Vienna Presbyterian Church
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2 Peter 3:1-13
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As many of you know, I was on sabbatical this summer. I am deeply grateful for this very generous gift and for the many staff and volunteers who gave extra time and energy to make it possible for me to enjoy rest, renewal, extended time with family, and time to work on my doctor of ministry project. I did miss you, and it’s good to be home. I’m still processing the experience, but look forward to sharing reflections in varied ways in the year ahead.

One of the weeks of sabbatical was spent in Northern Michigan. For the first time, my sons and I were able to see and actually cross the Mackinac Bridge—a five-mile-long suspension bridge that connects the Upper Peninsula to the rest of Michigan. It was the world’s longest when it was completed in 1954 and literally changed the lives of those who live and work in that area.

Today, I am using the image of a bridge to make connections. Today is a bridge Sunday as we wrap up our summer series on the prophets and connect it to our fall series on The Story. Our passage today is from 2 Peter 3—a great New Testament text that I hope will help us bridge where we have been in the prophets to where we are going.

The text reminds us of God’s Story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. The Bible recounts God’s interactions with His people in particular times and places throughout history. The prophets speak during a time of rebellion, exile and restoration. At the center of these pointed messages is God—what He has done, what He is doing, and what He will do in the future.

Over and over again, we are reminded that God is great. He is all-knowing, all-powerful, and always faithful. He is holy and righteous without any spot or blemish. He is perfectly able to hold in balance mercy and justice. He is infinite and eternal—not bound by space or time. Truly, God is above and beyond our comprehension

The prophets and our passage for the day also remind us of who we are. We are not God. We are limited, finite creations of God made in His image to live in a loving relationship with God and others. But since the fall in the garden, all of us are “prone to wander…. to leave the God we
love.” This is a problem. Our sin is a problem. The gap between God and us is great—impossible for us to deal with on our own.

But The Story of God, including the prophets, is the story of God pursuing His people and providing bridges that enable us to live the with-God-life, as 2 Peter reminds us, God is “patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”

And, then, God did a remarkable thing. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Jesus is the ultimate bridge. In his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus has done everything necessary to draw us into relationship with God. He has bridged the gap connecting us with God, now and forever. This is a gift from God that cannot be earned or achieved but received by grace through faith.

Throughout the summer, as I was reading the prophets, the words of the Great Thanksgiving Prayer—part of the liturgy said before communion—kept coming to mind. It is a wonderful summary of what God’s big story and the prophets are all about:

“O Lord our God, creator and ruler of the universe. In your wisdom, you made all things and sustain them by your power. You formed us in your image, setting us in this world to love and to serve you, and to live in peace with your whole creation. When we rebelled against you refusing to trust and obey you, you did not reject us, but still claimed us as your own. You sent prophets to call us back to your way. Then in the fullness of time, out of your great love for the world, you sent your only Son to be one of us, to redeem us and heal our brokenness. Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with choirs of angels, with prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and with all the faithful of every time and place, who forever sing to the glory of your name: Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.”

This text not only beautifully summarizes our prophet series, it also provides the vision of our life in God beautifully describing who He is and
what He has done for us as well as our purpose: to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

The biggest problem of God’s people throughout time—including us here and now—is the tendency to forget the greatness, goodness and grandeur of God, and so we lose the vision for our life in God. We often drift or even run away. Proverbs 29:18 says, “Without a vision, the people perish.” I like the way The Message puts it: “If people can’t see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; But when they attend to what he reveals, they are most blessed.”

I want to illustrate the significance of having a vision by sharing a personal experience. About a year ago, my husband, Stuart, and I watched the Ken Burns series National Parks: America’s Best Idea. Until then, I didn’t know he had even made a film on national parks, but for a week we stayed up late watching this amazing history of national parks.

As we watched the film, we were amazed at the beauty and wonder of these national treasures. But we were also overwhelmed with gratitude as we learned the history of how these parks came into being and the sacrifices of time, energy and financial resources that so many people made to ensure that the best places in America were preserved for all the people for all time. This film provided the vision of what National Parks are all about, and it stirred in me an even greater longing to see and enjoy them.

But seeing the film and having the vision wasn’t enough. We also needed intention. With the gift of sabbatical over the summer, we realized we would have more time not only to see our extended family as we usually do for vacation, but to arrange to see some national parks as well. Our intention was manifested in making plans. I must give credit to my husband, Stuart, who mapped our journey, made reservations, and did so many other things to get us ready to hit the road.

Do you see the connection? The story of our redemption and the sacrifices Jesus has made for us are far more incredible than that of the national parks, and we need to know this story and be reminded of this vision of life in the kingdom of God.
Peter reminds us that we not only need vision but we need intention: “I am trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you that you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles” (2 Peter 3:1-2). Like the prophets, Peter is warning the people of his day about false prophets who are trying to pull them away from God. That danger still exists, and there are still many other things that can pull us away from or cause us to drift from the vision of the life God has for us. So we need intention. We must decide to follow Jesus. So Peter’s question is still relevant to us today: Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God?

How do we practically arrange our lives to remember the words and commandments of the Lord and to lead lives of holiness and godliness? What does that practically look like for us right here, right now?

First, we need to keep the vision of our life in God before us, and that’s why we regularly remind you of our VPC mission statement: “Becoming Like Christ Together for the World.” This is how we lift up the vision and mission of our community of faith. It is not something we can make happen by our own human striving or effort. We don’t have the power to change ourselves; only God can do that through the power of his Spirit, but we can cooperate with God in what He is doing.

For that, we need intention: We have to choose to participate in the process of transformation. We have to decide to follow Jesus. And this year particularly, that involves deciding to journey through The Story together.

But again, how do we do that practically? Well, there are bridges or means that help us connect our story with God’s story as we engage in practices, relationships and experiences for spiritual formation. Again, I want to look at each of these and illustrate from my experience this summer visiting national parks.

Let’s look at the first bridge: practices that connect us with God. At the entrance to each park, there was always a ranger who gave us a written guide to the park. This was essential to have because it contained a map of the park and special...
sights to see. But it also contained important information about safety conditions, length and difficulty of hiking trails, and a calendar of what was happening that week. We didn’t receive this guide and toss it aside; we used the guide extensively throughout our day in the park.

As God’s people, we have received a written guide from God through His word. In *The Story*, God has communicated what we need for our life in Him. As the lyrics of the song “ Ancient Words” say well: “Words of life, words of hope, give us strength, help us cope; In this world where-e’er we roam, ancient words will guide us home.” Though most people own numerous Bibles, many of us may not know what God has revealed of Himself to us. So, this coming year is a great opportunity to become even more familiar with *The Story*.

After receiving the written guide, we would go to the visitor center seeking to have a conversation with a ranger about the park. Again, Stuart would let them know a bit about our family and receive helpful guidance regarding what would be the best way to spend our day given who we were. We enjoyed regular conversations throughout the day seeking to participate in as many ranger talks and guided tours as we could because that enhanced our experience of our journey.

As believers, prayer is having a conversation with God. We can pause to thank God for His many gifts, confess our sin, and ask for help for ourselves and others. God wants us to become more and more aware of His presence that is always with us. We are invited to enjoy ongoing conversations as we walk with God throughout the day—when we awake, when we eat, and before retiring—or any time we desire.

Finally, before venturing off from the visitor center to immerse ourselves in park experience, we would watch a beautiful inspirational film. This provided gorgeous images of the park, fascinating information about the geological and sociological history of the park, and directions regarding how to enjoy the many sights, sounds, and experiences. These films really prepared us and enhanced our experience in each park.

It seems to me that is what inspirational worship does. Our time together each week is meant to help us to keep the vision of God ever before us as we remember who He is in all His glory, what He has done
and continues to do for us. As we offer ourselves to God in worship together as a community, we are connecting to that deep purpose for which we were created. That, in turn, helps us to live out that purpose in our everyday, ordinary lives so that we glorify and enjoy God in all that we do.

So here’s the challenge for this year: engage in practices that connect you with God. Get the written guide—The Story—and read it. Use the devotional, which will aid you in your conversations with God and with others, and commit to weekly worship knowing the place it serves in connecting your story with God’s story.

Not only do we need practices that connect us to God, we also need intentional relationships that connect us with others in the community. We, as Christians, are not lone rangers. The journey of life is to be shared in community, and relationships are the bridges that connect us. As we visited national parks, I was struck by the fact that each day our family was journeying together, but we were also part of a group of people from across the country and around the world who were experiencing that park on that particular day. And more than that, we were part of a throng of people who had come there over many years to appreciate the beauty and wonder of that place.

The same is true of The Story. You are invited to share the journey together in reading and talking about God’s story and connecting that to others in your marriage and family life, with spiritual friends, and in some other community. We have groups for children, students, teens, parents, women, and men. And if none of those fit your schedule, then form a micro-group—coworkers, neighbors, or friends you already see regularly. The important thing is to identify intentional relationships that connect with others in connecting God’s story with your story.

So we need practices and relationships that connect us to God and others. And we also need experiences that enable us to participate with Christ in his ongoing work in our lives and in the world. All that I have said is really to bridge or connect our real life to God and what He is doing. So I have a few suggestions for you.

Pay attention to your life. If you are a parent of young children, that role places certain demands on you. You need to pay attention to your real life—not the one you want, used to have, or wish you had, but your
real life as it is right here and now. If you have just launched your child to college or transitioned to a new job, then your real life involves processing these good but also stressful life changes, and you need to pay attention to that. If you are grieving the loss of a loved one, dealing with a health crisis, or a broken relationship, it is important for you to accept that this is your life, and you need to pay attention to the physical, emotional and spiritual work that grief brings. Each of us is called to arrange our lives to engage in the practices and relationships that will open us to God’s love, grace and power that bring healing and transformation. And that will be different for each of us given who we are and what we are experiencing at the time. We must pay attention to our lives.

When we visited Arches National Park, we were encouraged not to miss Delicate Arch. It was a hot day, and it’s a big park with limited water supply. We got to the trailhead and started our journey. But when we got over the first rise, we could see how long the trail was. The people in the distance looked like tiny ants because they were so far away. And yet, we still couldn’t see the arch. When our boys saw where the trail was leading, they literally sat down and said, “We are not doing that.” Stuart and I were disappointed and frustrated, but we turned back. When we got back to the car and read the guide again, we realized that Delicate Arch had two different trails. We had started on the difficult trail, not the easy one. We apologized to the boys and commended them for paying attention and for knowing their limits and saying no. It’s something that at times we all need to do.

We need to pay attention. But we also need to prune. Vine growers don’t just fertilize with the intent of growing bigger vines. When it comes to our spiritual lives, God is interested in the same thing—wholeness, vitality and fruitfulness. I recently heard someone say, “We need to underwhelm our schedules so that we don’t overwhelm our souls.” Practicing disciplines of detachment like Sabbath, simplicity, slowing, silence and solitude keeps us from identifying too much with our work, our stuff, our words and our image. Pruning creates that time and space that helps to connect deeply to God so that we can live a life of wholeness and fruitfulness.
Finally, we are called to participate with God in His ongoing work in the world as we learn, explore, create, serve, give. And, on top of all, we are to enjoy God and even have fun!

One of our best experiences was at Zion National Park. We rode a bus from the visitor’s center up the canyon to the end of the road and walked a mile-long trail along a river. Suddenly, the paved trail ended. Many people were relaxing on the beach at the river’s edge. The trail on land ended here, because at this point the river extended from one wall of the canyon to the other. This part of the trail, called “The Narrows,” was underwater. To my surprise, many of the hikers were walking right into the water to begin the journey up the Narrows.

I had read in my guide that this was a difficult hike. We weren’t doing difficult hikes, so didn’t read further. But when our boys saw all these people jumping into the river, they decided we had to do this. Stuart was game, but I immediately thought, “We are not prepared to do this.” I could see that other people had boots made for water and most of them had walking sticks. We did not, so I figured we were not prepared; we didn’t have the appropriate gear. And we didn’t know enough about it—how long it would take, what obstacles we might face, whether the boys could actually do it. Frankly, I didn’t want to have wet feet all day.

I had a lot of reasons spinning in my head about why we were not going to do this. But there we were at the river with the day before us and everyone in my family and countless others jumping in. I had a decision to make. Was I going to sit by the river and wait for them to return, or was I going to jump in and participate in the experience? So I jumped in, and it was the most fun we had the entire trip.

So here we are on this bridge Sunday about to begin the journey of reading The Story of God together, and each one of us is faced with a decision. What are we going to do? You might have a lot of reasons for not participating: you are too busy, not prepared, don’t know enough, or just don’t want to. So you can sit by for a year and wait for everyone to finish The Story. Or you can jump in, participate, and enjoy the journey. I hope you will. In the words of Peter, I hope you will “grow in the grace
and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.” (2 Peter 3:18).