and listen to Simon Peter’s response:

11 So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

They took a step of faith.

Mother Teresa heard God’s call as a twelve-year-old girl to become a nun. Her life was changed because she took that initial step to follow God’s best for her life.

Preacher note: Consider using an illustration from your life here.

I knew that night at the Darryl Mansfield concert that God wanted so much more for me than to simply sit in the crowd. He was calling me to a life of joy and service.

God extends that invitation to you.

Will you make a decision to take another step of faith in your journey?

Are you willing to leave everything to follow Jesus? Are you willing to let others know about God’s love and abandon your fears and your old way of life?

You are invited to join a small group so that over the next 10 weeks, you can discover specifically what God wants to do in your life. Each week, you’ll have a chance to pray with others and to study the life of Peter together to better understand how God’s call in your life.

Let’s pray.

wait. receive. respond.
waiting: leaning what it means to be blessed
The life of the disciple deepens as we understand God's heart for those in need. Peter (along with most of us) does not understand what it means to be blessed. Jesus prepares his followers for their life after Easter by instructing them about God’s heart for the poor and teaching them that in caring for others, we’ll be blessed. He also gives a strict warning for those who take comfort in the material possessions. As you continue on this journey that will extend beyond Easter, pray for yourself and your congregation as God stretches you to share what you have so that others might be blessed.

Preacher’s Note: Consider adding in stories from your own congregation or life that talk about the idea of feeling blessed.

Scripture

Luke 6:17 He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, 18 who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by evil spirits were cured, 19 and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

20 Looking at his disciples, he said:
   “Blessed are you who are poor,
       for yours is the kingdom of God.
21 Blessed are you who hunger now,
       for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now,
   for you will laugh.
22 Blessed are you when people hate you,
   when they exclude you and insult you
   and reject your name as evil,
       because of the Son of Man.
23 “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.
24 “But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.
25 Woe to you who are well fed now,
   for you will go hungry.
Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.
26 Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you,
   for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.
Recently I had the opportunity to speak with folks from my church in informal gatherings at various homes. One of my first hosts greeted me as I walked through the door with a big hug. When I said that it was so kind for them to open their home they replied in the gracious manner that I have become used to from them, “Oh, it’s nothing. This house is the Lord’s house. We’ve been blessed.”

On another day, a woman asks for a moment of my time. “I’m going back in for my yearly re-check ...” she says haltingly. I know the rest. I know that she spent the last year in treatment after being diagnosed with colon cancer. I know she had a section removed and endured the discomfort and embarrassment of a colostomy bag. I know she went through every day and every hour of treatment so that her three year old son would have a mommy. And I know she is terrified that now, one year later, when everything seems okay, it could all be put in reverse if the appointment doesn’t go well. She is here so that I can say a word of prayer for her. Her hands are cold in mine as we bow our heads and I ask for God’s presence and power. Two days later I get the email: “It is all clear! I have been blessed.”

The sight of a grandson running up to the house or a sunset that radiates a glory the great painters tried to capture, the loving gaze of our spouse, the sound of the organ’s swell or a lush chord of praise in church—we experience these things as rich blessings. In fact, we would venture to say that we are among the most blessed people who have ever lived. Then Jesus comes along and turns everything on its head.

Today’s passage is Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount. You notice it is even located in a different place. They gather on “a level place.” It is sometimes called “The Sermon on the Plain.”

This is the inaugural teaching for Jesus’ disciples. They have just been chosen after Jesus has been away all night to pray. Meanwhile the stories are radiating out regarding Jesus’ healing powers. Just last Saturday in the synagogue he said that it is the right thing to heal on the Sabbath. Then he took a man’s withered hand and made it whole.

Now hundreds of cripples and blind had been carted to the place where Jesus stood and he had been touching and healing people all day. It says, “The people all tried to touch him” and I can imagine there was almost a frenzy of activity around him.
Preacher Note: Consider adding your own story of serving on the mission field when you were overrun with people in need.

In Haiti, we handed out a bag of rice, some beans, and some cooking oil. It was one bag per family. We had to keep on going outside to force people back. The line they finally made was so tight you couldn’t wedge your hand between two people. People were just drenched in sweat. And others were trying to tear down the fence to find their way to the front. It was a desperate scene that teetered right on the edge of violence all day long. There must have been that kind of frenzy around Jesus.

Finally, he sits everyone down. He looks over this crowd of scared people, some of them healed, most of them struggling, all of them wondering what their future would be. And he says, “These are the blessed people: those of you who are poor, hungry, weeping, and hated.”

Joan Baez gave us modern images about these same folks in the early seventies:

Blessed are the one way ticket holders
on a one way street.
Blessed are the midnight riders
for in the shadow of God they sleep.
Blessed are the huddled hikers
staring out at falling rain,
wondering at the retribution
in their personal acquaintance with pain.
Blessed are the blood relations
of the young ones who have died,
who had not the time or patience
to carry on this earthly ride.

Joan Baez, Blessed Are, 1970, 1971, Chandos Music
Meanwhile, Jesus continues, woe to you who live comfortably because you have all the comfort you are going to get. Enjoy that pizza now, because the time will come when you can’t find a bite. And yuk it up while you can because it is closing time at the comedy club and tragedy is the next event on the marquee. And if everyone thinks you are the greatest, that is just the way they talked about the prophet-haters back in the day.

The problem for us is that we feel the divide. We already know that he is not talking about us when he says they are blessed. He is talking about “them.” He is talking about people who live in rough circumstances and have nothing to show for a lifetime of hard labor. And maybe we could go for that—we can see the beauty in the picture of an old woman sitting outside her hut chopping wood or the African woman balancing water on her head and a child on her hip. We like the poetry of considering them blessed.

But how about them woes! Are you kidding me, Jesus? Sure I have had some privilege and some opportunities, but I also worked hard to be where I am. Are you telling me that after all this, plus serving on several church committees—are you telling me that I am out of your kingdom just because I am not poor?

Maybe. Or, maybe it is more like this: Unless you are part of the solution, unless you care about the plight of those with nothing, unless you align yourself with the kingdom’s goals, you have had your day. My getting poorer isn’t going to make any poor people rich. But my being satisfied with the world as it is, my being glad to keep things arranged with me on top—that isn’t going to help anything either.

And isn’t it interesting how we hear this statement of hope for the poor and instantly want Jesus to talk more to us? Sometimes we who have so much need to step back and let this word simply be for those who have nothing. Maybe part of what we need to do is be silent and listen, and realize this: “Jesus is their voice. He is speaking for those who cannot speak, who are never heard. Jesus is their voice.”

You might come back and tell me the futility of trying to help the poor. After all, you might say, Jesus himself said, “The poor shall be with you always.” It is never going to change.
I would say to you that Jesus was quoting that saying from Deuteronomy 15:11, which says, “There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.”

Jesus envisions a day when the poor are lifted up and—let’s be honest—the rich come down a few pegs. And if his prayer is that his will be done “on earth as it is in heaven,” then we want to become a blessing to the poor. We want the water they drink to hydrate their bodies rather than infect them. We want the work they do to be microenterprises that create sustainable businesses. We want the horizons for them to be brighter than a one in three chance of death by AIDS. What can we do?

First, we can realize that our faith is not just about the by and by but also about the here and now. We need to lift up the poor so that they can be blessed. As a church, we are doing it in these ways [pastor, please insert your own programs]. As an individual, what are you doing? How are you living openhandedly towards the poor and needy? Have you become so wrapped up in yourself that you haven’t thought of someone who is in much more difficult circumstances than you are?

Second, we as wealthy people need to get off our high horse. How dare we think of the poor as lazy?! It is hard every day to be poor. There is a lot of rhetoric these days that says the poor are the enemy. It is wrong. They are our brothers and sisters. How do we fix poverty? I don’t know. But I do know that, as a church, we have to try.

Third, we need to decide that it isn’t about us. It isn’t about what is comfortable or what I like. If you were Peter that day, freshly chosen as a follower of Christ, this would be your first lesson. And the lesson would be that it is not about you. It is not about your place of privilege or your fame. It is about serving others in Jesus’ name. And the ones he wants us to serve are those who are at the bottom financially, physically, emotionally, and socially. That is our calling.
Preacher Note: As you think about your congregation, consider what stories of being blessed in caring for others you might tell at this point.

And when we take the time to really engage the poor—whether that is battered women or drug addicts or someone who is just so down on his luck—when we take the time to engage them, we start to see that we are not so different from them. Here is how that song I quoted earlier ends:

For you and I are one way ticket holders
on a one way street.
which lies across a golden valley
where the waters of joy and hope run deep.
So if you pass the parents weeping
of the young ones who have died,
take them to your warmth and keeping
for blessed are the tears they cried
and many were the years they tried.

We are all one way ticket holders. And you and I got pretty good tickets. It is time for us to bring some healing, to make some changes, and to help others move to a better place on this train. If we do that, we just might be blessed.

Let us pray.
waiting: keeping your eyes open

SCRIPTURE: LUKE 8:40-56

Dr. Jan Armstrong
Description
The life of the disciple expands as we keep a close watch on what God is doing in the world. Peter had many experiences with Jesus that taught him about the life of a disciple, if he watched. In this sermon, we'll explore what Jesus taught Peter and the others around him about faith. As they watched, Jesus taught them that you have a choice when things are hard—to seek help from God, or not; that when things are a disaster, it is a fatal mistake to equate diagnosis with outcome; and that we shouldn't surrender to the negative talk of people around us.

Scripture

Luke 8: 40 Now when Jesus returned, a crowd welcomed him, for they were all expecting him. 41 Then a man named Jairus, a synagogue leader, came and fell at Jesus’ feet, pleading with him to come to his house because his only daughter, a girl of about twelve, was dying. As Jesus was on his way, the crowds almost crushed him. 43 And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. 44 She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped.

45 “Who touched me?” Jesus asked. When they all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you.”

46 But Jesus said, “Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me.” 47 Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed. 48 Then he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.”

49 While Jesus was still speaking, someone came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. “Your daughter is dead,” he said. “Don’t bother the teacher anymore.”

50 Hearing this, Jesus said to Jairus, “Don’t be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed.”

51 When he arrived at the house of Jairus, he did not let anyone go in with him except Peter, John and James, and the child’s father and mother. 52 Meanwhile, all the people were wailing and mourning for her. “Stop wailing,” Jesus said. “She is not dead but asleep.”

53 They laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. 54 But he took her by the hand and said, “My child, get up!” 55 Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up. Then Jesus told them to give her something to eat. 56 Her parents were astonished, but he ordered them not to tell anyone what had happened.
The life of the disciple expands as we keep a close watch on what God is doing in the world.

Alongside Peter as fellow disciples, we watch and see a woman healed, even in the crush of others’ demands. It begs the question, can Jesus hear my feeble cry for help in a world clamoring for God’s attention?

As disciples we observe Jairus’ concern for his daughter. Then we can witness Jesus’ response and discover that others can pray for you, even if you are as good as dead.

Who is watching over our lives? Who is this? It is Jesus, who never really sleeps, nor slumbers (Psalm 121), but lifts us up when we are up to our necks.

As I watched Peter this week in our text, I began to wonder what Peter may have learned as a disciple as he watched Jesus interact with the woman who was bleeding for 12 years and Jairus whose daughter had died.

As Jesus healed their needs, I saw for Peter (and us if we are willing to keep our eyes open) a valuable lesson on worry. What is God’s response to the disciple when it comes to facing difficult circumstances and those times when we feel hopeless?

Worry and hopelessness are emotions and feelings that we can run into from time to time in our lives. Long term worry and fear can bring on tremendous depression. The word comes from the Anglo Saxon word for choke. Worry chokes the joy of living out of its victim. And it chokes off creative power to improve one’s condition.

The trouble is that in life, everything is not always rosy. I was reading a cartoon by Dan Friday. It shows a minister in a pulpit preaching: “Having completed the formation of the earth, on the seventh day the Lord rested. Then, on the eighth day, the Lord said, ‘Let there be problems,’ and there were problems.”
The reality is that when Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, sin and problems entered the world. Worry is how many of us deal with problems. The other part of worry is that some of us can get so caught up in worrying that we make ourselves sick with worry. Social scientists have studied worry and have discovered that

- Forty percent of what a person worries about never happens.
- Thirty percent is related to the past, and all the worry in the world can’t change the past.
- Twelve percent is needless worry about our health.
- Ten percent involves petty miscellaneous matters.
- Eight percent deserves our focused consideration.

So let’s assume for a moment that your worries today are important and significant. Perhaps about work, job, a child, the health of a relative, your future, or some big project. How can we approach the negatives and fears in life? Our passage helps us.

We read of a man whose child is dying, and the man goes to Jesus and asks for help.

Our first point is that you have a choice to seek help when things are hard or not.

In some cases this means turning to God in prayer, looking to our advocate Jesus, and asking for guidance. Other times it means looking for human advocates; in health issues it means finding medical specialists. If you are dealing with a work issue, it may mean talking with a friend or member of the church who has some expertise. Look for solutions. When things are bad, look for help from someone who can give you advice, encouragement, or hope. If you have relational problems with your spouse or family, find a qualified counselor who can help you heal your end of the problem. History shows that very few things that we experience today have not been experienced by other people. If we just sit and worry and find no counsel from friends, experts, teachers, doctors, or counselors, we make a choice to stay worried and will be stuck in worry. You have a choice.

Now men and women, life is not always a picnic.

Sometimes things start out bad, and we worry, we lose a job then find another job, then we find we hate the new job and don’t make the money we hoped for, or it works out poorly, and we find that we are going from bad, to worse, to disaster.

The doctors told this man, Jairus, that his daughter was terminal. That there was no hope.

wait. receive. respond.
Second point is when things are a disaster, it is a fatal mistake to equate diagnosis with outcome.

In this passage we meet a man who has been told that his daughter is terminal. He refuses to surrender to the fences that people put on him, and he looks to Jesus to do what no one else says is possible. His love for his daughter, and his desperate hope causes him to go for help and ask for the kind of help that no one else can offer.

He refuses to give up hope in a hopeless situation because of his desperate love for his daughter. Men and women, hope makes a difference. Hope affects the heart of God. You need to know that. Encourage yourself that; God is moved by your prayer and desire and dreams. Your hope, faith, and love affect God. In Luke 8:51 Jesus said to Jairus, “Don’t be afraid.” What a great verse of hope. Jesus’ agenda that day did not include a healing, but because of the request Jesus goes. Our hope and requests make a difference in Jesus’ agenda in our lives. Your hope can make a difference.

There is a verse of scripture that I find incredible. Jesus said “You have not received because you have not asked.” Can you believe that? What a provocative verse. “You do not receive because you have not asked.” That is a blow to all of those who say to just say a little prayer and that whatever will be will be. It is directly different than the fatalistic idea that whatever happens is God’s will. God wants us involved in seeking good things and improving the world and praying.

What hopes and dreams have you laid at the feet of Christ in prayer? What is it at the core of your being that you need help with? Ask with hope. No, it won’t always be answered. But seek, ask, knock. God wants to open doors on your worry and hopelessness.

Do not equate diagnosis with outcome. In a chapter called “Panic, the ultimate enemy,” in his book The Healing Heart (1984), Norman Cousins talks about an enormously successful approach to cancer surgery that Dr. John Styland uses. When he approaches a patient, he not only describes the procedure that is going to be used in the surgery, but he also spends considerable time with each patient, describing other cases that were worse than the patient before him has, and the people were healed. He tells them of other people who had the same symptoms, same disease, same cancer, but had it worse, and they came out of it alive.
Do you see what he is doing? He is building hope for them that there is a chance. It is a mistake to equate diagnosis with outcome.

Christians of all people need to remember that no situation is hopeless. “Our God omnipotent reigns.”

Third point: Don’t surrender to the negative talk of people around you.

I read a story about a minister who stood up in the pulpit and told the congregation he was taking a vacation. And someone stood up and said, “The devil never takes a vacation.” There is always someone like that. Do you know what the minister responded said? “That’s probably why he’s the devil.”

People come from the village and say, she’s dead, don’t bother Jesus any more. Now men and women, it is one thing to come looking for someone to heal your daughter, but men and women, when you start looking for resurrection, you are entering a completely different ball park.

They have moved from illness to resurrection, no one can do anything. Jesus ignores what they said; Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid; instead believe.” Jesus ignored the negative people. There is a lot of guilt around that tells us to listen to what everybody says. We think that if someone speaks we need to listen to them. You don’t have to listen to everything that everybody says. Men and women if someone asks you for your financial situation you don’t answer them, do you?

Jesus says when people come and plant seeds of doubt don’t listen to them. Jesus ignores them. Take John Obray. The Chronicle did a big story about him a year ago when he was playing in the Alameda County golf championship. Why was he a story? Because he had lost a leg. They said he would never play golf again. But he said, yes I will. He taught himself to swing a golf club balancing on one leg. He learned to play so well he was nearly a scratch handicapper. People do this all the time.

Call him a hopeless alcoholic, and you have Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. People said he was a hopeless alcoholic, and he decided with God’s help he was not. Hundreds of thousands of people have been helped by Alcoholics Anonymous, learning that no one is hopeless with God’s help.
Tell him that he can't draw and that he will never go far with his art—you have Walt Disney. Critics said his art was useless.

Men and women, don’t believe what everyone tells you.

Don't listen to the doubters, and get rid of these people. Create a positive place of faith and hope and prayer in your life. In today's passage, Jesus takes the radical step of expelling all the people who had no hope. He kept in the room three disciples who knew that he could heal people. The mother and the father who still hoped that something good might happen, hoping against hope. And all the rest he moved out. Men and women, this means we need to create climates of faith in our lives.

In hopeless situations, we need to pray and have faith that God can move and make a difference in what you experience in life.

What are you doing in your life to increase your faith, your hope? Are you growing in your faith this year? What are you doing this year to grow in your faith that you weren’t doing last year?

At a minimum, grow by reading scripture. Learn to pray and pray more. Get around people of faith by joining one of our women's bible studies, or the men’s bible study as we study the life of Peter. The best way to conquer worry is to draw close to Jesus Christ and to make friends with fellow pilgrims along the way, so that your hope can grow and mature along with your faith.

Our first point is you have a choice, to seek help when things are hard or not.

Our second point is that when things are a disaster, it is a fatal mistake to equate diagnosis with outcome.

Our third point is this: Don’t surrender to the negative talk of people around you.
waiting: contemplating the cross

Optional subtitle: What’s the buzz?
The life of the disciple demands that we make a choice—we must choose what we authentically believe about Jesus and if we are committed to following him—no matter that cost. Truth is, you’ll have to deny yourself and take up the cross. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” Peter could see Jesus was the Messiah; now Peter had to decide if he wanted to follow the Messiah God sent and not the Messiah he expected. As you work on this sermon, pray for God to reveal himself to your congregation, and take time to reflect on how you would answer the question from Jesus, “Who do you say that I am?” At the end of the sermon, you’ll have a chance to share your personal convictions and invite others to do the same.

Prior to Reading the Scripture

In today’s passage, Jesus is praying by himself. He is just coming off of the powerful high of the feeding of the five thousand. People are flocking to him looking for every kind of healing. As he ministers to them, he meets their every hunger in miraculous ways. Given Israel’s expectations, the distribution of food pricked their ears to hear if Jesus might be the one. After this encounter he draws away to pray, but the disciples, so full of what has just happened, cannot leave him in peace. Jesus then asks them what people are saying. He wants those closest to him to grasp that following him will mean much more than hovering, not so quietly by, when he tries to grab a few moments of prayer. He wants them, maybe Peter most of all, to know that following him will reorganize every priority. It will cost everything.
Luke 9:18 Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say I am?” 19 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.” 20 “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “God’s Messiah.”

21 Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. 22 And he said, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” 23 Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. 25 What good is it for you to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit your very self? 26 If any of you are ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. 27 Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.”
waiting: contemplating the cross

SCRIPTURE: LUKE 9:18-27

It is a natural human tendency to wonder what people are saying about us, isn’t it? It is natural to want to know who people think that we are, what they really think of our character, of our mission in the world, of the lives we live and the message that our lives preach. It is natural, too, to wonder about others as well.

Preacher’s Note: Consider using a story from your life when someone assumed they knew who you were or a time when you wanted to find out what people were thinking about you.

A number of years ago I took my study leave for a month alone to write on a tiny island off of Nova Scotia. One day at the Laundromat I overheard two women talking. One asked the other, speaking of me, “Who is that?”

“Oh that is that woman from Vermont who is always alone.” My rental car had Vermont plates. The people of that little town had seen me walking the beach or sitting on my little porch with a book and a notebook. I was odd, different, a stranger and they wanted to make sense of my presence there. One evening when I went to Ray’s Place, one of three tiny restaurants on the island and a pizza joint whose claim to fame was the only salad bar in town, the young man who served me my pizza came right out and asked me, “What’s your story?”

I don’t know if that was some kind of cultural nicety, like when we say “how are you doing,” or what, but it struck me and stuck with me and initiated a conversation that I will get back to in a moment.

It is natural to wonder what people are saying about us, and it is natural to wonder about others we meet who are somehow different. And Jesus was certainly somehow different, much more different than a woman alone in the wilds of Nova Scotia.

As he pulled aside to pray, Jesus wondered too, about them, don’t you think? He wondered what they had actually grasped of his message and his being. He wondered what the crowds saw in him when he fed them so completely. Did they see something about the majesty of God’s provision? Did they grasp as they gathered up the fragments of food leftover that he was somehow saying to them that nothing in their lives would ever be wasted? He wondered what the buzz was. So he asked his friends. Who do the crowds say that I am?

And the answers he got were not very heartening.

wait. receive. respond.
Some thought he was John the Baptist come back from the dead. Some thought Elijah, the one whose return was expected as a herald of the coming Messiah. Some thought he was the return of one of the great prophets or a new great prophet. But none of those perceptions got right down to the truth. All were more about the people perceiving than the reality perceived. All were about their expectations and not about God’s unruly reality.

So then he turns to them and says, **BUT**... letting them know in a word that what others were saying was missing the truth ... But, who do you say that I am?

Peter replies that Jesus is Messiah. Well, what did that mean to Peter? Messiah was a very loaded word. The word itself rolled off the tongue loaded with expectations about who Messiah would be and how Messiah would behave.

Messiah would restore Israel to its special kingdom of honor. Messiah would make sure that the oppressive boot of Rome was off the neck of Israel. Messiah would lead Israel into battle against her enemies and finally bring lasting peace. Messiah would return the land and its people to right worship of God. Messiah would bring lasting and decisive change in the plight of people. Messiah would bring the promises of God into full color reality in the lives of God’s people.

That is what Peter had been longing for.

That is what Peter had been preparing for.

That is what Peter had expected.

That is the way he thought God would act.

That is the way he thought salvation would come.

That message was not the message Jesus wanted shared. He saw it differently. He knew it differently. And he silenced them all right then and there.

In that poignant moment when the disciples can contain their excitement no longer and can’t even leave Jesus alone to pray, Jesus realizes how little they have yet understood. They can’t see the hardship that lies ahead. They can’t see his cross much less their own. They can’t see that there is a bigger picture of which they are a part. They can’t see that the way to get what they need is not always by getting what they want.

*wait. receive. respond.*
So Jesus tells them flat out. “This whole Messiah thing is going to kill me,” he says. “And much in you will have to die as well, your desire for fame, your quest for wealth and power, your need to be in control, your tendency to want everything your own way. That will have to go and you can’t begin to know how hard it is all going to be. Worth it, but mighty, mighty hard.”

Jesus lays it all out for us. Can’t you almost hear him asking again after that, “Now who do you say that I am? Do you think I’m some kind of magic trick to get you what you want and to keep you from getting what you don’t want? Or am I the Messiah of God and, if so, will you go where I lead you?”

That deeply poignant, sadly passionate question rings through this room and through our community and world doesn’t it?

“Who do the crowds say that I am?”

“Who do you say that I am?”

When I was in Nova Scotia I thought a lot about that question. I was serving a congregation that was growing and growing more diverse in a city that seemed more and more unconcerned about the Gospel. So whenever I had a natural opportunity, I asked the question of people that I met what they had to say about Jesus.

At the Laundromat the day I mentioned, I met a couple from Ontario who lived on their sailboat and went all over the world. We chatted while our clothes washed and somehow, probably after they asked what I did for a living, I asked them.

The man said, “He was a wonderful man who founded a horrible religion. No,” he went on, “It’s not a bad religion. It is just practiced by horrible people, hypocrites. I’d like to be a Christian if it wasn’t for the hypocrites.”

The young girl who rented me a movie at the general store nearly every evening said in answer, “He was part of God wasn’t he, a long time ago?”

The defrocked Roman Catholic priest who was the owner of one of the little restaurants in town said, “He was my way to God before the church blocked my path.”

And, my personal favorite, the young man at the pizza parlor said, “Jesus, I don’t know the dude. Does he live around here?”

wait. receive. respond.
In each of those conversations, I could hear Jesus’ pensive question to his friends, “Who do the crowds say that I am?”

That is a huge question for us today, sisters and brothers. Who do the crowds say that he is? Is he a political code word for a particular ideology? Has he become a justification for our points of view—right, left, right, wrong? Is he just the name of an ancient man with long blond hair who was fond of holding lambs and lifting gentle hands to gentle children?

Who do the people in your company say Jesus is? In your school? In your family? In your neighborhood?

Who does the world at large, say that Jesus is? Who do those who experience United States’ power as their powerlessness, our passion as their destruction, our freedom as their enslavement—who do they say that Jesus is?

Before we can answer that question with any integrity at all for the world, before we have the right to answer, before Jesus lifts the ban of silence from our own lips, before we can say to the young man serving pizza in a remote corner of North America, before we can say to the families moving into our communities, before we can say to friend or enemy, before we can answer their spoken or unspoken question of who is Jesus, we must be able to answer that question appropriately, adequately, personally, humbly and passionately for ourselves.

Who do you say that he is? Well, we all know the “right” answers.

He is the son of the living God,  
the savior of the world,  
the pathway to relationship with God,  
the example of a life lived in righteousness,  
the sinless one,  
the one of love,  
the one of sacrifice,  
the one of forgiveness  
the lover of the downtrodden,  
the great equalizer of people  
the prince of peace  
the friend of all
Yes, yes, yes!

But, “Do you know the dude? Does he live around here?”

That is the question at its heart that Jesus put to Peter and his friends.

Who do YOU say that I am?

Preacher’s Note: Write this next section personally for yourself. Consider telling the story of how you came to the understanding of who Jesus is.

Well, I will tell you who I say Jesus is.

Jesus is a personal, spiritual reality in my life. He is the very real companion that walks with me when I am muddling through my life and has a presence that I can sometimes feel as goose bumps on my body.

Jesus is the one who loves me anyway,
   who is willing to look at the ravages of the life that I live
   and look at the pain that I often leave in a wake behind me
   and look at the choices that I have made that have hurt people and dishonored him
   and love me anyway.

He is the one who cried with me as I watched my beloved father slip away body and mind and finally spirit. He is the one who sent me hummingbirds to remind me that love goes on and that for Christians, no good-bye is ever final.

He is the one who pushes me to do what I don’t want to do to take care of my health.

He is the one who asks the hard, hard questions of me when I sit with my journal on my lap and try to look at life, at him.

Jesus is the one whose Spirit reminds me of words of truth from Scripture just when I need that word, just when I must have it or die.

Jesus is the one who picks up the broken pieces of life, just like he instructed his disciples to pick up the broken fragments of bread and fish after the miracle feeding and collect them in baskets so that nothing would be wasted.

wait. receive. respond.
等待: 考虑十字架

耶稣是那一个确保生命中的每一件事，无论多么破碎，都不被浪费。

耶稣是那一个拯救我的生命，
谁恢复我的力量，
谁当静脉无法找到时，触碰我颤抖的手。

耶稣是那一个，尽管我的五十多岁不太明白，
尽管我将我自己的期望加在那创造我的人上，
是那一个教我宽恕，
不是作为另一节课要学或掌握的，
不是作为规则来定义我的生活，
而是作为体验到神心的现实。

耶稣是那一个用恩典浇灌我，
并且坚持尽管我的受伤的完美主义，
尽管我法律束紧的心，
让我开放自己于那恩典，
那超越言语的爱，
让我屈服于它，
于那神自己就是爱的神。

耶稣是那一个坚持让我让神爱我，即使我不可能回报那爱给我自己。

耶稣是那一个包扎破碎的心，
宣称释放给被囚禁的，
那召唤我进入生命，像鹰一样恢复我的青春，
让我重新开始。

耶稣是那一个召唤我正直，
谁伸出手来拿走我可能扔给其他人的石头，
并从我的手中移除它们。

耶稣是那一个没有耐心让我找借口，因为耶稣是我唯一的需要，
我唯一的保护，
十字架。

wait. receive. respond.
Jesus is the one who calls me to the truth,
    whether I like that truth or not.

Jesus is the one who demands that I get up and follow,
    not stay home and wallow.

Jesus is the one who asks me daily to follow in his wake,
    to paddle like a duckling even if my legs are tired
    to shoulder my cross for his sake and for the sake of others
    to rest in his sacramental presence to hold me up and see me though.

Jesus is the one who taught me that you can't always tell who is winning by the score;
    That suffering is not the end of the world and that it doesn't last forever.

Jesus gives me life with meaning and hope in dying.

I am not an extraordinary person. I am not even a particularly good one. I am sometimes
small minded, self absorbed, careless, forgetful, willful, stubborn and too interested in
what others think.

But one thing I can say that I am.

I am a lover of Jesus.

Without him I would not know how to breathe.

You know friends, Christ has called us to build his church. God has called us to build a
life-sustaining, life-transforming, world-changing community of lovers of Jesus.

The first step is to have something to offer.

And that something is someone.

Who do you say that Jesus is?
waiting: selling it all to gain everything
Description

The life of a disciple demands that we not only make a choice about what we believe, but also what we do with all our stuff. Will we allow our stuff to get in the way of allowing God to change us into radical followers of Jesus, who in the words of Mother Teresa, “live simply so that others might simply live”? As Peter waits to discover the reason Jesus came to humanity, Jesus reassures Peter that you cannot out-give God. No matter what you give up, you’ll receive so back so much more. As you prepare, ask God to show you areas in your life where you’ve allowed material things to get in the way of your relationship with Christ both personally and as a church.

Scripture

19 “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. 20 You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.’”
21 “All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said.
22 When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”
23 When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy. 24 Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! 25 Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.”
26 Those who heard this asked, “Who then can be saved?”
27 Jesus replied, “What is impossible with human beings is possible with God.”
28 Peter said to him, “We have left all we had to follow you!”
29 “Truly I tell you,” Jesus said to them, “no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God 30 will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”
I cannot say how many times I’ve heard someone say, “If only I could have been standing there to see and hear Jesus, then I’d really be ready to believe and follow.” Perhaps one reason I cannot say how many times I’ve heard it said is because I’ve said it to myself so many times!

It is obviously true that many who personally encountered the Lord Jesus during his three year ministry found Him life-changing. Certainly the disciples were radically affected by Jesus. Peter was not blurtting out hyperbole when he exclaimed, “We have left all we had to follow you!” (Luke 18:28) Recall the way Luke tells the story of Jesus calling Peter to “catch people,” in chapter 5:1-11, when he, James and John, “pulled their boats up on shore, left everything, and followed him.” (v.11)

And so the thought is: “Certainly if I were to be confronted personally by Jesus with such a miraculous calling, I too would have ‘left everything’.” Such an idea can be a little confusing for those of us who already believe, because so few of us have in fact “left everything” to follow Him; yet follow Him we do. And truth be told, when an unbeliever articulates that sort of “if I had only been there” thought in the midst of a conversation with me, I have yet to be inspired to respond, “Well, there’s one thing you can do: Sell everything and give to the poor, and you will inherit eternal life!” I suppose I’ve known intuitively that I don’t have the integrity to offer such a call, not to mention a lack of courage and spiritual insight into others.

Preacher’s Note: Use your own examples of what has been “given up” to follow Christ, with a self-deprecating / humble slant, acknowledging that we have not “left everything” to follow Christ, as Peter, James and John, and certainly not as Jesus invites the rich ruler to do.

Then again, most of us haven’t done too badly. We have “left something,” to follow Christ! I left a public teaching career; more significantly the possibility of every summer vacation left open for surfing! Of course God has called me to pastor an historic congregation just down the road from one of the best waves in California, a miracle to me and a seemingly inexhaustible source of jokes and jabs for my closest friends.
What might be troubling then is that here we have a story of a man who did seek out and personally encounter Jesus, who had an intense conversation with him, and nonetheless was not converted as a disciple, so far as we know. In that sense this is a disturbing story, and, as Luke notes, “very sad.”

What are we to do with such an exchange? What are we to think when most of us cannot even identify with Peter’s exclamation of leaving all we had to follow Jesus? Does our “less than everything” discipleship reveal that we maybe are not waiting on Jesus’ promise of the age to come, of receiving “many times more” than what we have left to follow Jesus?

Consider Peter, watching, listening, and waiting for the exchange between the rich ruler and Jesus to play out. He seems to wonder about some of the same things. Peter’s instinct after witnessing the rich ruler’s personal encounter with Jesus is to recall his own first encounter with Jesus. Perhaps then a place for us to start would be similar: the stories of our own conversions.

We may not have had an opportunity like the rich ruler or Peter, but most of us have made decisions to follow Jesus. I wonder how often we recognize the miracle of salvation. We might now and again hear the radical testimony of a person saved by Jesus out of some extraordinary circumstances, the type who go on to give up everything to live a life of radical discipleship. (And often fame, otherwise, when would we hear such radical stories in our mostly non-radical churches?) Most of us have much less dramatic stories. We were brought up in believing homes and gradually, step by step, became disciples ourselves. Or we were invited to a church or fellowship and slowly came to faith. Whatever our stories, one thing Luke 18:18-30 teaches us is that salvation, any salvation, is truly a miracle of God.

We are told that in Peter’s day, the people who seemed most likely to be blessed were those who were faithful in their religious dedication. And wealth was taken as clear testimony to authentic faith—an example of God’s blessing and approval. Therefore, if there was ever a candidate for eternal life, the rich ruler would have been it. Yet when he proudly answers that he has kept the commandments since he was a boy, an answer that might not have startled his contemporaries the way it does us, he is not praised as faithful or blessed, and neither is he condemned.¹

That must have been odd. As we can see from the questions that come later, folks were paying close attention to the conversation. Maybe those listening intently simply wondered why Jesus wasn’t answering the ruler’s question: What was needed to “inherit eternal life?” (Lk. 18:18) Jesus, however, after issuing the challenge for him to “sell everything you have and give to the poor,” promises “treasure in heaven,” not “eternal life.” (Lk. 18:22) Isn’t keeping the commandments of God enough?!

Yet I wonder why the ruler is not condemned as a hypocrite for asserting such a bold claim about his commandment keeping. More than one scholar has written about the ruler’s self-awareness, or rather, lack of it. Really?! He’s kept all the commandments since he was a boy?! Self-awareness can grow humility in us, and it seems pretty obvious the ruler is not a particularly humble fellow. Digging a little deeper, I wonder about his expectations of God, and of himself. And the I wonder, what are my expectations of God and of me in light of this passage?

I’m already a little on edge for not being able to assuage the questions the passage raises by harking back to my own radical, “leave everything” conversion. I’m beginning to sense that the person I most relate to in this story is, in fact, the ruler. But I’m not quite ready to drag us all into a bracing round of self-examination, because I’m not sure that what Jesus says to him is supposed to be applied to me, or you! The pressure is building though, isn’t it?! If the ruler had obeyed Jesus he would be quite an inspiration. But he didn’t, and so instead of inspiring he is a bit troubling.

*Preacher’s Note: In my own style of preaching this transitional question is a little bit playful, and a little bit pointed.*
Luke describes the ruler’s emotional reaction to Jesus’s “You still lack one thing” as sadness, but he doesn’t give us a description of the disciples’ countenance. A few moments later though, they are clearly exasperated when he describes how difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God; as hard as it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle! If I were to think again of the ones who seem to me most obviously headed for the kingdom of God, and then hear those calculations turned upside-down by Jesus, or to hear him raise the bar on them, I too might protest, “Who then can be saved?” Obviously the question behind the question is: If they can’t be saved, what are my chances? And I’ve already disclosed that I don’t have a comeback like Peter’s, and I’m guessing you don’t either! Are we in fact destined to become “very sad” at our present chances of being saved? After all, I have a home, a wife, brothers and sisters and parents and children, and I don’t think I can say I have left any of them as part of my calling to follow Christ. What about you? Have you left everything? Can you even imagine leaving everything?! Do we want eternal life that badly? Do we trust Jesus that much?

One of the remarkable things about Jesus is the way he loved, and loves, sinners. People whose sense of self had been so eroded that they’d lost touch with the goodness of God, and were daily confronted with their own problems; these seem so often to be the ones who are drawn to Jesus and then hang obediently on his words. But this ruler is different. He seems quite confident in his “goodness.” Is his question, “...what must I do to inherit eternal life?” a true question, or is it an attempt to be publicly affirmed and praised by the famous rabbi Jesus? I think scholars are onto something when they say that Jesus’ “you still lack” observation, and “sell everything” instruction to the ruler was intended to show him that he really had not kept the all the Commandments since his childhood. Unlike many of us who read this passage, the ruler was not a troubled soul, until that point. Luke tells us he experiences sadness. I wonder what he felt a moment later when Jesus looked at him and spoke about how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!

An essential part of any conversion to Christ is repentance: remorse or sadness for sin. For how are we to accept forgiveness if we do not sense a need for it? And the experience of conviction, of remorse and the need for forgiveness, and help, really is a work of the Spirit of God. In that sense most of us can distance ourselves from the ruler. Where he projected confidence, we have been contrite. Where he surveyed his life and found spiritual success, we have surveyed our lives and found sin.

And so in that way we are distanced from the ruler, and more closely aligned with Peter, who said, “I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8) We have experienced the miracle of conviction, we have responded to the Spirit’s call in our hearts to confess our sin to God, and we have responded to Jesus’ call to repent and change. Saved through faith by the power of God! Most definitely salvation is a miracle for each one of us who has come to Jesus.

But perhaps some here have not yet had such an experience, and perhaps the miraculous work of the Spirit is happening now. The ruler was egregious in his confidence, but more often we are simply blinded, unaware of our sinfulness and unconcerned about any eternal consequences. That is, until we hear the still, small, and surprisingly powerful voice of the Spirit of God drawing us toward the Light of the World, where it all becomes so visible to us. If you are hearing this as though I am speaking directly to you, please do two things. First, say this prayer in your heart, “Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” (repeat) And second, come speak with me or another person here in the fellowship who you trust, and we will confirm the miracle you have experienced and offer some guidance for the beginning of the journey of faith.

Salvation to eternal life is one important teaching in this passage, and it’s awesome, but Luke has another piece of business for us: our stuff. All our stuff that gives us a feeling of security, identity, belonging, convenience, and, well, pleasure. We may be able, with integrity, to distance ourselves from the ruler through confession, repentance, and forgiveness, but we may as well get in front of him when Jesus looks at him and says, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel [the largest animal in first century Palestine] to go through the eye of a needle [the smallest opening in first century Palestine] than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.” (Luke 18:24, 25)

Have you ever stepped in front of someone? Cut in line at a potluck? Shielded a child from a water-balloon? That’s what we ought to imagine doing, stepping in front of the suddenly sad ruler, in order for Jesus to look us in the eye and articulate our impossible situation. Impossible because we are rich by just about any reasonable global scale, and if you want to see a graphic description of your wealth, go to www.globalrichlist.com and stand eye to eye with Jesus! And if Peter’s confession helped us out a few minutes ago, his protest here gives us some homework, “We have left all we had to follow you!” I wonder how we’re doing with that opening thought, about how much clearer and simpler it would be if we could just experience an encounter with Jesus like the people in the Bible!

wait. receive. respond.
Luke the gospel writer is nearly relentless in dishing out warnings about wealth and riches; they have a narcotic effect on our souls. And when you’re hooked on a drug, it is very difficult to imagine life without it—sober. Likewise it is very difficult to imagine leaving “all we have” as an act of faithful discipleship. Most of us can imagine leaving it all to our heirs, but that would be only one small slice of loving our neighbors as ourselves, because that’s kind of just a form of loving ourselves! For today we may be able to bracket Peter’s comment, to discern his protest as unique to him and the other disciples. But we take a great spiritual risk if we ignore Jesus’ warning about riches, just as we forfeit receiving “many times as much in this age, and in the age to come, eternal life” when we do. (Luke 18:30)

If we are able to believe Jesus for our salvation, which is a miracle, then let us step out in faith to believe Jesus’ promise to give us much more than we would ever ask or imagine. Conviction, confession, and repentance are the calisthenics of salvation. Giving away our money and stuff, then giving away a little more of our money and stuff, and again giving away yet more of our money and stuff is an investment in the kingdom of God—and it is loving our neighbors as ourselves.

In the end we don’t need to go back to the first century to have an encounter with Jesus. We have one every time we read and listen to the New Testament witness to Jesus, by the power of the Spirit. Does that seem far-fetched? Well, “What is humanly impossible is possible with God.”

Amen.

(i)bid. p. 460.
waiting: becoming aligned with God’s heart

SCRIPTURE: LUKE 19:28-48

Beau Smith
Description

Does your heart break over the things that break the heart of God? Peter, along with the crowds, celebrated the day Jesus came into Jerusalem. Jesus, on the other hand, wept over Jerusalem. In this sermon, you’ll walk systematically through Jesus’ “realistic” entry on Palm Sunday. As you prepare the sermon, consider in prayer how this story will impact the life of your congregation.

Scripture

Luke 19:28-48 After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. 29 As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 30 “Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 31 If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it.’” 32 Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. 33 As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” 34 They replied, “The Lord needs it.” 35 They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. 36 As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. 37 When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: 38 “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” 39 “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” 40 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” 41 “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” 42 As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. 43 The days will come on you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. 44 They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.” 45 When Jesus entered the temple courts, he began to drive out those who were selling. 46 “It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be a house of prayer’; but you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’” 47 Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. 48 Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words.
This morning’s text is traditionally referred to as the “triumphal entry.” Taking a closer look at it, I think it is safe to say we can hardly call it “triumphal.” Instead we are faced in this text with a “realistic entry.” Chalked full of hope, celebration, comedy, irony, disappointment, anger, and conspiracy—sounds like real life doesn’t it?

Jesus’ “realistic entry” into Jerusalem.

This text in fact is one among many that challenges the reader to think, “Why include this in the telling of the gospel story?” This account in so many ways is embarrassing, and it’s hard to imagine how embarrassment might further the Kingdom of God.

In similar fashion to past kings, Jesus enters the city, but the similarities between these entries only seem to accentuate the differences. Three hundred years prior to Jesus, another king had conquered and entered Jerusalem. He is best known as Alexander the Great. Alexander too entered the city via a beast of burden—a great chariot pulled by a horse. He too had people laying out cloaks, and even flowers—the finest cloaks and most expensive flowers. He too had multitudes gathering to sing his praises—the entire city in fact, and not just his army who were also the recipients of praises and gifts. He too entered the temple and made a sacrifice at the instruction of the high priest himself (a real, and true, and deep offense to any good Hebrew I’m sure).

So why include a text like this where the King of Kings enters on a baby donkey, over the tattered cloaks of his poor and “least of these”-type followers, where he cries, and gets upset to the point of lashing out in anger, where he prophesies the impending destruction of the city and teaches his message under the close watch of those who conspire to kill him? Why not embellish here just a little? Why not omit the awkward details so as to paint over any possible humiliation? Let’s take a closer look at our passage to see if we can’t find out together.

Verse 28 starts us out by looking back: “After he had said these things.”
What things? Jesus’ followers believe the kingdom of God will come immediately when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem. In fact they long for it; they couldn’t imagine it any differently, and despite Jesus telling them differently they still seem to go on believing it just the same. Jesus explains that the kingdom will not come right away by telling a parable about a greedy and harsh king, a king who is unconcerned for the weakest citizens in his kingdom and who blesses those who already have at the expense of those who don’t. Jesus is not this kind of king, and therefore his kingdom will not come immediately. There will still be kingdom work left to be done even after Jesus has entered Jerusalem.

Though the kingdom will not fully appear upon Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem, he is a king nonetheless, and verses 29-34 serve to show us this. Jesus asks two of his disciples to go and get a colt of a certain age at a certain location and bring it back to him. If anyone asks why, he instructs them to say, “The Lord needs it.” Lo behold, the disciples go (unquestioningly) and find the colt just as Jesus said they would. They untie it and someone challenges them, just as Jesus seemed to know would happen; then they reply as Jesus commanded and get off scot-free.

What ought to jump out at us here is really two things. The first is that Jesus has some pretty amazing foreknowledge and authority! The second is that Jesus uses this amazing foreknowledge and authority to grab a very puny and meek little animal.

Jesus’ foreknowledge and authority is similar to many stories about kings entering cities, Alexander the Great included. That a new king entered the conquered city was simply not enough; the king’s entrance needed to be ordained by the divine, and the divine’s authority needed to rest on that new king. In this passage, Jesus in very real fashion is demonstrating to his followers he is a true king of the first order. However, Jesus is like no other king before him or since. Rather than steed or chariot, Jesus asks for a colt, the foal of a donkey less than one year old. Already Jesus’ “triumphal entry” comes with a twist. Yes, Jesus is king, but not as most would imagine a king. Jesus is Messiah, but not in the way so many had hoped. He would not be storming Jerusalem to take the city back from Rome by force, and a colt is obviously no way to approach such a mission anyway. Jesus is not like other kings. Jesus is like the king foretold in Zechariah chapter nine who comes “lowly and riding on a colt,” to put a stop to war altogether and bring peace to all people.

wait. receive. respond.
In verses 35-40 we witness a building momentum. At first the disciples cover the colt, giving Jesus some comfortable seating. As Jesus moves forward, more garments hit the ground in front of him. A path is being laid out before him. Then come songs and shouts of celebration from the Psalms. Songs of praise and hope lifted high, “because of all the miracles they had seen.”

But this building momentum is also full of irony, fixed in the future reality of the cross. Previous kings had entered cities in similar fashion, but this was a mockery in comparison, a scandal. In years past kings would enter proud on horseback or chariot, and the whole city would come out to greet them. The followers, the armies, and the king would be celebrated and praised by the residents of the city. What stark contrast it must have been to have no one from the city itself celebrating, perhaps no one even noticing. Furthermore, none in the midst, we’re told in verse 44, “recognizing God among them.”

Only his followers sing his praises, and they, as we know by now, are not the up-and-coming, the elite, or the cream of the crop. They are the broken, the sinful, the poor, the sick, and the wounded. What a bleak comparison it must have been when prior conquering kings had the best linens thrown at the feet of their war-horses, and flowers and gifts to boot! And the Prince of Peace has only the tattered clothes of his rag-tag followers scattered at the foot of his borrowed donkey.

It looks as though the only recognition Jesus receives from the elites of the city is in verse 39 when he is told to quiet things down. “Teacher, rebuke your disciples,” say the Pharisees. Jesus, however, does not crush the hopes of his disciples in rebuke. Though he’s assured his followers that the kingdom is not yet, it looks as though their responses of praise and adulation are absolutely in order and appropriate. Though it’s clear from the days that follow all the way up to the cross that Jesus’ message of “not yet” has sailed right over their heads, his praises are in order nonetheless!
Here we too might be able to most clearly relate with those first disciples. Two thousand years later I think we’re starting to get it: the kingdom is here, but “not yet.” Not completely anyways. But hope, praise, and thanksgiving cannot be cast aside just because it is not here in its fullness. Especially hope. And in fact that may be the one things Jesus’ followers are doing right all along; they are hoping, and we can too.

And so too is the creation. “If these kept quiet, the stones would cry out!” says Jesus. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law have gone far wrong. They don’t see what’s right before their very eyes: God in their midst. And so Jesus calls to mind the words of his predecessor John the Baptist, who said, “God is able from these stones to raise up children of Abraham.” And Jesus too calls to mind the many allusions in Scripture to creation pointing to its creator.

It is here that the momentum stops abruptly—all that energy amassing before and around and behind Jesus the Messiah. The wholehearted, half-witted efforts of his rag-tag followers come to a halt. Jesus sees the holy city, Jerusalem, the “place of peace,” and weeps in verse 41. Does Luke mean for us to reach the ecstatic heights of expectation only to be confronted with the reality of disappointment—Jesus’ “realistic” entry into Jerusalem? Maybe. Or worse, are we not meant to think of this episode in the life of Jesus as triumphal in any way, shape, or form, but rather a tragic comedy of errors moving ever-faster toward a violent death for the Savior?

“If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes,” Jesus says in verse 42.

And he knows what lies ahead. That peace will come from his death and resurrection alone; there is no other way. This is not feigned emotion here. This is the tragedy of sin in our lives—our sin, what it costs us, how it breaks and distorts and eats away at us, how it twists what was good into what is bad, and what it costs our creator. These things break the very heart of God, and God weeps over this. God weeps over how we on our best day build “holy” cities, Jerusalem, and without a moment’s hesitation forget what is holy to begin with: love of neighbor, love of God, care for poor, the sick, the stranger, and the prisoner.
And so God will come in, thank God, and tear it all down, leave no stone unturned, leave nothing standing. For we build up things without recognizing Him in our midst. Now of course some years later Jerusalem was literally destroyed and no stone was left unturned, and man, woman, and child alike were killed. That said, Jesus’ prophetic words here are for us too. Do we know, do we remember, “what has made for peace,” how he lived, what he taught, how he died and conquered sin and death itself? We too fail to recognize God in our midst. We gather together each week to remember, to remind each other, to spur each other on toward the prize, as the Apostle Paul would say.

Now Jesus enters the temple. No more tears, just anger and frustration. They’ve made a marketplace out of God’s dwelling place. They’ve turned their worship into commerce. It’s here that we today may need to pay even closer attention. We may be sensitive to what breaks the heart of God and at the same time not be discerning about what stirs up God’s anger.

We live in an age and a culture of commerce. We are consumers; our economy counts on us for it. God’s call on our lives in the very least demands that we be wise consumers, though it might be said his call demands even more than simply wise consumerism.

However, something far more dangerous than our shopping lists has seeped into the Christian life as a result of our culture. We are spiritual consumers as well. We all too easily have made God about us rather than us about God. We come to church, to worship services, and to Bible study looking for spiritual goods and services rendered. If we dislike the goods we receive (or do we dare consider that we pay for them with our tithe?), then we shop for another vendor, another church that will meet our needs. We create dividing lines along our taste preferences and generational consumer needs.

For example, for some what must be offered is the product called tradition. In fact, some are quite certain that church is not church at all without this product, tradition. For others what must be offered is the product entertainment. In fact we might not show up to church at all unless it is entertaining. And of course we want to honor the past, and of course we want to engage the present. But, we all too easily do neither when we forsake the gospel to ensure that our spiritual goods and services are rendered.
We are not here for us. You are not here for you, and I am not here for me. We are here, we exist, and we live and breathe and have our being for the sake of God. It is a church service because it is our service to God and to each other, not the other way around. Our spiritual marketplaces are an offense to God, and Jesus demonstrates God’s feelings on the matter clearly. God is angry, God is driving out, and as we read further, God is instructing.

Verse 47: “Every day he was teaching at the temple.”

Jesus’ entry into the city of Jerusalem in so many ways shares in the tradition of kings entering their city. But, as we have seen, and will continue to see, the similarities only seem to highlight the differences. Jesus’ entry is not triumphal, glorious, pompous, or even officially recognized. And here again we have another stark difference. Other kings would have entered, other kings would have had accolades (though far greater than Jesus’), other kings would have processed to the temple, other kings would have done some sort of act of officiation (though probably no king before or after Jesus would have driven out the temple trades people), but most kings would have then left. They would have gone on to politic and to plan their next conquest. Jesus stays in the temple, doesn’t move, just teaches. It’s as though Jesus again is turning expectations on their head. No, he will not go to confront Rome; no, he will not go to conspire with the Sanhedrin; he will stay close to his father, in his father’s house teaching about a new kingdom and new kind of king.

We’re left this morning with Pharisees conspiring to kill Jesus and one final interesting phrase, “they could not find any way to [kill him], because all the people hung on his words.” Jesus will be killed; they will find a way, but it’s interesting here at the end of our passage that the events of Jesus’ remaining days are tied in with the activity of his followers. Jesus’ life is tied to those who follow him. And isn’t that so true for us today? The life of Jesus is tied to our activity as his followers. May we too hang on his words. May we trust that he is king. May we lift up his praises in hope. May weep over what he weeps over. May we drive out what is unfit for life with God. And, may we be a part of his life, hanging on his every word.
waiting: the cost of denial

SCRIPTURE: LUKE 22:54-62

Fawn Parish
April 5/6, 2012 - Maundy Thursday/Good Friday

Even the best of us deny Christ – whether it’s in the heat of passion or the fear of failure, we will often turn from the One who can truly help us in order to follow our own desires. Waiting for the Living Water involves waiting through the darkness of denial. There are times when God is silent and we feel the full weight of our actions. This part of Peter’s story ends with him weeping bitterly, alone and wondering.

What happens when you’ve turned away from the One who promised you everything. In your walk with Christ, are you willing to be brutally honest with your places of denial?

Before the Rooster Crows ... Disowning Jesus

*Luke 22:54* Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. 55 And when some there had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. 56 A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, “This man was with him.” 57 But he denied it. “Woman, I don’t know him,” he said. 58 A little later someone else saw him and said, “You also are one of them.” “Man, I am not!” Peter replied. 59 About an hour later another asserted, “Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean.” 60 Peter replied, “Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. 61 The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.” 62 And he went outside and wept bitterly.
Sermon

Imagine you are a cinematographer filming this scene. How would you frame Peter as he spits denial, adamantly disowning Jesus? Would you focus on Peter’s frightened eyes or his hands fumbling with despair? How would you focus on Jesus when he turns and looks straight at Peter? Can you see yourself in Peter’s story?

Unfortunately, Peter does not have a franchise on disowning Christ. We have no room to judge this open-mouth-insert-foot-disciple. We like Peter are utterly dependent on the mercy of God on this issue. We distance ourselves from Christ both outwardly and inwardly. Peter’s disowning was spectacular, public, and unforgettable. Most of our disowning of Christ will not be read and remembered for millennia. For this we can be thankful. Our stories are not as dramatic, as heartrending, as soul piercingly bitter as Peter’s.

I had a real estate agent friend who used to hide her Bible in the trunk when she got her car washed or had a client in the car. She was afraid people would think she was a “Bible thumper.” We all had a good laugh when she confessed. (Pastor, insert a personal story of someone you know who hides their Christianity in the workplace).

But it’s not the outward ways I’d like you to consider. It’s the many and varied interior ways we disown Jesus that I invite you to explore. We can fall prey to “spiritual dissociative identity disorder,” with two personalities that co-exist within us, one for the outward world, and one for spiritual environments. The perceived sacred/secular divide poisons our hearts and dulls our souls from saying emphatically “Yes! I know this man!”

God wants more from us than occasional acknowledgements. Never one to miss a moment of conviction, songwriter Keith Green, in To Obey Is Better than Sacrifice, poignantly sings “I want more than Sunday and Wednesday nights” and adds the line, “God wants hearts of fire not prayers of ice.”

We can dismiss and disown Jesus in our own personal Holy of Holies, our mind. We rent out space between our ears to a million voices, deadening our hearts and ears to the voice of the one who loves us.

We often distance ourselves from Jesus by busyness. We distance ourselves by trying to protect ourselves, by doubting Jesus’ words directly spoken to us, by living, as my friend Kirk DeWitt says, as practical atheists.
We also disown Jesus when we allow busyness to continually consume our thought life. When we live life running on our own steam, our own abilities, our own savvy. The story goes that a foreign visitor came to the United States and said “My, it’s impressive the things Christians can build in America apart from God!”

Author David Kopp, once stood at a Christian booksellers convention full of two football fields worth of books. David asked God, “How many of these books did you author? David said God was strangely quiet. We disown the author of life when we choose to be our own writer of our days. When we live as if Jesus doesn’t exist, or doesn’t have anything to say to us.

We disown Jesus when we embrace the lie that we can adequately protect ourselves. Peter believes he can save himself. We all think that. We try to protect our hearts. We refuse love, we don’t take risks, or we don’t say big “yeses” to God. We disown Jesus when fear is the controlling dynamic of our days.

We disown Jesus when we doubt his word to us. Peter was warned by Jesus that denial was knocking at the door. But Peter refused to believe he was capable of such duplicity. Peter, like us, had an exaggerated idea of his own strength. If there is a sin that we think we would never commit, we are in deception. Peter denied Jesus’ word privately among the disciples before he disowned Jesus publicly among Jesus’ enemies.

Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, Peter—this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny three times that you even know me.”

“No!” Peter insisted. “Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you!” And all the other disciples vowed the same. Matthew 26:34-35

Someone once said that maturity is coming out of deception into the truth about ourselves. What if Jesus was inviting Peter to repentance before this tragic moment? What if Jesus’ prophecy that before the rooster crowed Peter would deny him was a plea for Peter to recognize the frailty of his own heart, to fall on his knees and ask for strength? What might have happened? What might happen if we as the people of God intentionally embraced God’s words as truth, even the ones that sting?
In the graciousness of God’s story in Peter’s story, Peter has a moment to erase the tape of his triple disowning. It happens like this: Peter has gone fishing with a few other disciples. From the boat, John recognizes Jesus cooking some fish on the beach. John says, “It’s the Lord!” (A case can be made here that when we often lean on Jesus’ chest like John did, we will have the ability to recognize Jesus even when we aren’t expecting him.) When Peter hears that it’s Jesus, he plunges out of the boat into the sea and swims one hundred yards to Jesus.

Jesus invites Peter into the drama, telling him to go back to the net and bring some of the fish they’d caught. We pick up the story in John 21:12: “Now come and have some breakfast!” Jesus said. None of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. Then Jesus served them the bread and the fish. This was the third time Jesus had appeared to his disciples since he had been raised from the dead.

Between mouthfuls of grilled fish, Jesus asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?” Somewhat baffled, Peter affirms his love three times in response. He doesn’t yet realize that Jesus is re-enacting Peter’s initial calling with the huge draught of fish while also giving him the privilege of declaring his love and erasing his triple denial.

In verses 18 and 19, Jesus goes on to address Peter’s fear of death that led to his denial: “I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don’t want to go.” Jesus said this to let him know by what kind of death he would glorify God. Then Jesus told him, “Follow me.”

Jesus wants to address the fears that lead to our own denials, our own disowning of Jesus that happens both privately and in the company of others.

John tells us in 1 John 4:18, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.”

Peter knew bitterly the torment of fear and its fruit. As Peter declares his love, he is being invited three times to live in love rather than fear. Love is the only power strong enough to motivate Peter to be willing to die for Christ. Love is the only power strong enough to keep us true when our frail hearts grow faint.

Instead of praying that we won’t disown Jesus, we can pray for greater love, perfect love, the love the Father has for Jesus, thriving in our minds and hearts. We can ask for God’s perfect love to overwhelm us.

wait. receive. respond.
Extra Tools

Loving Jesus Moment by Moment

Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (c. 1614 – 12 February 1691) called himself the Lord of Pots and Pans. He was a lay brother in a monastery who mostly worked in the kitchen and later in life worked as a repairer of sandals. Brother Lawrence is the historical poster child for loving Jesus moment by moment. His tiny book Practicing the Presence of God was compiled after his death from a series of letters he’d written to a friend.

Brother Lawrence writes, “Men invent means and methods of coming at God’s love, they learn rules and set up devices to remind them of that love, and it seems like a world of trouble to bring oneself into the consciousness of God’s presence. Yet it might be so simple. Is it not quicker and easier just to do our common business wholly for the love of him?” For Brother Lawrence, the mundane and routine could be a medium of God’s love. The sacredness or worldly status of a task mattered less than the motivation behind it. “Nor is it needful that we should have great things to do . . . . We can do little things for God; I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for love of him, and that done, if there is nothing else to call me, I prostrate myself in worship before him, who has given me grace to work; afterwards I rise happier than a king. It is enough for me to pick up but a straw from the ground for the love of God.”

Brother Lawrence felt that he cooked meals, ran errands, scrubbed pots, and endured the scorn of the world alongside God. One of his most famous sayings refers to his kitchen: “The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament.” Yet Brother Lawrence didn’t come out of the womb with his ability to practice the presence of God. It is a learned art that requires a lifetime of great diligence. Someone said “Faith makes things possible, not easy.”

Brother Lawrence said, “As often as I could, I placed myself as a worshiper before him, fixing my mind upon his holy presence, recalling it when I found it wandering from him. This proved to be an exercise frequently painful, yet I persisted through all difficulties.” He learned to live in love that casts out fear. We too, can learn the art of living in love that casts out fear by diligently fixing our minds on Jesus. We can sculpt our lives moment-by-moment by meditating on his character and his love revealed in Scripture.
Extra Tools Continued ...

1) There is an old African American song we would do well to revive.

   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJeVKOTTkHs

2) Pastor leads this song a cappella and invites congregation to join in as the message concludes

   Oh I woke up this morning with my mind
   And it was
   Stayed on Jesus
   Woke up this morning with my mind
   And it was stayed
   Stayed on Jesus
   Woke up this morning with my mind
   And it was stayed
   Stayed on Jesus
   Hallelu hallelu
   Hallelu hallelu
   Hallelujah
Hope! Life! Despair becomes Joy. Denial becomes belief. The life of the disciple begins with the reception of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He died and was risen so the repentance and the forgiveness of sins might be preached to the whole world. Easter launches followers of Jesus to share what they’ve received: life and freedom. In this sermon, you’ll invite your congregation to put their pain on the cross and experience forgiveness. If you have a cross available, you may want to invite folks to come forward and place their sin/brokenness on the cross and receive new life.

**Scripture**

Luke 24:1 On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. 4 While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. 5 In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? 6 He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 7 ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’ ” 8 Then they remembered his words. 9 When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. 10 It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. 11 But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. 12 Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.
Sermon

Preacher’s Note: If you have a cross in your place of worship, consider finding out the story behind that cross. Tell your story and then tell the story of how the cross got tagged at Highlands Church in Paso Robles, Ca.

What I want to do this morning is just to tell you a little bit about this big object over here, this big brown wooden thing with a circle around the middle that is poking out of the ground over here. I want to talk about this cross. And I want to tell you about the five-year journey that it has been on. I know that you come to an Easter worship service like this one and you expect to hear about the story of the cross two thousand years ago, and I will tell that a little bit, but today, I want to begin by telling you a little bit about this cross, the Highlands cross, and the journey it’s been on.

You know, maybe you have walked this path on the way to school, or driven past this building, and you have looked over at this cross as you were driving up Niblick. Maybe you have driven up Highway 101 and seen the gleaming of the cross in the sun as you were carefully changing lanes. You may have seen these things, but you may not know the full story of this cross – and that’s what I want to talk about this morning.

How The Cross Was Built

This cross’s story started when my wife Star and I moved into our house in Paso Robles. It was one of those houses that had a nice yard, but honestly, absolutely everything else in the house had to be replaced. It was a money pit. Remember that movie? And so we tore up floors and ceilings and bathrooms and the whole thing. And we hired a man by the name of Norm Franklin to help us. Is Norm here today? You may have heard of his family; he is a fourth generation Paso Roblan.

So, after we had torn up most of our house, I remember saying to Norm, “Norm, we are going to be starting a new church in about two weeks down in the vacant field across from Walmart.” He said, “You are?” And I said, “Yeah. And what I wondered is if you could build us a cross for our first worship.” I sketched out a drawing, and Norm said, “I’m pretty busy, but I’ll try to throw something together.” So about a week went by, and Norm called me up and said, “I’ve got your cross.”
Now, honestly, I was thinking, it would be about four feet tall, made of plywood, and taped together with duct tape and chewing gum. I will never forget my feeling when that cross drove down our street in the back of a trailer. And then we came down and we put it into the ground.

And so, for our very first Easter service, we had a cross. By the way, can you raise your hand if you were at that very first Easter service out here? So, now you know how the cross was built.

How The Cross Was Torn Down
The next part of the story is how the cross got torn down. When we started building on this property, the cross was up on the hill up here. I don’t know if you remember, there were forklifts out here on this property and machines. And one night, we still don’t know who it was, but someone hot-wired a fork lift and drove it up here to the top of the hill and pushed over the cross—just knocked it down. It was really discouraging to have that happen. Maybe you know the news coverage that we had on KSBY about that. We are still known by a lot of people in this community as the church that got the cross knocked down. So, now you know how it was built, and how it was knocked down, but maybe you don’t know how it got back up again, the first time.

How the Cross Got Put Up Again
So, this was early on in the church, and we didn’t have that many volunteers back then, and it was just Jamie and me and a few people, and we knew we needed the cross to get put up again. I said to my brother Jamie, who helped start this church, “We don’t have the people to do it.” I was really discouraged that we didn’t have the people.

And Jamie then said, “Hold on, just wait here a minute.” Jamie then walked over to Walmart and apparently, he went straight over to the hardware section and he started randomly walking up to people and asking them to come and help put the cross up again. Five minutes later, I am sitting up here on the hill, and I see this line of people dressed in black, with chains coming out of their belts, some of them had mohawks, some of them had steel toed utility boots, some of them were wearing black lipstick and eye shadow, they came up here and they put the cross back up again, in two seconds.
So, now you know how it was built, how it was pushed down, and how it was put back up again. But you may not know how the cross got tagged. That’s the main part of the story, and the part I want to focus on today. This is the first time that we have ever told this story publicly, so this is a press bulletin; this is news that we are making today.

How the Cross Got Tagged
One morning about six months ago, some of our staff came to work here at Highlands. I don’t know if you ever get this feeling when something is wrong but you can’t put your finger on it. That was the feeling that a lot of the staff had on that day. So we started looking around the building, and we noticed that someone, in the middle of the night, without our knowing it had come along with a can of spray paint and had sprayed some really ugly stuff right down the middle of the cross. In modern day terminology, by the way, the process of spraying spray paint on stuff is called tagging. It’s a way of marking territory for some people, and it can also be a kind of expression of hatred.

And so, as we looked out here that day, here it was. There was a spray painted tag right down the middle of the cross. And I will be honest with you, of all the things that have happened to this cross over the past five years, that was the most discouraging. It was just such a mark of darkness, put right upon a beautiful thing.

So, I remember really feeling bad about it and discouraged about it for about a week. And finally, Star said to me, after a week, “What’s wrong Graham?” You know, I am a real brooder. I can brood with the best of them. I have a spiritual gift for brooding. And I said, “Well I am just really discouraged about the tagging of the cross.”

“Oh, that?” Star said.

“Well, it just really bummed me out that someone would do that, you know? It just really bummed me out that someone would take what’s ugly in them and put it on the cross, express the darkest parts of their heart and place it on the cross, would literally remove what is fallen in them and put it up here, would take out what is sinful and place it on the cross.”

The purpose for this thing is not to be a beautiful statue—even though this one is especially beautiful.

The purpose is not to mark this as a religious building—even though this is a religious building.

wait. receive. respond.
The purpose is not to have a replica of what Jesus died upon—although it is that.

Star waited for a moment after I had said that, and then she said, “Yeah, it seems like a really bad idea to put our sins on the cross, doesn’t it Graham?” And after she had said that, I knew instantaneously what she was saying. The purpose for this thing...

The purpose for this thing is not to be a beautiful statue—even though this one is especially beautiful.

The purpose is not to mark this as a religious building—even though this is a religious building.

The purpose is not to have a replica of what Jesus died upon—although it is that.

The purpose of the cross is for us to have a place, throughout our lives, to put what is darkest in our souls, to put what is most fallen, to put what is most sinful up on that thing, and to have Jesus Christ miraculously transform that darkness into something beautiful.

And you know, honestly, as we planned this worship service today, we thought about handing out a can of spray-paint to every person who attended this worship service, so that all of us could spray up there what is darkest in our hearts. But then, we thought, no, that’s a little too much, maybe we should just give people flowers to put on the cross after they put what is darkest in their hearts up there.

So, I want to look at our Easter text, and then offer a few thoughts about how we can put our dark stuff up on the cross, how we can put our sins on the cross.

Our text is Luke 24:1-12. It is printed in your little bulletins, or smalletins that you have, and if you would, would you please read along with me.

On the first day of the week, (That’s a Sunday.), very early in the morning, about 5:00AM, the women, (that’s Mary Magdalene, a follower of Jesus; Joanna, who was the wife of a servant of Herod; and Mary the mother of John and Jesus’ aunt), took the spices they had prepared, and went to the tomb. They had with them myrrh, which was an embalming agent. It was also one of the gifts at Jesus’ birth, so there is beautiful circularity here.
They found the stone had been rolled away from the tomb. Notice there is no great alarm here initially; could be the cemetery manager was cleaning the tomb, taking out old bones, whatever.

When they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. Again, there is no great shock here initially. In the old days, tombs were like Motel 6s. People would be buried in there, moved, re-arranged, put here, put there, for new bodies, etcetera. (Maybe not so much like a Motel 6.)

The next line is significant. While they were wondering about these things. While they were wondering about these things. Did you know that God works best in people’s hearts when they are wondering about things? Maybe you are sitting there this morning, wondering about these things. Wondering about the bagpipes, wondering about the music, wondering about God .... God is working in your heart.

While they were wondering about these things, suddenly, two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright, Now there is shock. You know that’s how it is. You can handle one thing in your life that isn’t right, maybe your kids are driving you nuts, or maybe you lose your job, but it’s when several things pile up that you start to become frightened, shocked, thrown off. When gas prices go up, and when your business starts to fade, or when you get a health diagnosis that you lose it a little. That was the women, they are starting to lose it a little.

In their fright, the women bowed with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He HAS Risen!! Jesus Christ has come back from the dead. The man who took all of the world’s sins on his shoulders two days before is now without any of that sin, and he is alive again.

Remember how he told you while he was still with you in Galilee, The Son of Man must be delivered in the hands of sinful men? Again, that is the main theme of the morning for us. How we all must put our dark stuff up on that cross. How we all must put our sin up there. How all of us must tag the cross. Be crucified, and on the third day be raised again?
Then, this is my favorite part of the whole text. *Then they remembered his words.* I love that. Some other Sunday, I would love to do a message called, Wondering and Remembering, because it is somewhere between wondering and remembering that God captures people’s hearts. But that is not our focus. What I want to talk about is “Tagging the Cross.”

*Preacher’s Note: Consider sharing about a time when you experienced freedom from burdens that you had been carrying.*

I remember about seven years ago, before this church was started, Star and I (before Haley was born) had a chance to go to a family reunion. Now, because my mother’s family is from Scotland, we all had a chance to go to Scotland. My Dad’s side of the family are from Merced. And they were having a family reunion as well that year. And it was a tough decision for us, Scotland—Merced, Scotland—Merced. But we chose Scotland.

But honestly, I didn’t really want to go at the time, because I was really busy with my work, and it would have taken a lot of time and money to get there, and it just didn’t seem like something we should do. But after a lot of thought, we decided to go.

When we got there, we had to go through customs and rent a car and change money, which was a hassle. And then we had to take a few days to drive to the highlands of Scotland, which was sort of a pain. And then when we got there, we were so tired that we just went to bed. And then I remember waking up the next morning. And it was early, and I remember deciding to go on a walk. Everyone else was still in bed. And so I went on a hike. It was beautiful, and there was mist, and you could see the hills, like the ones behind Paso Robles, and I remember going to the top of a hill and standing there, and looking at everything. I remember taking a deep breath, and I remember thinking how wonderful that felt. Because all the burdens that I had been carrying around on my shoulders just sort of melted away. I didn’t know how much my work burdens were weighing on me. And I remember wanting to shout out, like some character from the movie Braveheart, “Freenedom!” But I know that if I did, some Scotsman would have been there with a walkie-talkie going, “Alrighty Jimmy, we’ve got another one, an American who thinks he’s William Wallace, please bring the paddy wagon right now....”
But you know, I was thinking that all of us are a little like me before I went on that trip. We all carry around with us all the burdens of our lives, we all carry around all of this weight of our responsibilities with our family, our jobs, our health, job stress, our marriages, our bills, maybe relationships that are not working. And what we need to do is to be able to put our stuff on something and then be able to stand back and say, “Freedom! Freedom!”

So, what I want to talk about in the time that I have left is to talk about this process of putting what is dark in our hearts, or what is missing, or what is broken, or what is sinful, or what is lost, or what is confused up on that cross. My deepest prayer would be that all of us could leave this service today a little lighter than when we came.

**All Of Us Have Something That We Need To Put On the Cross**

I don’t know if you all like to read the comics in the paper in the morning. Every Sunday, before I go to church and preach, I like to read the headlines of the paper, and then read a few comics. Maybe that’s where I get all of my bad jokes. Maybe I should just stop doing that. But a couple of weeks ago, there was this comic that was sort of cute from Calvin and Hobbes. And Calvin in this cartoon is feeling kind of bad because he has said some mean things to Susie. So Calvin says to Hobbes, “I feel sort of bad about the things I said to Susie.” And Hobbes says, “Well, Calvin, maybe you should apologize.” Calvin waits for a minute and says, “Yeah, I’ve just been hoping that there is a more obvious solution.”

I think that’s like a lot of us. A lot of us are sort of hoping there is a more obvious solution to getting rid of that dark stuff that we carry around with us. And so, we will write in our journals, or we will work out hard at the gym, or we will try to do extra nice things for others to compensate for what we know we shouldn’t have done, or we just try to ignore it, for a very long time.

This past Wednesday’s Tribune had a very interesting article on page two, way at the bottom. A man in Rhode Island finally settled a warrant for a traffic violation that he had committed forty years before. Michael Young of Warwick Rhode Island finally came before a judge and pled his outstanding traffic warrant that he was issued in September of 1974. He was twenty-three at the time. He is now in his sixties. And with that settling, Michael Young put his stuff on the cross and was forgiven.
Another one of my favorite stories about putting stuff on the cross is a man named Werner “Jack” Genot. It’s a true story that came out in the news recently about a decorated Korean War Vet named Werner “Jack” Genot. Genot, who is now seventy-one, had been living a lie his whole life. He lives in a small Illinois town. He played himself off for years as a marine who had been taken as a prisoner of war during a bloody battle. The problem is that the story grew and grew and grew. People would ask him to come and speak and to wear his uniform, so he had to actually make medals and uniforms that he never actually owned. He had a Bronze Star and a Silver Star and two Purple Hearts that he actually just ordered from a mail order catalog. He would march in parades and do autographs. He got a special license plate that allowed him to park anywhere he wanted. The problem came when he had the Veterans Administration come around, and they did a background check, and they found that all of this was false.

“You can’t imagine what I’m going through,” he said. “I really didn’t know how to shake this demon. But I went to bed with it every night, and I looked in the mirror every morning. I don’t want to meet my Maker with this on my heart.”

You know, every night when I put my head on my pillow, after my wife and daughter have gone to bed, the last thing I do is say, “Lord, thank you for being such a great God; I ask forgiveness for anything I have done today which isn’t of you, even the things I don’t know about that have fallen short. I put them upon the cross.” It’s a way of unburdening my heart every night. And every morning, I wake up and my heart is new, and I am ready to go forward and rack up a whole bunch of other things that I will need to confess that same night.

All of us have some part of fallen-ness, or a lot of things that we carry around with us that are extremely burdensome; they are a weight that holds us down. And we don’t even know it or recognize it after a while.

One last small point here. Maybe what you need to put on the cross today is not what you did to someone else, but what someone else did to you. And it’s something that you have been carrying around for a while, and it’s time to tag the cross.
Many of you know that I am a dad, and it is literally my favorite job in the world. It is a great job to be pastor of Highlands, but it is an even better job to be the dad to Haley. Every night, I go in and put Haley to bed, and I tell her a story. And afterwards, I give her a kiss and a hug and I say, “Good night.” The other night, before I bowed down to tuck Haley in, she said, “Daddy?” I could tell that something serious was on her mind. Very serious. She said, “Daddy, can I give you three kisses?” And then I said I love you, and she said, “I love you too.” There is nothing better than being loved by someone in this life who really loves you.

There is only one thing better than that. It is being loved by God. When we put our stuff on the cross, we are putting our stuff onto a person who loves us more than any person has ever loved you. More than your parents loved you, more than your wife or your husband loves you, more than your kids love you. God loves you.

It is literally transformative to have that love. It’s a tragic story, but a powerful one. In 1993 in Great Britain, two little ten-year-old boys were accused of killing a two year old boy. They denied the crime and denied the crime and denied the crime. But their stories did not match up, and they were saying things that were inconsistent with one another. But they could not get the two boys to confess. Finally, one of the parents came to one of the boys. He put his arms around the ten-year-old boy and he said, “Son, whatever is the truth, I want you to know that I still love you, I love you, no matter what you might have done, or not done, it cannot change how much I love you.” The boy waited for a moment, and then through tears said, “I did it, Dad.” And with that, he was released from the burden of what he had done, by giving it away to someone who loved him.

wait. receive. respond.
The Meaning of Easter (the meaning of this day) is the Transformation of our Sin on a Cross, to something Beautiful in Christ

You know, a lot of people have asked me, through the years, why we have a gold circle at the middle of our cross, when the original cross of Jesus did not have a gold circle in the middle. And the answer is that there are a whole bunch of reasons, but the main one is because it is a reminder that as often as we put our sin upon the cross, God will transform it into something beautiful through Christ. It is an eternal circle; it goes on forever.

The big fifty-cent word for this is atonement. Atonement is where we put our stuff on the cross, we tag the cross, but somewhere in between our reaching out to tag the cross with our brokenness and God’s being on the cross, he reaches out and forgives us.

There is this true story of a farmer who was having an anniversary. His friends all said, “Bud, this is your anniversary coming up, you had better take your wife out to dinner.” “Naw,” said Bud, “I’ll just get her a card.” The friends all said, “Bud you better.” So, Bud decided to take his wife out for dinner. He picked his wife up, but on the way, he needed to go check out one of his cows that wasn’t doing so well, just down the way. His wife didn’t mind, so he went, and the cow was fine. And then they went to the restaurant and had dinner. After dinner, the bill came, and it was time for Bud to pay. Bud reached in his pocket for the checkbook, but it wasn’t there. It had fallen out in the mud when he checked out the cow. Bud said, “I’m sorry, I don’t have my checkbook.” That’s all right, said the waiter, your bill has already been paid. It’s all paid.

That’s our lives as well. We drop them in the mud, we have our priorities all mixed up, we don’t really have our heart in it, but it already gets paid for by the one who died on a cross. Jesus has paid for what we did.

wait. receive. respond.
Today, we want to give you an opportunity to put your stuff upon the cross, and so, what I want to do is to lead you all in a short prayer, if you want to pray it with me, and unburden your hearts, and then I will have a moment of silence for you to put your own stuff on the cross, to tag the cross in your own way.

And then I will say amen. And we will begin to sing a song, and as the song is being sung, I want to invite you to come up with your flower, and imagine that your flower represents that ugly thing that you put on the cross, the thing Christ transformed into something beautiful. And after you put your flower on the cross, you are free to either go back to your seats, or to leave, stay around after for coffee, or to pick up your kids.

Pray this with me (and would you repeat each line after me.)

Dear God
You are totally loving,
And I humbly admit
That I need your help
That I have wandered away from you
That I have sometimes sinned
In my thoughts
In my words,
In the things I have done
I have not always done what is right
And, today,
I put all of this upon the cross
And know that
Through your resurrection from the dead
You transform all of these things
Into something beautiful
For you,
In Jesus Name I Pray
Amen
receiving: the living water

SCRIPTURE: MARK 16:1-8

Andy Rock

Optional subtitle: Who will roll the stone away?

BONUS WEEK 7 SERMON: EASTER
This sermon was created for all those who are unsure about the message of grace. May the Lord bless you as you preach this Easter Sunday.

Scripture

Mark 16:1 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body. 2 Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb 3 and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?” 4 But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. 6 “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’” 8 Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.
When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body.

Let me stop right there at the word Sabbath, which places this story of Jesus’s resurrection firmly in the history of the Jewish people. Sabbath is the day of rest for the Jewish people. The Sabbath people are God’s people. God has covenanted with Israel; God makes a promise to be their God and for Israel to be God’s people. This is a covenant—a promise—established by God and fulfilled by God. Israel’s sin and rebellion against God did not nullify God’s promise; rather their folly, just like ours, caused Israel great pain and increased their desire for God to bring deliverance and salvation. God promised to bring deliverance and salvation through one person; in Hebrew he is called “The Messiah,” and translated into Greek the word “messiah” is Christ.

Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, and Salome all knew this Messiah story, and these women had many clues from Jesus that he identified himself as the Messiah, the promised Christ. Jesus’ name literally means ‘God saves’, but his crucifixion and death crushed that reality in their hearts and minds. It is possible that the other Mary mentioned in today’s passage was Jesus’ mother. In any case, she knew the dangers and promises that always surrounded her son. She knew the promises God had made to her concerning him, that one day her heart would be pierced with sorrow, yet Jesus, her boy, would be the one who would forgive sins, bring peace on earth, and goodwill to all mankind. Yet in the numbness of grief, I doubt Mary could see beyond her sorrow to see what we can today.

We can see that from the beginning, Jesus was constantly under the threat of death. Herod, king of Israel when Jesus was born, discovered a prophesied usurper to his throne was born in Bethlehem, so he murdered hundreds of little boys in that poor village in an attempt to protect his reign. Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt with Jesus, where they were under threat as foreigners. In Nazareth, Jesus grew up around the tumult and danger of nearby towns destroyed by Roman legions as the might of Rome stamped out Jewish revolts. When he was thirty years old, immediately after his baptism Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness for forty days, which is no small attack. For forty days Jesus faced and conquered hunger, thirst, and attack. But even then it did not stop. As soon as Jesus started his public ministry, religious leaders, pastors, and community leaders all worked against Jesus to entrap him, arrest him, and kill him. Jesus was just too dangerous, too popular, too radical, and too unconventional.
Why? Because from the beginning of his ministry, Jesus miraculously healed people, cast out demons, proclaimed God’s kingdom, demonstrated his absolutely unique and intimate and preeminent relationship to our Heavenly Father as the Son of God. Yet Jesus had one focus to his mission: to go to Jerusalem and give his life as a ransom for us all, to die, and then to rise again from the dead in triumphant resurrection. His closest friends tried to persuade him to abandon this mission. Peter stood in front of him and contradicted the necessity of the cross; Jesus rebuked him, “Get behind me Satan! You do not know the things of God!” Judas betrayed him. His friends couldn’t even stay awake and pray for him on his worst night.

And then Jesus did what Mary and the rest of the disciples thought was unthinkable. Jesus walked willingly into the perils that had threatened him since his life began. Jesus went to the cross to die, not as a victim, but on his own terms with his Heavenly Father’s mission of love and forgiveness for the entire human race. Yet to his friends and family, Jesus went to the cross to die—and that’s it.

Timothy Keller writes of our passage today, “Nobody is expecting a resurrection. If you were the Gospel writer Mark, trying to write a credible piece of fiction, and you have had Jesus saying repeatedly to his disciples that he would rise on the third day, wouldn’t you have at least one disciple thinking this through after Jesus’ death and saying to the others, ‘Hey, it’s the third day. Maybe we ought to go take a look at Jesus’s tomb. What can it hurt?’ That would only be reasonable. But nobody said anything like that ... [because] nobody was expecting there to be a resurrection.”

So here are three women going to prepare the body of Jesus, whom they all believe is dead.

1 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body. 2 Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?”

This is a great question. How were they going to roll away an enormous rock that completely sealed the entrance to Jesus’s tomb? In, part, that’s our question. Practical questions like this are important; after all, we live in a world in which we have to get things done, and for the most part, we are extremely practical people. Pure physics means that these women knew they could not roll the stone away themselves.
Now, there are some of you who are here today who are not too sure about Jesus, nor are you too sure about the resurrection. What I am about to say is not directed primarily to you, although it might be helpful if you are considering Jesus. For many of you, this is not your first Easter at church. You have heard this story. And I want you to place yourselves right here with these three women. You might be them. What do I mean? I mean that despite the multiple times in Mark that Jesus taught and instructed about his impending crucifixion and resurrection, these women completely didn't get it. Despite the fact that one of them might even have been his mother, they missed it. They heard Jesus’ words, but for some reason, they couldn’t or wouldn’t or hadn’t quite grasped what Jesus promised would happen: “I will die and on the third day I will rise again.” They are walking along the road to the tomb trying to figure out how to serve Jesus, assuming it’s up to them to roll the stone away. When I say you might be them, what I mean is that in all your practicality as Christians and all your familiarity with Jesus, you might be missing the whole point. Like these women, you think your faith, your love and service to Jesus, is all up to you.

Let me put it another way. All of us Christ followers at some point will either with our words or our actions say this: “I am saved by God’s grace; my salvation is a pure and complete gift. And now that I’m saved, I have to keep myself in good standing with God with my behavior. If I’m good, God will bless me. If I’m bad, God will be angry. I get my slate wiped clean by asking forgiveness.” Basically, we are like these women. We believe Jesus, and then when Jesus is gone, we think we’re alone and our faith is all up to us. We exchange God’s grace in for our feeble efforts, and it’s so discouraging.

Why? Because we fail, we have doubts, we get stuck in sin and addictions, the camp high wears off, the good feeling after church goes away, we mess up, our plans fail, loved ones die, we get sick, our prayers are feeble and infrequent, we can’t figure out what the Bible means, and all of this spells ‘failure’ for us. Faith becomes a grind. The equation we had, “do good things and God will bless me” doesn’t actually work in real life. The forgiveness treadmill becomes so heavy. It’s like, well, it’s like Jesus isn’t even alive and we’re walking to his tomb wondering, ‘How are we going to roll this stone away?’

Denial will be a powerful force for you right now. Let me help. Please turn to your neighbor and politely tell them, “You’re like one of these ladies.”
But if Jesus has risen, if the resurrection is true, and if you consider yourself a Christian, then you know that, as Jerry Bridges writes, “First, your debt of sin has been paid by the death of Christ. The love of God and the justice of God have been fully satisfied. The debt of our sins has been marked ‘Paid in Full!’” (All say it.) God is satisfied, and so are we. We have peace with God, and we are delivered from all guilt and condemnation forever.

Second, not only has the debt been fully paid, but there is no possibility of going into debt again. (Repeat this sentence.) Jesus paid the debt of all our sins: past, present, and future. As Paul said in Colossians 2:13, “God forgave us all our sins.” We don’t have to start all over again and try to keep the slate clean. There is no more slate. As Stephen Brown wrote, “God took our slate and he broke it in pieces and threw it away.” This is true for our Christian lives as well. God is not keeping score, granting or withholding blessings on the basis of our performance. The score has already been permanently settled by Christ...The entire Christian life is lived under the reign of God’s grace.

Eugene Peterson puts it this way, “Jesus’ resurrection, which took place without any help or comment from us, keeps us from attempting to take charge of our own development and growth.”

4 But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away.

Shazam!!!

5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

6 “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.

Now, if you’re here today and you haven’t quite made your mind up about Jesus, this next part is for you. You have your doubts, you have your reasons, and you now find yourself surrounded by a lot of strange people on Easter. First, let me say, thanks for coming.

If Jesus really has done it—if he truly is risen—it means that this entire story is true. Jesus really is the Son of God, the true and perfect king. If the resurrection is true, then Jesus really did come to earth to die on the cross for us, and by trusting in what he has done there, we are spared from eternal judgment and ushered into the presence of God for all eternity.
This is not easy to accept. The story itself is a bit unbelievable. But to me it strikes a note not easily forgotten because it’s the beginning to the story I’ve always wanted. When I look at my life, I want it to be good. I don’t want to look back on my life and think, “Man, how come I could never heal from my parents’ divorce? How come I was ruled by bitterness for all those years? Why couldn’t I get past my selfishness? How come I didn’t give and love and laugh more?” I’m desperate for there to be some way in this life for evil to be overcome. But for many of us, the reality is that we don’t see this happening. Sorrow and pain and death surround us, and we get nervous that this is all there is.

“Why is it so hard to face your own death or the death of loved ones? It’s so hard because we think this broken world is the only world we’re ever going to have. It’s easy to feel as if this money is the only wealth we’ll ever have, as if this body is the only body we’ll ever have. But if Jesus is risen, then your future is so much more beautiful, and so much more certain, than that.”

A Presbyterian pastor tells this story: Every Easter I think about Joni Eareckson Tada. She was in an accident when she was seventeen, and ever since she has been a quadriplegic, paralyzed from the neck down. While she was still trying to come to terms with this horrible accident, she would go to church in her wheelchair.

The problem with being in a wheelchair, she found, was that at a certain point in her church’s liturgy every Sunday the priest called everyone to kneel, which drove home to her the fact that she was stuck in a wheelchair. Once she was at a convention in which the speaker urged people to get down on their knees and pray. Everyone did except Joni. “With everyone kneeling, I certainly stood out. And I couldn’t stop the tears.” But it wasn’t because of self-pity. She was crying because the sight of hundreds of people on their knees before God was so beautiful: “a picture of heaven.” And then she continued weeping at another thought:

“Sitting there, I was reminded that in heaven I will be free to jump up, dance, kick, and do aerobics. And … sometime before the guests are called to the banquet table at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, the first thing I plan to do on resurrected legs is to drop on grateful, glorified, knees. I will quietly kneel at the feet of Jesus.”

Then she adds: “I, with shriveled, bent fingers, atrophied muscles, gnarled knees, and no feeling from the shoulders down, will one day have a new body, light, bright, and clothed in righteousness—powerful and dazzling. Can you imagine the hope the resurrection gives someone who is spinal cord injured like me?”

wait. receive. respond.
This life is not all there is. There is much more. Jesus’ resurrection is the guarantee that death does not have its sting, that hell does not have its victory, in this life or in the life to come.

But more so, Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection are the events in history that forever point to the goodness and love and mercy of God for you. Many of the doubts and hesitations we have when it comes to God are really about the character and nature of God. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is proof that God loves you and accepts you and embraces you no matter who you are. Your doubts do not disqualify you from God. All your selfishness and apathy, all the ways in which you have hurt others—it is all forgiven, especially the stuff you assume is unforgivable. On the cross all your sins are forgiven. And no matter what has been done to you, all the pain and rejection and hurt that has branded you as unworthy and unlovely—on the cross Jesus joins you in your hurt and there he dies for you. And in his resurrection you are given his new life, his new body, and his pure heart.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus puts it this way: “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die.” (John 11:25)

7 “But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’”

8 Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

I love it that Mark ends his gospel this way, with the women trembling, bewildered, and afraid, the sound of the angel’s news ringing in their ears, “Jesus is risen!” (He is risen indeed!) The resurrection of Jesus turns everything upside down. God does that. Because Jesus has died for us and risen to new life, everything is different; everything has changed. Life with the risen Christ is totally different than we imagine.

Like these women, we’re bewildered because being a Christian is NOT about being religious. Being a Christian is totally opposed to a life in which we work and work and work to be moral, good, and perfect. That’s just navel gazing. We are saved by Jesus not because we are perfect, but simply because God loves us. The gospel is the good news that we get to die to this old life of striving and navel gazing because God knows, and we know, it won’t save us. The gospel is the good news that we are resurrected into the new reality that Christ is our life, that we are loved and affirmed and being recreated into the person we were always meant to be by Jesus, not by us.
We tremble because the crucifixion and resurrection means that we are free to lose. We are free to fail, to be ordinary. We don’t have to measure up to expectations. Our strength is to admit we are weak. And this scares us. But it also frees us. In Jesus my identity is secure, which frees me to give everything I have to God for his will and purposes because everything I have is secure in Jesus.\(^7\)

When we trust Jesus, he calls us to follow him, which means we are called to die with him so that we might be raised with him. To die with Christ means that we must be ruthless in disowning all our efforts to roll the stone away ourselves. All our self-centeredness, all our self worship, all our efforts to secure blessings from God by our good behavior, and all our fear of losing God’s blessings because we fail: It all must die. This is terrifying. Resurrection is terrifying because you have to die first.

To be raised with Jesus means that we must be fearless in trusting God. God is good. God will never leave you nor abandon you. Jesus proves this on the cross. To be raised with Jesus means that we must be fearless in affirming our worth and status before God. Why? Because we are adopted and redeemed by God, forever made new and pure through Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. There is no room for self-hatred or self-loathing in the gospel. If we were ever in doubt about our self worth, Jesus proves that we are irreplaceable and eternally loved; he died for you and is risen for you.

So, in the end, it doesn’t matter if this is your first Easter in church or if you’ve been here for fifty years. All of us, every one of us, must make a decision today in our hearts and minds to trust Jesus. I invite you: Trust and rest in the sure fact that you are saved by God’s love because Jesus chose to die in your place. Trust and rest and joyfully celebrate that in his resurrection Jesus has defeated death, and his life and hope and peace are forever yours.

Maybe it’s even simpler this way:

Jesus plus nothing equals everything. Everything minus Jesus equals nothing.\(^8\)

Jesus is Risen!
wait. receive. respond.
receiving: the gift of God’s presence

SCRIPTURE: ACTS 1:1-11, 2:1-4     Dr. Randy Working
The journey of the disciples does not end with Easter, it begins. Jesus calls Peter and the other disciples to go out and to be God’s witnesses of love first in their local community and then out into the world. But God not only calls them to go out, he empowers them with the Holy Spirit. As you prepare the sermon, ask the Holy Spirit to fill you with his guidance. Pray that the Spirit will empower each person in your congregation to be his witness both in your local community and in different parts of the world.

**Scripture**

*Acts 1:1 In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach 2 until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. 3 After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. 4 On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. 5 For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” 6 So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7 He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” 9 After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. 10 They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 11 “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”*

*Acts 2:1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*
Sermon

In the Chronicles of Narnia four children, Peter, Susan, Edmond, and Lucy Pevensie, are taken magically from England into another country inhabited by talking beasts. During their visits to Narnia, they have wonderful adventures in the service of Aslan, the great lion and Son of the Emperor-Over-the-Sea.

In the third book, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, Edmond and Lucy spend the summer back in England with their annoying cousin Eustace. They feel depressed at being stuck with him and reminisce about their grand Narnian adventures as they gaze into a strange painting of a medieval ship on the waves. Suddenly the waves begin to move, the ship is tossed, and they pitch headlong through the painting and into the sea. The story depicted in the painting isn’t just a story anymore. They’ve been caught up into it. Their summer holiday won’t be the end of their adventures, but the beginning. And as they journey, even the unpleasant Eustace discovers courage and strength he never knew he possessed.

The Story Isn’t Over Yet

Luke opens the book of Acts by saying it is the second volume of the good news about Jesus. The first part, the gospel of Luke, tells about “all that Jesus began to do and teach” in his ministry, death, and rising from the dead. Now the second part makes it clear that the story continues. Luke doesn’t simply commemorate all that Jesus did in the past. He tells us what Jesus continues to do through his Spirit-infused community, through all who trust him and obey his voice. It turns out that Easter isn’t the end of the story, but the beginning of a great adventure, and as we embark on the adventure we’ll find courage and strength we never knew were ours.

Preacher’s Note: Considering telling a story from one of the Waiting for Water small groups about their experience of going out and practicing compassion in their neighborhood.

The Meaning of the Feast Fulfilled

The second chapter of Acts opens on the day of the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost, fifty days after Christ’s resurrection. That was one of the three major feasts in Israel, celebrating the beginning of grain harvest and also the giving of God’s law to Moses on Mount Sinai fifty days after the Exodus. It was the first pilgrimage feast after Jesus’ resurrection, and Jews from around the Mediterranean basin gathered in Jerusalem for the feast. There was a great sense of excitement in the air, the city surging with international guests.
The disciples gathered that day, maybe in the same upper room where Jesus had served them the Passover supper fifty days before. Maybe it was in the temple courts. They knew he had risen, but here they waited and wondered. What would be next? What came next was more than they could have asked or imagined. The Spirit came on them in power, and when he did they spilled out from the place they were meeting and into the crowded street below. The world would never be the same.

Jesus had told them to wait for the “promise of the Father,” that is, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Now God was answering his promise to pour out his Spirit on the church. And the result of that gift is that “you will be my witnesses.” The gift of communication was given to the church, the ability to communicate in the languages of many gathered from around the Mediterranean. Peter says, “This is what was spoken through the prophet.” This was the day of fulfillment of God’s promise:

“A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and you will live.” (Ezekiel 36:26; 37:14)

Jesus had told the disciples about the gift of God’s Spirit, a gift that was absolutely crucial for the work to which he calls his people:

He said, “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” (John 14:26).

And he said, “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.” (John 15:26).

Pentecost was a new thing, and in a sense an unrepeatable event. In another way, though, Pentecost is still happening, because the experience of being filled with the Spirit continues. If we want to know what God wants from us, and if we want to have the power to do it, Pentecost is our model. That’s the measure for the quality of our life in Christ.

Jesus is Emmanuel, “God with us,” and now he is God within us, God who works through us. Pentecost means Jesus continues his work through the Holy Spirit moving in us. And the work of the Spirit is suggested by two signs, wind and fire.

wait. receive. respond.
The First Sign is Wind

The word in both Hebrew and Greek for spirit means “breath.” In Greek the word is pneuma, the life-breath, where we get the term “pneumatic.” The day of Pentecost begins with the disciples gathered to pray, and then a sudden eruption of sound from heaven and of wind. Things are coming loose, breaking open. The same wind that swept across the dark waters on the very first morning of creation is now blowing again, once again bringing something to life.

If you’re suffering from a hot flash, a couple opened windows allow a fresh wind, and you feel you can breathe again. I remember some sultry one-hundred-degree days in Sacramento when you couldn’t move without getting sweaty. Then in the evening the cooling breezes came off the delta and the temperature could drop twenty-five degrees. There was a sense of relief when the smog and polluted air dissipated and you could breathe again.

Wind suggests the freedom of God. You can’t control it, and the fundamental thing about God is his freedom to be God. Jesus said, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8) The wind shows us God will have his way. We can’t tame the Spirit, because he is God operating in absolute freedom, and as he does that he is working to save us.

The winds of the Spirit can blow away the pollution of our lives. That can give us a new perspective as we enter into God’s presence. As we gather for worship, we should come with these two attitudes. We should come with awe: Who are we to be the dwelling place of the holy God! And also, we should come with joy: How blessed are we that God should love us! Maybe sometimes we just go through the motions in worship. Maybe sometimes we have neither a sense of reverence nor of joy. We need to come in a sense of holy expectation that the living God will meet us to love and transform us.

Sometimes in the church we try to do life in our own power instead of in the power of the Spirit. Maybe sometimes our first task should be to wait for the Spirit, as Jesus told his disciples to do. The prophet Isaiah says that “those who wait upon the Lord will mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be tired, they shall run and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:31) When we find ourselves struggling, we need to ask, where are the winds of the Spirit blowing? Riding the currents of God should be effortless, so that we’re no longer working for God but with God.
Preacher’s Note: If you have access to video during the sermon, consider showing the video “Waiting 4 Water: Safe Water, the gospel, and voodoo.” Introduce the story as a way the Holy Spirit works in surprising ways.

YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFIA5-Ai04E&feature=related

The Second Sign is Fire
Throughout scripture, fire is a sign of holiness of God. He comes as a burning bush. He leads the children of Israel through the desert as a pillar of fire by night. He sends his fire to consume the sacrifice of Elijah. John the Baptist promises that the Lord will come with the fire of judgment. Our God is a “consuming fire,” writes the author of the book of Hebrews.

What does fire do? It shines in the darkness and illuminates the secret places, not in order to hurt us but to heal us and purify us. The fire warms us and melts away our coldness and our resistance to God’s will. The fire ignites a new kind of life in us. It also purifies and consumes what is not of God. The Spirit wants to bring us closer to Jesus, to lead us into all truth, to help us worship, to give us direction. Who wouldn’t want that kind of fire inside?

We Will Be Witnesses
A characteristic of fire is that it spreads. When the wind blows, fire consumes. When a Christian or a church has no passion for sharing the good news, the solution isn’t usually to guilt them to evangelize or to look for more effective techniques for doing ministry. It’s to rekindle our first love, a passion for Jesus, and when we do that the witness will follow. That’s why Jesus said “you will be my witnesses,” not a command but a promise, and it hinges on waiting and being filled with the Spirit.

Not so long ago our world was very different. Our country was very different. In the past generation, the world has come to our doorstep. We now have Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim neighbors, not to mention many people who describe themselves as atheists. In a way our calling has become easier, because it’s not just a matter of us going to the world. The world has come to us. It’s in this setting that Jesus says we will be his witnesses.

wait. receive. respond.
What does it mean to be a witness? It’s like providing testimony in a law court. When you do that, you speak the truth, and you say it in terms of what you’ve seen and experienced. It’s not writing theology or coming up with a list of doctrines. It’s telling your story, bearing witness to your personal experience. So, how do you do it?

You share how Jesus has fulfilled the longings of your heart. One of our daughter’s friends in London plays for the band Mumford and Sons. I like how they express the idea that God meets our deepest yearnings:

And there will come a time, you’ll see, with no more tears.
And love will not break your heart, but dismiss your fears.
Get over your hill and see what you find there,
With grace in your heart and flowers in your hair.

Jesus fulfills the Old Testament expectations of the people. The good news of the gospel fulfills the deep longings of the people for life. So Jesus completes a long age of preparation. From the ancient promises of God, he comes to meet us in the particulars of our own life and to make us covenant partners of God.

So Peter says in his sermon to the crowd that this outpouring of the Spirit is the one promised by Joel:

“I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
And “Your sons and daughters will prophesy.” (Joel 2:28)

When we look at Jesus Christ, we see the one who meets our profound needs, whether to be forgiven, or made pure, or to find peace, or to discover the meaning of our lives. Jesus Christ fulfills your deep longings for life. That’s something everybody wants, and Jesus says “I have come that [you] may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10:10)

This is how you can share your faith in a conflicted age. You tell how Jesus has met you at the point of your need.
That means you share Jesus himself. It means the good news we have to share is not about the church, or about you, it’s about Jesus Christ, about what he’s done for you and can do for any hungry heart. We speak a good word from our own experience about Jesus and his purposes. And the Spirit will use the raw material of our lives as they’re touched by Jesus as an effective witness.

Paul tells us that “to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:24) Now we witness in the confidence that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Romans 10:13) As you open yourself in faith to Jesus, you have his power in you, and you will be his witnesses.
The journey of following Christ involves meeting the physical needs of those in our community so that they might see the deep love that God has for them in Jesus Christ. In response to Easter, Peter now does the very works that Jesus did. He meets people on the way, listens to their need, meets that need and then tells others that they too can have life in Jesus’ name. Peter does not take weeks to figure out what God wants for him to do, he just jumps in as the Holy Spirit directs him. As you prepare this sermon, pray that the Holy Spirit would direct each person in your congregation into ministries of compassion this next week.

Scripture

Acts 3:1 One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. 2 Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. 3 When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. 4 Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” 5 So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. 6 Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” 7 Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. 8 He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. 9 When all the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.
PREACHER’S NOTE: Consider telling a story from your life in which you were confronted with the question of “not having enough” to complete a task or job.

I had a dream.

It came right after I took a new job as the assistant pastor at a large church next to downtown San Diego. My charge was to oversee all the children, youth and adult education ministries. I felt excited and nervous at the same time. So I moved our newly expanded little family—our daughter was a month old—to San Diego, and I got to work.

The only trouble was, within a month of my arrival, everybody on the support staff who worked in children and youth ministries quit! And I hadn’t even figured out where the bathrooms were yet...

Then I had a dream. I was in a smoke filled room where several large men in three-piece suits stood together laughing and smoking cigars, and then one of them would come over to where I was standing and slap me on the back as if to congratulate me. But all the while I remember this nagging sense that I was being had. Then one of these men said to me, “Your job is to raise $100,000. But you have to raise it in quarters.”

In my dream I reached into my pocket and pulled out some change, and counting the coins in my palm I said to the man, “Well, I have two quarters here.”

And that’s how the dream ended. Isn’t it amazing how the sub-conscious mind can sum up so clearly what it is we’re feeling, and fearing? That was a dream about the fear of not having enough to do the job. It was a dream about the fear of inadequacy. That I would not have what it would take.

When we are faced with a daunting need, or challenges to our faith, it seems almost inevitable that we find ourselves asking, “What can I do?” Then the reason why we can’t do something is because we believe we just don’t have it.

And “it” can be just about anything: training, the right words, money, time, talent, good looks, personality, the fact that “I’m a sinner,” that something ought to be left to the “professionals” (like the dinner table prayer at Thanksgiving—you know who always gets asked, but really, I’m glad to do it!)

wait. receive. respond.
We can tend to get focused on what we don’t have, but that can lead to paralysis, and dependence, and ultimately to a perception of scarcity. And when that happens we have to spend more and more time lowering expectations because high expectations make us nervous. We end up seeing the world as zero-sum situation.

That’s one way to go through life. But there is another way.

And that is to take stock of what we do have.

I love the story of Apollo 13. The astronauts had encountered a major disaster on board the space craft and radioed “Houston, we have a problem.” In the near panic of what to do in response, the flight controller shouted to everyone in the room, “People, don’t tell me what’s wrong, tell me what’s working!” In effect he was saying, “It won’t do us any good to spend precious time talking about what we don’t have. Tell me what we do have!” Then everyone went to work to solve the problem.

We’ve seen Peter move from being a reluctant fisherman who followed Christ to an outspoken disciple. Peter, like us, still had to make a decision each day whether to focus on what he didn’t have, or on what he did have, one day soon after Pentecost. In his case I don’t think it was a difficult decision. Here’s what happened:

[READ TEXT]

There are many churches around the country that have placed a sign over the back door of the sanctuary that people can read on their way out on Sundays. It reads, “AS WORSHIP ENDS, LET MINISTRY BEGIN!” This is exactly what Peter and John were doing. They had stepped out from the intensity of the newly formed Christian movement described in Acts 2. Now they were out on the streets of the city and headed toward the Temple a little before three o’clock in the afternoon.

And just before they came through the gate, they were confronted with a very tough situation. A man crippled from birth sat on the side of the road. Based on what Luke tells us, it seems the problem centered in his feet. There may have been some paralysis, and the bones were out of place so that he was not able to walk.
We’ve all had experiences of encounters with those asking for help who are very clearly physically disabled in some way. We’ve all seen the cardboard signs, or had the Styrofoam cup thrust in front of us as we walk into or out of a building. We all feel it. Guilt. Compassion. Helplessness. Maybe even anger over the strong suspicion that we’re being manipulated. We feel confused over how to respond too. If we give them what they want, won’t they just spend it on booze and cigarettes?

The crippled man Peter and John encountered that afternoon was a fixture at that gate. He was there every day, and quite frankly he was probably pretty good at asking for money. He had it down how to look and sound. Really, who can blame him? It was how it worked if you were disabled. This was the informal version of what we call social security today. At least there were some folks good enough to every day carry him to this same spot in front of a major entrance to the Temple so that he could ask for alms.

I mean what else did anyone have a right to expect? Don’t misunderstand me, it’s important to have some kind of “system.” Welfare, for all our criticism of it because of how it is used and abused, at the end of the day, is still very much needed. It’s just that our Lord doesn’t want to leave it there. Then or now.

Because we have so much more to give than we may realize.

The lame man saw Peter and John coming. I think he saw two more good prospects. He probably recognized them as regulars at the Temple. So he stretched out his hand, and called to them, asking for money. Exactly what anyone might expect. It was the drill. And everybody knew their part.

But then things got interesting. Look at verses 4 and 5 and all these references to eye contact:

“Peter and John looked intently at him”.

Peter tells the lame man, “Look at us!”

The lame man “fixed his attention on them…”

wait. receive. respond.
I suspect, according to the daily drill, that there would normally be minimal eye contact. Just pass on by and plop some coins in the hat almost like tossing money into the basket as you slow down to pay at the toll booth. But these verses say Peter and John really looked at this man. They thought about him. And in turn, they told this man to take a good look at them as well.

We’ve all had the unusual experience of someone asking, “So tell me, how are you?” and then look us right in the eye, and wait for our response. It can be a little disconcerting. We don’t expect someone to care that much!

So Peter and John insist on eye contact not in order to confront this man, but in order to connect with him. Based on what Luke tells us, I’m sure this insistence on direct face-to-face conversation also raised this lame man’s expectations. Maybe finally these two men were going to come through BIG TIME. Here comes a large donation that will really help him to get ahead.

And this is where Peter took stock of what he had to give. Peter’s first word no doubt brought this man’s thoughts crashing back to earth. “I don’t have any money…”

There’s been some discussion about why Peter and John said this. One theory is that they were standing next to the Nicanor Gate outside the Temple. It was huge, and covered in Corinthian bronze that shone like gold. Perhaps the lame man had grown to depend on help coming from sitting in this same place for the rest of his life. Another very possible explanation is quite simply that Peter and John had given everything to the church! It’s always been that way; the Christian movement from the outset has always relied on the sacrificial giving of its members. The last theory also has to be true; Peter and John tell this man they have no money in order to create in him a new expectation. Because what Peter is about to say will change this man’s life in every way, forever:

“I don’t have any money, but what I do have I give to you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk!”
There are three crucial questions we must ask:

What does Peter “have”?

Do we have what Peter has?

And if we have what Peter has, then what does this mean for us, and what we have to give?

Peter says, “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” What Peter has is faith, confidence, and trust, in Jesus.

But is that enough?

Preacher’s Note: Consider sharing a story in which a Christian organization was not meeting the real needs of those in their care.

I have a friend who just recently went to work for a man who is supposedly doing a wonderful outreach project for children and their families. But soon after taking the job our friend has noticed some huge needs in the organization. When she approached the man about her observations his repeated response has been, “Don’t worry about it, you’ve just got to have faith.” In the meantime some very real needs are not being addressed. That’s not it! That kind of “faith” is really an excuse to avoid dealing with real need. That man needs to go back and listen to James who teaches about a faith that works!

Peter is zeroed in on the need. But it’s clear that what Peter has is not something innate or natural to Peter. On his own he doesn’t have what it takes. He acts “in the name of Jesus Christ.” What Peter has is “position” under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In other words, he has “authorization.”
It’s like when Colin Powell was Secretary of State under George Bush, Jr. He could go to another country and deal, make offers, and respond to need because he was authorized to do so. Now Colin Powell is a nice looking man. He’s also a smart man. He’s had years of experience. But none of these things are enough to address the huge needs he encountered in his travels. What he needed and what he had was “authorization.” He knew the United States. He knew its policies. He had a personal relationship with the Commander in Chief. He knew his heart, and has the sense of our national leadership. And he had been appointed to go and given what he had been empowered to give.

Peter has this kind of relationship with Jesus. He knows his heart. He knows what Jesus stood for. And so do you.

Here’s where I need to say a word about Jesus and healing. This encounter in Acts 3 is very similar to the many healings that took place at the hand of Jesus in the gospels. In Luke’s gospel I found eleven accounts of people being made well, from lepers, the crippled and paralyzed, the “possessed,” to the deceased being brought back to life. In every case the healing made a point. It conveyed a message that God is really here, that we are loved, that we are restored to God, and to each other, and even to ourselves.

Think of just one example. When the four friends lower the paralyzed man down through the roof in front of Jesus, what does Jesus say? He says, “Your sins are forgiven.” The problem was the issue of authority. Only God has the power to forgive sins. It was then that Jesus said, “So you know I have this power, rise up and walk!” The healing was a demonstration of God’s authority resting on Jesus.

Now Jesus did not heal everyone in Palestine. That was not his point. There came a time when Lazarus died. All his work of healing drew the recipient back to God. Our Lord’s hearts beat for people’s souls, and their accepting the gift of God’s promise.

The words “salvation” and “healing” come from the same Greek root. Healing in Scripture is never just about the body, or relief from illness, or pain. It is always about reconnecting with God. It is “holistic.” Healing is of mind, body and soul. The words healing and salvation mean “wholeness,” forever!
Peter has learned this. He has faith in Jesus. He gets his mission. Therefore he has authorization.

But do we have what Peter has? My answer to that question is “I hope so!” But is it enough?

Listen to me, yes it is!

“But the needs are so huge. There are so many who are sick. So many who are broken. They’re all around us. They’re in our families just as much as they are in this crazy, chaotic world.”

Again, this is not about anything you and I carry around inside of us. This is not about any power you and I have. There is no little ritual to perform, or perfect word to say, or Tarot cards to turn. That’s called magical thinking. This is not about us. You and I cannot produce faith. That too is a gift from God by his Spirit.

That’s the point of Pentecost. The Spirit of the Risen Christ is loose in the world.

What you and I have is mercy, and grace, and promise. We have the name of Jesus Christ. We have authorization!

This leads to that last and most crucial question: If we have what Peter has, then what does this mean? What do we have to give?

Some research was done recently that takes stock of what has been accomplished because the followers of Jesus Christ have given what they have. Here are just a few examples:

Christianity ended the practice of infant exposure, gladiator contests, and cannibalism.

The institution of slavery came to an end in the West as a direct result of the implications of the gospel that every single human being has been created in the image of God.

Hospitals for the public were introduced by Christians in the fourth century.

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The International Red Cross was founded in the nineteenth century by a Swiss evangelical Christian.

The Christian movement is fanned out across the world today working in schools, orphanages, and places of worship, using the skills of doctors, teachers, farmers, preachers, and business people.

Here’s the point. We must not underestimate what we have to give. Bruce Larson once said “When the church is busy being the church, people get well.” We must be careful to not underestimate the power of prayer for healing. There’s even scientific research being done on the mystery of the power of prayer.

PREACHER’S NOTE: CONSIDER SHARING STORY FROM A WAITING FOR WATER SMALL GROUP THAT HAS SERVED OTHERS IN YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY.

So all we can do is what Peter and John did. Pray and work in the name of Jesus Christ. Pray and work with our Lord’s mind in our own minds. This takes discernment. Sometimes it’s time to ask, seek, and knock and pray for direct healing. Sometimes it’s time to pray for peace and acceptance. In every case we give what we have.

The lame man leapt to his feet and jumped around like a kid with new basketball shoes. He created a commotion in the Temple and upset the battened-down-already-decided-how-life-should-be world. His healing was yet another sign that that you and I have been given more than we sometimes imagine.

And that you and I have a lot to give, more than we sometimes believe is possible.

Shall we pray…

wait. receive. respond.
responding: living the life

SCRIPTURE: 1 PETER 1:13-25

Israel Gonzales
Description

As you finish this series of sermons, Peter’s final word to us is that we live lives that are holy. As you consider your message this week, pray that the Holy Spirit will show you and your congregation specific ways to live as holy and hopeful people. This particular sermon uses very few illustrations with the hope that you’ll add stories from your church’s journey through Waiting for Water.

We’re concluding this ten-part series today called “Waiting for Water.” As people who follow Jesus as Lord and Savior, we don’t view resurrection as a distant miracle from the past, nor do we somehow shelve it for tomorrow when Christ comes again. No, we bask in it and understand that our whole lives are created, supported, and preserved by Christ’s power in our lives, so much so that it enables us to serve the world.

Scripture

1 Peter 1:13 Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. 14 As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. 15 But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; 16 for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”
17 Since you call on a Father who judges each person’s work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. 18 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. 20 He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. 21 Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.
22 Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. 23 For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. 24 For,

“All people are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
the grass withers and the flowers fall,
25 but the word of the Lord endures forever.”
And this is the word that was preached to you.
Today as we wrap up this series, I want us to have a conversation about two words we don’t usually place together in the same sentence: hope and holiness.

For the first twelve verses of this letter, Peter gives no orders, no corrections, and no exhortations. He simply rejoices and blesses the God “who has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” New birth is a gift, and it can only be truly experienced and appreciated if it’s lived in a living, breathing, building hope fueled by the resurrection power of Christ.

And now, in verse 13 we hear Peter giving his first commandment and encouragement for how to live life fully: “Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed.” (NRSV)

At first glance, it looks like Peter is giving a number of commands. At least, that’s the way it comes off in our English translations. Actually, the command is not that we “prepare for action” or “discipline ourselves” but rather, it is to set all our hope on the grace that Jesus continually offers. The only way to do this, to set all our hope on the grace of Jesus Christ is to be mentally fit and morally sober.

Peter says, “set all your hope” on Jesus, and he provides two descriptive ways that lead up to this command. (In fact, he uses two participles that buttress the command to hope.) He literally says, “Therefore, having girded up your loins of your mind, being self-controlled,” set all your hope on Jesus.

You’re probably wondering, “Excuse me?” Gird up my what?

In a day when people wore long robes and had to lift up and even fasten their robes around themselves in order to run or to act swiftly, Peter says, do this in your mind. Do it in your way of thinking, where you make decisions and feel what it means to be alive. Get ready to run in your mind. See yourself running, so to speak. When we experience God’s liberating work through Christ, we can’t help but be ready for action. It’s a given, at least in Peter’s mind.

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What’s not so much a given is the next descriptive word he uses to lead up to this first command. He also says, being self-controlled, hope completely on the grace being brought to you in the revelation of Jesus Christ.

(1) having prepared yourself to run,
(2) being self-controlled, being sober ... totally hope on the grace that is being brought to you when you see Jesus now and later.

Peter says, get ready in your mind and stay continually in control of yourself, your appetite, and your desires. Don’t get out of whack. Stay awake, be sober.

So hope is first. Peter is saying to the church, get mentally fit and ready, be awake and tuned in to God’s desires so that you will totally hope in what Jesus is doing not just around you, not just in you, but through you.

He goes on. Hope is first, but it’s not all. Don’t just hope. Be holy! (verses 15, 16) Now we have two commands: Hope that in the grace of God being served up now and later ... be holy like the holiness of God. You can see that both of these commands call for a conscious and cooperative decision to live life not just for God but with God.

• Be a person that is full of hope in what God has done, is doing, and will do.
• Be a holy person, and let the holiness that you have be like the holiness of God.

Chances are if you’re like me, you were really interested when we were talking about hope but as soon as Peter uses the other “h” word, you actually lost a little hope. We have an idea of what it is to hope for something or someone, but many of us have really no clue when it means to be holy.

Is holiness a style of dress? Is it something you do or don’t do? Is it something you wear or don’t wear? Is it a long list of those sorts of things?

Let me say first off, when you are hoping, you are God-centered, and when you are holy, you are God-centered. The grace of God is the source of your hope and the holiness of God is the model and fountain of your holiness.
Sometimes when we try to define or even think about hope and holiness we miss the forest for the trees. The forest is this: our whole lives, our lives connected together, permeated by God.

- God in the morning, God in the afternoon, God in the evening.
- God as the motive, God as the guide, God as the sustainer and preserver.
- God as comfort and strength.
- God as truth and joy.

What emerges from 1 Peter and the whole scriptural witness, especially in light of the fact that Jesus has conquered sin and death, is that your life and mine is a life lived in God.

- Ever increasing awareness of God.
- Ever increasing admiration of God.
- Ever increasing trust in God.

The story of our culture speaks a different reality though. The subject of God, much less the reality of God, is one we’d rather not think or talk about too much in our day and age. It’s too complicated. “Find your own way, if you must, and keep it to yourself, thank you very much!”

This is not just North American culture. This is the human dilemma. Without God’s intervention, left to ourselves, we live lives of separation from God and from one another. We live lives ignorant of how God views and acts in the world. We’re too caught up in our own search for survival and significance, and we drown either in our successes or failures.

That’s why God’s act of salvation is so spectacular. It doesn’t just set individuals in restored relationship with God. It does so in such a way that the free gifts of God in Christ become so central, so important, and so acceptable that we can’t help but hope and be holy.

Life can’t be lived the same anymore once Christ comes around. The former ignorance with all its passions, the former life of only caring about happens to you at this second, fades away as a much less desirable way of living.

wait. receive. respond.
It would be easier to understand if holiness could somehow be defined by some list of to-dos and not-to-dos, but it simply doesn’t work that way. The best list you’ll find is the Ten Commandments, and even these can’t make you holy. They provide a way to live a hope-filled, holy life of thanksgiving.

So then, Peter says first off, be hopeful in God—he even repeats this in verse 21. And while you’re at it, be holy like God. God is the source of hope. God is the standard and supply of holiness.

But what is holiness? How can we be like God? Let me ask you: What does it mean when we say God is holy?

**The Meaning of Holiness**

Holiness in the Old Testament is described as being separated from what is defective and evil and separated for God.

- So the Sabbath is holy to the Lord: separated from the pursuits of other days and dedicated to the Lord (Ex. 31:15).
- Priests are holy to the Lord, set apart from ordinary pursuits and dedicated in a special way to the Lord (2 Chronicles 23:6).
- And things could be holy by setting them apart from ordinary use and dedicating them to God.

When you apply that definition of holiness to God, we realize that God is holy in that God is set apart from all that is evil (where goodness is absent or defective). That’s the one side of the coin, that God is absolutely free from any taint of evil or deficiency.

But the other side of the same coin is that God’s holiness is God’s set-apartness for God.

When you read the Scriptures and experience God’s presence, you find out that God is holy, glorious and righteous. What do we mean by this? We read these words, we sing these words, and we even use these words in our speech from time to time but let’s briefly take a look at these more closely.
God’s Holiness, Glory, and Righteousness

When we read or say that God is holy, we are dealing with the greatest reality and mystery of all. What we are encountering, just like Moses who stood barefooted before the burning bush, is the reality that God is utterly unique and in a class all alone. God is set apart in the sense that none compares with God.

- There is no other Creator, no other sustainer, no other final measure of good and evil.
- God is unrivaled; God has no beginning or end, nor any need for improvement.
- God is so unique and majestic that all glory and honor and obedience should be rendered to God, even if God would have remained a distant Creator.

When we read and say that God is glorious, we are speaking of the radiance and natural expression of that perfection and value that only God enjoys.

We all benefit from the sun’s rays and at the same time, we cannot bare to simply stare into its radiance. I want you to think of that light as the glory of the sun, and I want you to think of the tremendous fire of the sun as its holiness.

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” (Isaiah 6:3)

When we read or say that God is righteous, we are bringing to mind that God’s words always match God’s actions because God is faithful and merciful. God’s righteousness is wrapped up in God’s integrity to uphold and magnify the glory and the holiness that belong only to God.

So What?

In other places in the New Testament, we are exhorted to build our lives on the righteousness of God and the glory of God. But in these verses, Peter focuses on the holiness of God. So here is the question for today and every day:

What difference and impact does the holiness of God make on our lives? Peter quotes God in verse 16, “Be holy, for I am holy.” Does that mean that we are to be utterly unique and standoffish? I don’t think so. What then?
The key is found in comparing verse 14 and verse 15. Verse 14 tells us what the opposite of being holy is in contrast to the command to be holy in verse 15.

14 As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. 15 But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; 16 for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”

I see five ways that God shines on us and through us.

1. **God Calls Us.**
First, God calls us. Verse 15: “just as he who called you is holy.” This is virtually the same as God’s giving new birth back in verse 3: “In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” God’s call on our lives changes everything. God’s voice that created light out of darkness brings us out of a rebellious cycle and posture and into the submissive and compassionate faith.

2. **God treats us as God’s very own children.**
Second, the effect of this call or this new birth is that we become the children of God. Verse 14: “As obedient children.” This is crucial because this shows that something really changed inside of us when God called us, namely, the Spirit of God came in. I want you to think about that for one moment here. Though you have made mistake upon mistake, though you may have come from a very broken home ... (PAUSE) ... you are NOT a mistake. You are a child of God. The Holy Spirit is in you to make you more like God in Christ. The Holy Spirit enters us and begins to work the holiness of God in our lives. But how?

3. **God opens our eyes to see differently.**
Third, being called and made children of God we no longer see things in ignorance the way we once did. We see things differently. Verse 14: “Do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.” We no longer look at people to simply to get something out of them. Now that we are called, born of God and children of God, and we are not blinded by what Paul calls “deceitful desires.” They don’t deceive anymore. We see through them. We are not foolish anymore like a little child that takes a nickel instead of a dime because it’s bigger.

**wait. receive. respond.**
We grow in our faith and we pursue God. We are not content enough to know that God is for us. We live for God and see the world differently. We know better. We see better. But how?

It goes back to God. Without the sun’s rays, we could not see our own hand in front of our face. As we encounter God, we experience God’s holiness through the glory of seeing the world in a new light. We see each detail and every person we meet as a unique expression of God’s holiness and value.

Once we were blind to the value of God. Now, by God’s Spirit, that ignorance is gone, and we are beginning to assess things for what they really are. Now we see that the holiness of God is the absolute center and greatest value in the universe.

4. God enables us to put away old desires and exchange them for NEW ones
Fourth, as children who no longer live in ignorance, we put away old desires and experience new ones. Verse 14: “Do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.” The word “desires’ is a neutral word. We are all born with the God-given capacity to desire. When we assess God wrongly, when we live in the shadows of our own ways and understanding, we are prone to be entangled by deceitful desires, desires that don’t care about God or others.

But now Peter calls us not to be conformed to those desires that we “formerly had in ignorance.” The past is behind us, and those old desires that never delivered what they promised are fading into the past. My friends, we cannot accomplish this without God and without God’s power in the context of honesty and the safe community of Christ’s Church.

Those former desires don’t define us anymore when we live in the light of God’s holiness.

5. God is obeyed, in essence, loved in return
Finally, these new desires and the dethroning of the old ones lead to obedience to God and nonconformity to the world.

wait. receive. respond.
Preacher’s note: You might want to share how parents can see the difference between not only disobedience and obedience but obedience and compliance. The goal of parenting is to see children live the truth in growing maturity out of thankfulness, not simply seeing children comply with rules in their parents’ presence.

Wrap Up
When God calls us and changes us and sustains us, then and only then can we understand verse 15: “be holy in all you do.”

So what impact and difference does the fire of God’s holiness have on us?

1. God powerfully and undeniably calls us out of darkness and into light, out of isolation and into relationship with God and with one another.

2. God gives us the Holy Spirit to bear witness that we belong to God; we’re God’s children.

3. God removes the blindness so that we are not fooled to take the nickel over the dime. We refuse to live in a small, safe, and selfish way, because God is so supreme. We not only notice the needs and interests of our neighbors, but we make them our own.

4. God enables us to continually exchange foolish and ignorant desires for new ones with growing faith and gratitude in God’s goodness and holiness.

5. So in all our behavior, the holiness of God becomes the dominating, all-shaping reality of life so much so that we receive and share the glory of God’s kindness to us.

So I encourage you with the apostle Peter: “As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do.” (verses 14-15)