

COVENANT WORD

The State of the Church Address: Following Jesus

Psalm 25:4-10; Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20

A message by
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Pastor
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Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.
Sarah Shelton



WHERE FAITH COMES TO LIFE

Although the gospel of Mark is placed as the second witness in the New Testament canon, Mark was actually written before any of the other accounts. To Mark's skeletal outline, Luke and Matthew add extended teachings like the parables and Sermon on the Mount (or on the Plain as Luke describes it). Luke uses phrases like "in those days" to indicate a shift of scenery; Matthew likes the phrase "when Jesus had finished saying these things;" and Mark likes action that is immediate. There is little, if any, time for reflection or negotiation in Mark's gospel.

Mark feels such super-concentrated urgency that he completely skips over the birth narratives. There is no lineage or taxation, no Bethlehem or over-crowded inn, no Mary or Joseph, no shepherds or wise men, no star in the sky or angels singing "Gloria." Having just come through Advent and Christmas, this is hard to hear. We are still sweeping away glitter in our homes and from our eyes. We love us some baby Jesus laying on a sweet bed of hay wrapped in swaddling clothes. This baby stands in stark contrast to Mark's challenging urgency.

There's a great movie scene that gets at this contrast, but to use it, I have to admit to you that I actually watched "Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby." Will Ferrell plays the role of Ricky Bobby who is the most successful driver on the NASCAR circuit. His only priorities are self-indulgence and winning races. Yet, true to Ferrell's comedic strength, he hits at truth somewhere between reverence and irreverence when he is asked to pray at

the family dining room table. Over and over again, he prays to "The Lord Baby Jesus." The people around the table finally interrupt him to point out, "You do realize that the Baby Jesus grows up?!" And Ricky Bobby, irritated and indignant, says, "Listen, you can pray to any Jesus you want to. You can pray to the teenage Jesus, you can pray to the adult Jesus, I don't care! But in this house, we like the baby Jesus and all his magic, baby powers and swaddling clothes!"

While this may be where we are after mind-numbing holidays and snow days, this is not Mark's gospel. There's no sentimental swoon over the baby Jesus. Mark's gospel begins like an alarm clock

"You do realize that the Baby Jesus grows up?!"

with the urgency of John the Baptist's "Repent," with skies ripping open, and with Jesus' call to delay no longer, but rather, to follow him with immediacy. According to Mark, the time is now thus demanding a response.

Mark lands his readers on the shores of the Sea of Galilee where Simon and Andrew, fishermen, are the first to be approached by this very grown-up man who makes a seemingly simple request with astonishing sacrifice attached. "Follow me," Jesus says. There is no conversation, no hint that these men had heard Jesus teach at some point. Jesus is not asking them to add one more task to their busy lives. Jesus is calling them into new ways of being, and so Simon and Andrew just leave their nets immediately in order to follow Jesus.

James and John are next. They are

mending fishing nets when Jesus floats his invitation to follow. Where Simon and Andrew leave their nets, James and John leave their father...not after hugs and handshakes, not after words of wisdom often given at farewells, not after encouraging these sons to first go home and tell their mother. No, they drop their nets and leave their father behind to do what exactly? At this point, all they know is that they will follow Jesus. I need to remember this when I become overly critical of their clumsy and short sided behavior. They have no warning, no on-the-job training; they don't even have an interview. They leave their families and careers behind to follow Jesus immediately.

To live with this sort of devotion is foreign to most of us. We want to know about real estate values, that the school system can meet the needs of our children, and we double-check the salary package for retirement and medical benefits. That's the smart way to follow, isn't it? But that's not what these fishermen do. Without even a job description in hand, Peter, Andrew, James and John leave what they know in order to follow Jesus.

We have been privileged this past year to witness this sort of determined following as we watched our friends, the McClintocks and the Fisher-Ingams, in particular, pack up and move away in order to follow the call of God on their lives. Like you, I feel the weight of the nets left in my hands since these families have left. Soon to follow are the Mulvihills – not just junior but senior Mulvihills too! Paul and Susan Richardson won't be far behind, not to mention the influential legacies of Judy Bridgers and Marie McKinley. All of these persons have been a part of our critical mass who have graciously given leadership on strategic committees and critical junctures in this congregation's life. And while I long to linger in my sadness, I also bask in the glow of their responses to the call of God on their lives to follow in service. It is, after all, that which we encourage every Sunday in our commitment response:

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hear the call and follow it with the living of our lives.

In their absence, others have come. We have welcomed 28 persons as candidates and as members this year. However, between those who quickly become inactive or non-residential or who leave with purposeful conviction, our numbers for involvement are down by about 80 persons. So if you have missed someone, do not hesitate to call them. If you can introduce a neighbor to the church, do. If you can simply reach across the aisle to shake a hand and not be afraid that you are welcoming a charter member, err on the side of gracious hospitality.

We are beginning the year with 122 pledges that account for 84% of the budget. We are acting on faith that the funds will come to pay the electric and gas bills. While we have intentionally and cautiously prepared for emergencies, all the designated accounts used to refurbish this sanctuary, the fellowship hall and to purchase the Southern Research parking lot are at a 0 balance. It is time for us to consider how we can free the annual budget from outstanding indebtedness in order to increase the Ministry Coordinator's salary to a full-time status and where mortgage payments do not stifle programming.

The trustees, treasurer and I have been talking about the amount necessary to pay on our indebtedness so that income from parking rental is sufficient to pay our monthly note. It would appear that \$250,000 is what we need to raise to pay off the two smaller loans, leaving the third larger loan to be totally handled by collected parking rent. This would leave the budget free of a mortgage payment. The Council on Mission will be considering such a move during their first meetings of the New Year.

Another financial consideration this year will be a re-definition of our giving to ministries and missions. Over the past four years, there has developed a consistent trend to move allegiance from the

National Cooperative Baptist Fellowship to the Alliance of Baptist and to Alabama's Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. An ad-hoc committee, chaired by Fisher Humphreys, is studying our giving to mission and ministry partners, both globally and locally, and both through denominational-type partners as well as non-profit organizational partners. Their initial thoughts about re-defining what constitutes missions giving, what is involved in partnership, and our participation with these entities will be explored on Wednesday nights, January 31 and February 7. It appears that the decisions around these definitions will affect our giving habits as well as clearly define missions and ministries for our practical understanding and implementation.

Conversation is also developing between Christian Formation and Ministries. Questions about the objectives of Sunday School, in particular, are being raised, such as: As Christians, is it our objective to sit in Sunday School every week for all of our lives, or might an outgrowth from Biblical study result in answering a call for periodic action for such things as discipleship groups in a coffee house, or serving lunch at a shelter or visiting with the homebound? How might scripture bring about a call to action so that a ministry-type internship can bring together personal passion and community need in order to have us following Jesus with urgent immediacy?

The Council on Mission is charged with casting a vision for our future. Their task this year will be to walk the congregation back through our long-range goals to congratulate ourselves on completed tasks and to create some goals of intentionality for the near and distant future. A 50th Anniversary is looming in November of 2020. What is essential to complete by that deadline and what might we launch to propel us into the future? How will we celebrate 50 years of faithfulness and how might we give ourselves over to some final acts of corporate healing so that the conflict that so characterized our beginning finds final resolution and does not continue into the future?

Our culture is currently functioning in such a way that it is increasingly difficult to be able to speak a good word for fear of critical judgment. It is in vogue

to be disgruntled and negative. We appear naïve when we dare to be messengers of hope and peace. It only takes one day's headlines to make me long for a more practical line of work with measurable results. Wouldn't the world be better served if my work could recount how many bones were set, how many stitches were taken, how many pounds of rice and chicken were delivered to the hungry or how many gallons of fresh water came into a village because I functioned in concrete, measurable ways? I will, however, never know these types of definitive numbers, because I am a preacher – a proclaimer of good news that applies Biblical Band-Aids for the unmeasurable healing of broken hearts, the disappointment of unrealized dreams and despair that laughs at hope. So, of late, I have been asking myself why do I continue to give ministry my complete energy and focus? In other words, why do I believe in the urgency of my calling and that I, we, should follow at this particular time and in this particular place?

***Your presence on earth
at this time and in this
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I discovered some time ago that to attempt running away from what I know to be a genuine calling to follow is useless. I experience calling as something that is so alive, it pursues me. And so I continue to practice ministry: visiting the sick, inviting the unchurched, listening to the downtrodden

and studying for sermons that do come around with regularity. I do these things because every once in a while I can feel the strands of who I have been and who I am becoming, the extended amounts of time on the computer converging with courage, and the middle of the night prayers weave themselves together so that I know, without a doubt, that I am doing what I was made to do. In the larger sense of calling, I am paying some rent towards the Kingdom of God. Responding to calling is what wakes me up, lights me on fire, opens my eyes and ears to things I can never see or feel when I am hiding under the covers, cowering and consumed with my own sense of failure and fear. Because I experience this, it is what I pray for you as well: the sure and certain knowledge that your presence on earth at this time and in this place matters...and not just to me, but to the Lord who calls us into service.

I would be less than honest if I did not confess

to you there are days I have the Jonah-complex: unwilling to preach the message that God has given in the off chance that God will change God's mind, not to mention my heart, about destroying those with whom I have differences. Truthfully, I am so grateful that God chooses to love and forgive us all and is patient enough with me...with us...to keep actively working in this world to open all of our eyes to the delightful spark of the divine in every person. I think Pope Francis is so right when he says that "the only future worth building includes everyone," and the way that we do this is to connect whatever power we have to humility and tenderness. (TED Talks)

And so, I continue to answer the call to serve at Baptist Church of the Covenant because it is only here that I receive a five dollar bill from a grateful Highland Manor resident who wants to keep our grocery ministry vibrant.

Only at Baptist Church of the Covenant does Valerie baptize a dozen Cubans in the Gulf of Mexico.

Only at Baptist Church of the Covenant do public school teachers go to Uganda's Terra Nova's teachers for training and encouragement.

Only with Baptist Church of the Covenant members do I walk into a hospital room where one member is comfortable enough to refuse prayer and just down the hall another member raises her hands in praise declaring, "I know that I will get well because I have all of you at the church and the Lord."

Because of the intentional welcome of the membership of Baptist Church of the Covenant, other congregations and denominational entities gain the courage to be open, accepting and affirming...if not in their corporate lives, at least in their individual lives.

Only at Baptist Church of the Covenant are we privileged to see blonde, blue eyed children holding hands with dark, brown eyed children so that we live into the dream that Martin Luther King, based on the love of Jesus Christ, gave to us.

It was this time, last year that I first talked about The Take What you Need fence on University Boulevard. It is such a small way to reach out to the community, but here is what I am observing from our small acts of kindness done in the name of Jesus: People stop to look. They see not just the fence; they see the

church.

I am noticing that, on our block, people are speaking to one another and wishing them good days.

Every now and then when we have a dry run of items for the fence, there is someone from the community that leaves grocery bags of items on the fence.

Once in a while, a brave soul will literally jump from their car, while stopped at the red light, to hand me \$20 to keep the fence stocked.

Our preschoolers made Christmas scarves and one of our teens, at her own initiative, assembles bags in her free time.

The ladies at St. Luke's Episcopal Church created scarves again this year. They arrived during the critically cold weather of this week. Their partnership is so intentional, for you see, before they begin, their priest comes to pray over their hands, blessing the work they are about to begin. Then, when the scarves are ready, they spread them out

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all along the altar railing and on the communion table, so that the scarves themselves are blessed by the priest. I find this remarkable. I find it remarkable because we could focus on difference after difference between our congregations and our denominational beliefs, but instead we are reaching out to answer a call to the Southside community. Isn't this coming together a model of what our world needs most? Isn't this what God calls us to do in following...to come together; to find commonality; to heal whatever it is that separates us; to bring together opposing sides; to celebrate the spark of the divine in each one...all done because Jesus invites us to follow. I'm answering that call and wonder if you will join me.