

Sermon

The Very Heart of God

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Our New Testament scripture from the Gospel of Mark we find Jesus at the beginning of his ministry yet he says, “The time is fulfilled” which suggests that something has been accomplished or finished. Yet we are at the beginning of the beginning really when he calls his disciples Simon, Andrew James and John. There is that immediate decision they make to drop everything and follow Jesus. They in that moment, accept Jesus’ message, leave their life that they planned, that they understand, that they know, they leave that behind and embark on the unknown – one that they knew would likely not be easy – they would not necessarily be welcomed in town after town as they traveled to where, they did not know. With John’s arrest, that had some idea that the road would not be easy. So with some sense of urgency, they go with Jesus...though they don’t exactly understand what the urgency actually is.

All of us were at some point required to have one of these moments ourselves – that moment when we felt called by God to follow the teachings of Christ. That instant that required us to pick up our own cross and follow. We hoped and believed it would be a good decision but truly we didn’t then know what the journey would look like or where it would take us. But in addition to this instant moment, some may not have had that moment fully yet, and that’s ok – but in addition to this, we have to find a way to live beyond this. Simon affirms his faith in Jesus, but not his faith in Jesus as the suffering Messiah – that will take

a lifetime. We know that at the very end, when Jesus is on the cross, Peter, Andrew, James and John are nowhere to be found. Even then God does not count that moment as the final word.

Quite interestingly, this scripture that gives us a glimpse into that momentary decision we make to follow the teachings of Christ, it is actually a long-standing commitment. I recall for myself the moment when I truly surrender my life to God – the moment when I let God lead my life and the direction I would take – it wasn't something I studied, and thought about for a long time – some might even say that it was spontaneous – the moment God appeared for me and came into my heart – I simply accepted it. And then the work, the journey really began.

With everything, God's relationship with us is like this – the moment where we make an instant decision and then our life turns in a new direction.

Jonah- oh Jonah. The reluctant prophet. Jonah was on a clear path to Tarshish and then God commands Jonah to head to Ninevah. And Jonah is furious about this – he doesn't want to go there because these people were evil – he didn't care for them – but they had repented with Jonah's influence and God forgives and redeems them.

Jonah is a great teacher of exactly how this journey with God goes. We can make plans, we can have strategies – we can read books and look at how this church does that and we do this, but at the end of the day, our journey is unpredictable. And there may be times when we disagree or resist what we are called to do – both individually and as a church.

This past year has been a long one – and has led us down paths we could never have imagined. The complexity of what has been going on – a lot of which just blows our minds, creates tons of anxiety – well, I myself and maybe you as well, have been feeling pretty burned out – so sick of it. Just want to get back to some sense of normalcy. Today, the immediateness – the urgency of our calling – is we need the vaccine – we need it to be distributed quickly – we need to end the spread of this virus and end our isolation from each other. I think we all feel this. Well as we traveled on this journey of ours, and closed in person worship for the protection of our congregation, well, it's been frustrating to say the least. Discussing how we should decide when it is safe to reopen. Its been very difficult with no clear blueprint. But we have tried to stay true to our calling – true to our ministry throughout this time and some other things have happened over this last year – Serendipity if you will – we found something we were not looking for along the way.

Before the pandemic forced our hand, we didn't have an online presence and many of our members who were unable to attend in person worship, kind of missed out. Yes, we were mailing the sermons but it's not the same as hearing them preached. Well, with some growing pains along the way, here we are – meeting each week, face to virtual face. What were not looking for.

Before the pandemic, we typically had meetings every week of the various committees, most of us had other responsibilities and activities that took up quite a bit of our free time. With so many things on pause, some of our members found themselves with some time to focus on new mission opportunities. Something we were not looking for - but has become a magnificent experience.

About 100 years ago, the founders of this church decided 59th Street was the right place for this ministry – this community. The Holy Spirit has been relentless in telling me that we need to embrace our identity as a community church and engage directly with this community. You may have seen on our Facebook page our newest ministries of Blessing Bags for the homeless that we hand directly to those who need them, and Bacon’s Blessings - a giving cupboard that focuses on items people can’t obtain through other means like food stamp dollars. We gifted the local schools in our neighborhood as well as the Fire Department with large baskets of snacks and goodies, thanking the teachers and administrators and fire fighters, thanking them and letting them know we are praying for them for all they have done and continue to do to protect and nurture our neighbors.

You see, this journey that we are on, this lifetime adventure, that requires us to be spontaneous along the way, it requires us to come back to that initial moment when we dropped our fishing nets and decided to follow Jesus. The Creeds, our confessions, that central part of who we are as faithful individuals and as a people, and remind us of what we believe, they are like the wind – you can’t see it, but you can feel it and you know it’s there. Donna Schaper says in her commentary, “And why is it important to have some kind of creed at the center of our life? Because knowing what we believe and why we believe it is important to how we behave, whether we matter, whether we live in the world we make or the world others make for us. Absent our creedal thinking, which I mean in the broadest and most strategic senses, others will be happy to do our thinking for us.”

This story of Jonah – where he felt, as a prophet who listened to God, found himself in a situation where his path and direction that he had set for himself with God even, suddenly changed direction – and he was to do something completely different than he anticipated. Even God changed God’s own mind about the fate of Ninevah. Everyone in the story repents, even God.

We have certainly been presented with a drastic change in direction within our own personal lives and as a church. This is a time where we may need to make some spontaneous decisions that will take us in directions that are unexpected but as long as we stay true to our Creed, our calling, I am confident God will take us exactly where we need to go as a ministry. We must trust that inspiration that we feel pulling us – the Holy Spirit drawing us into new opportunities to share God’s love with a community and a world that so desperately needs it right now. And the beauty of this is it will enhance our own faith and our own lives in incredible ways.

We are hopeful we will be able to return to in person worship in the coming weeks, but that really isn’t entirely up to us – it’s up to the virus. What is up to us is that we stay connected to the heart of God, drop our nets, and change direction.

So let go of that anxiety you may feel about the future – the God’s laugh when we make plans after all. Time to be spontaneous and join us as we commit to our community and continue to find new ways to reach our friends on the blocks around the church and become a better neighbor here in our corner of La Salle. Keep watching our newsletter for new opportunities and pray for God to

lead us as we seek to follow our calling sharing the love Christ has shown us with our community and with each other.