

## Sabbatical Report

I want to welcome those who are with us at the West Campus via livestream.

And if you're visiting with us for the first time, or you've come while I was away, or you've forgotten who I am – my name is Rob Willey, I'm the SP here . . .

And I'm not only glad *you're* here, I'm glad *I'm* here. Welcome to HBC-Davenport.

I can't tell you how much we longed to do what we just got through doing – worship with you! We watched online a *few* times, but mostly worshipped in *other* churches.

And neither was a good substitute for being right *here*. Especially with so many good pastors who preached in my stead. Super thankful for them.

I'm also thankful for our staff, and elders, and deacons.

They not only held the fort down, but moved the ball down the field; if I can mix a few metaphors. There's little doubt that we have a . . .

Gifted, godly, committed group of leaders who love you, and love the Lord.

And I couldn't be more thankful and more proud, to be surrounded by such a group.

➤ That said, after being away for 5 months, there's so much I want to tell you I can hardly contain myself (**Intro**). So instead of opening up to a passage . . .

I'm going to do what the apostles did from time to time when *they* returned from trips – I'm going to give you a report.

And the bottom line is this – Becky and I experienced a *lifetime* of sights, sounds, travel, and people. More than we deserve, and more than I could ever recount.

We rested, we refreshed. We had un-pressured time to read and learn.

We tried new foods – like shrimp & grits in Ashville, NC; and **Schneeballens** in Rothenburg, Germany; and things I can't even pronounce in Lebanon.

In fact, I tried so many new things and turned over so many new leaves the past few months, Becky was like, "Who are you and what are you doing?"

And I was like, "Hey, new tree new leaf."\*\*\*\*\*

We also experienced awe upon awe. From countless natural wonders, to amazing manmade ones.

Like the Hoover Dam in NV, and the Coliseum in Rome, and the Eiffel tower in Paris.

We saw so many amazing things, that if Becky had a nickel for every time I said

"Wow," she'd be rich.

And then there were the *people* we met. And the conversations we had. So many interesting people.

Like the farmer and his wife from Australia, who we met in Europe.

And the City Manager of Beverly Hills no less, who immigrated from Iran in the 1970's before the Islamic revolution. His name is Mahdi Aluzri.

And then there was the 2 Star Mexican General I met at the Army War College in Pennsylvania. Such an amazing time.

And at the other end of the spectrum was the Hezbollah "public relations guide" in southern Lebanon. Who showed me around their "memorial."

We met so many different people from so many walks of life, it was incredible.

➤ But best of all, everything Becky and I experienced, we experienced together – 24/7, for 5 months straight.

And I don't know about your marriage, but we were a bit worried about that. But praise God, we only had a couple of heated run-ins, from which we recovered very quickly, and very little friction overall. For the most part, we just loved being together. Which is why this **quote** from Walt Whitman pretty much says it all – "We were together. I forgot the rest." It was a lifetime of experiences, and that was the best part.

So thank you. Thank you for your generosity, your steadfastness, your patience, and your love. We feel it.\*\*\*\*\*

With that in mind, I also *realized* some things on sabbatical, and want to share them w/ u. **Things I realized:**

### 1. How much I love people.

I've always loved people, but I didn't realize how much until I was away from them.

I love getting *together* with people. I love getting to *know* people. I love traveling with people. I love hearing their stories. You name it. I love people.

And I realized that just b/c my batteries are recharged more when I'm alone, doesn't mean I don't love to be with others. I do.

It's something I've sensed more and more the last few years, and it was confirmed over and over again on sabbatical.

### 2. It doesn't take long to discern someone's interest in God.

In fact, one comment usually does it. Something about God, the Bible, church, or anything spiritual. Or maybe a question about what they think or believe.

We had dinner in Belgium one night with our tour group, and sat across from an Australian woman. And upon finding out that she was a librarian and loved to read . . .

I asked her if she had read any C.S. Lewis or J.R.R. Tolkien.

Turns out she hadn't, and didn't even know who they were.

And when I told her that they were well-known *Christian* authors from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, she went blank. Just nothing.

No more questions. No more conversation. No nothing. She just shut down.

It was like the Apostle Paul said in 2 Cor 2 – that we are the aroma of life to those who believe, and the aroma of death to those who don't (v14-16).

I clearly stunk to that woman. And it didn't take long to discern it.

➤ On the other hand, was the French Muslim a couple of weeks later, who took us to the beaches of Normandy.

That guy was about as interested in God as you can get. In fact, we had several *hours* of conversation about spiritual things with him.

Right down to the veracity of the Bible, the Lordship of Jesus, and how to be saved.

And I'll never forget his comment that he had only read the Old Testament.

And I responded by saying that's like reading 2/3 of the best novel in the world, and not finishing it. That's the best part!

He was interested. And it was obvious.

But we would have never known, if we hadn't said something in the first place.

It doesn't take long to discern someone's interest in God, but you have to speak up.

### 3. How much I love you.

I loved being with other believers in *other* churches, but there's something about knowing and being known.

Something about the connection we have by virtue of our partnership in the gospel; our fellowship as a local body of believers.

Our common purpose. Our mutual goals. Our significant joys. Our shared struggles.

We put over 25k miles on our car in 4 months, and visited countless places. From the

West and Northwest, to the East and South.

And hands down, there's no other place we'd rather be, and no other people we'd rather be with. We love this *town*. We love this *church*. We love our neighborhood . . .

Our street. Our house. And you. *Especially* you.

It's like Paul said in **Philippians 1:3-8**

*[3] I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, [4] always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, [5] because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now . . . [8] For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.* That's how I feel.

Absence made my heart grow fonder, for sure.\*\*\*\*\*

### 4. The beauty of our world is evidence of God's grace.

We saw so many awe-inspiring mountains, valleys, cliffs, lakes, oceans, and rivers – I ran out of words to describe how absolutely amazing and breathtaking it was.

The beauty of this world in some places, is ridiculous. (**Pictures**)

From the National Parks out west and the Appalachians in the east, to the Alps of Austria and the shores of the Mediterranean. Over and over again we saw beauty.

And what struck me, was that there was so much of it, in such a fallen world racked and wrecked by the ravages of sin.\*\*\*\*\*

Romans 8 says that when Adam and Eve sinned, creation itself was subjected to futility and corruption. Just like us.

And the beauty that remains is yet another example of God's *amazing grace*.

His favor, to bless us with beauty and grandeur, in the midst of a world full of sin and consequences.

He *pre*-served what he didn't *have* to, that we might *ob*-serve what we *want* to.

That's grace. And we must not miss it by enjoying the *gift*, without acknowledging the *giver*.

### 5. To see the grandeur of God you have to stop and look up.

I'm not sure how many trails we hiked or how much I missed, before I realized that the *best* stuff was *above* us. And you have to *look* up in order to see it.

But when you're hiking, you can't do that. You have to watch your step. You have to keep your eyes on the ground so as not to trip and fall over the roots and the rocks.

So, we stopped every now and then and took it all in (**Patriarchs photo**).

And man am I glad we did. B/c *that's* when we got to see the grandeur of God.

Like these trees called The Patriarchs. We had to stop and look up!

And it dawned on me, that we have to do the *same* thing in life, in order to see the *unseen* grandeur of God; in order to keep our eyes on things *above*, and not on things below. You have to stop. Regularly.\*\*\*\*\*

That's why a daily time of *devotions* is so important. And a weekly time of worship. And other times for reflection. B/c the best is above.

Do you have to keep an eye out for pitfalls and *obstacles* as you walk through life? Absolutely.

Which is all the more reason to *stop*, and lift your eyes to the hills (Ps 121).

B/c that's where the grandeur is, and the help that comes with it.

### 6. The Christian life is one of standing on the shoulders of those who've gone before.

If we're going to make the *most* of our lives, if we're going to reach new heights and see new vistas in God's kingdom, individually *and* as a church . . .

We *have* to stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before.

Otherwise we're just starting over in every generation and every endeavor, to learn the basics all over again and make the same mistakes.

➤ This was impressed on my heart in a big way (**photo**), when we were walking through the Notre Dame cathedral in Paris.

And while I paid little attention as the guide was pointing out the relics and statues, I was all ears when we got to the massive **stained glass windows**.

They're called the Rose windows. And this one, *Rose South*, shows Jesus on his throne, surrounded by the apostles and a great cloud of witnesses.

And at the bottom, the 16 Major and Minor Prophets of the Old Testament are depicted. Symbolizing the *foundation* on which our faith is built.

Just like Paul says in Eph 2 – [We] *are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, [20] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets* (v19-20). It's beautiful. And striking.

But the thing (**window with circle**) that caught my attention the most, was the 4 people on the *shoulders* of prophets, right in the middle.

You can hardly see them, but here's a **close up**.

They depict the 4 Gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – sitting on the shoulders of the 4 major prophets of the Old Testament . . .

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

Conveying the truth that even the *apostles* stood on the shoulders of those who preceded them. What a picture. And what a beautiful illustration that . . .\*\*\*\*\*

The Christian life is one of standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before.

➤ Including those with bright minds and soft hearts down through the centuries, who have studied God's Word and walked with him in ways we haven't.

Men and women gripped by the greatness of God, with lives to show it.

People who were *intentional* about the imprint they left on this world, and put pen to paper to tell about it.

That's one of the reasons I've committed myself to read more of people like Charles Spurgeon, C.S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, A.W. Tozer, and Chuck Colson.

And men *still* living like J.I. Packer, Don Carson, John Piper, and Wayne Grudem.

Broad shoulders abound, and I want to learn and build on what *they* learned and built.

And hope you do too.

## 7. Satan will use any dysfunction he can to disrupt our lives.

My uncle died in the middle of our sabbatical, so I flew to Arkansas to be with my family and lead the memorial service.

It was a low-key affair, more like a family reunion than a funeral, and we held it outside under a pavilion. Those kinds you see at parks, maybe 15 or 20 feet square.

So there I was, giving a devotional on one side of the pavilion, with my aunt in the middle on a chair, and everybody else at picnic tables gathered around.

And at the end I asked everyone to bow their heads and sing Amazing Grace together.

And one phrase into the song, I heard a commotion on the other side of the pavilion, and looked up to see a massive **turkey vulture**, like the ones that circle overhead . . .

Sitting on the food!

And as I started to step that way, it jumped from the food, onto my aunt's head, who was still bowed in prayer!

At which point I lunged toward the stinking thing and hit it on the backside with my Bible, as it hopped to another table and then flew away.\*\*\*\*\*

That bird was messed up! Dysfunctional. And if I'd had a gun, I would have shot it! And my relatives did. Unforgettable.

But it was my mom's comment as we sat there stunned, that was *most* memorable part for me. "It's just like Satan," she said, "to try to disrupt a spiritual time." Spot on

And it made me realize that he will use any dysfunction he possibly can to disrupt our lives. Or distract from the gospel. Or divert our attention from things above.

It could be *your* dysfunction, or someone else's. *Your* sin, or theirs. Something in the world, or in your own backyard.

All the more reason to be sober, be vigilant. B/c your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Pet 5:8).

And never forget, that he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

So that even the *slightest* resistance (Bible), causes him to flee.

## 8. We are made to work.

Resting and relaxing is necessary from time to time, but we're made for a purpose. It goes all the way back to creation.

We were created to *fill the earth and subdue it*, it says in Gen 1 (v28). And God put Adam and Eve in the garden *to work it and keep it* (Gen 2:15).

We were made to work. To do things that *God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them* (Eph 2:10).

So God not only *created* us to work, but ordained the work for us to *do*.

Which for me is to pastor and preach. Not that there was ever any question, but that I can do no other. I'm compelled to do it, & I want to do it. I love to do it, & I have to do it.

Like **Jeremiah** said – *If I say, "I will not mention him* [referring to God], *or speak any more in his name," there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.* (Jer 20:9)

I needed to rest, no doubt about it. B/c work without rest leads to burnout.

But we're made to work. And mine is preaching and leading. The fire for which is all-consuming.\*\*\*\*\*

And then last . . .

## 9. I feel incredibly blessed.

Blessed to be your Pastor. Blessed to lead you. Though I don't feel worthy sometimes.

Blessed to teach you the Scriptures. Blessed to see you grow.

Blessed to partner with you in the work of ministry.

And blessed to equip you to fulfill *your* ministry – whether in your home, your workplace, your small group, or your neighborhood. (**Summary**)

I feel incredibly blessed to be your pastor, incredibly blessed to have had a break, and incredibly blessed to be back.

So thank you. For everything.

Pray – Lord, your word says that *you are good and do good* (Ps 119:68). And we feel it; we see it; we know it. And oh how we love it.

So we praise you and give to you now – our tithes and offerings. For the work of ministry right here, and around the world.

Use them to save souls, change lives, and build your church. For your glory and our joy.