

"What I Came To Do..."

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr

First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT - February 4, 2024

Please read:
Isaiah 40:21-31
Mark 1:29-39

I am increasingly distressed with world news. The carnage in Gaza is heartbreaking. Over 27 thousand people (which by the way, is almost 25% more than the population of New Canaan) have been killed in the last four months since the war broke out with the terrible terrorist attacks of October 7th. The US involvement has increased with multiple proxy wars around the Middle East and now we are engaging in full scale bombing raids. It seems we are rushing again to all out war. The US elections seem to be quickly headed toward déjà vu all over again... And while I'm excited about the Super Bowl, what about the NFL embracing online gambling? It all seems to be going nowhere good and going fast.

German sociologist Hartmut Rosa suggests that *acceleration* is the defining feature of our time. Technology, social change, and life itself is accelerating faster than in any previous time in history. Thomas Eriksen twenty years ago put it simply, "Modernity is speed." Due to the speed of life, and that for many of us it's going quickly in the wrong direction, many feel overwhelmed, out of control even. So what do we do?

Jesus came *to proclaim the good news that the kingdom of God has come near*. Jesus didn't just talk about it, he embodied the message that God has come near to us. As C. S. Lewis put it, in Jesus Christ *God invaded our world!* And those who receive God's grace, who trust in Jesus, Paul writes, "are more than conquerors."

It is not a worldly militancy, however, to which we are called. Our calling, our purpose, our chief end, as the Westminster catechism puts it, is to "glorify God and enjoy God forever." But what does that really mean?

As we remembered yesterday in the memorial service for Karen Wells, former member of this congregation who died at the young age of 58 from an aneurism, life goes by so quickly, and most have us will find that the end of our lives comes sooner than we expect... And so as we move toward the end of this season of Epiphany, I invite you to reflect on what are you here to do? So many questions...

In today's gospel text we see in the beginning of Jesus' ministry a clear sense of purpose, an intentionality which helped him make his day-to-day decisions. Mark says Jesus was at the house of Simon's mother-in-law engaged in healing ministry. The whole town shows up to have Jesus meet their needs. Then early the next morning, Jesus goes out to a lonely place to pray.

The disciples come and tell him, "Everyone is searching for you." But Jesus replies with a stunning answer: "*Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.*"

This is a pivotal moment for Jesus. He knows what he came to do, and he does it. How? As Mary talked about in her sermon last week, there are so many voices in our lives that cry out for our time, our energy, our money, our commitments.

Jesus had that cacophony of other voices calling out to him, too, all kinds of voices of people with varying needs. "Everyone," apparently in Capernaum, was searching for Jesus. They wanted him to do things for them. But notice how Jesus gives us the example of saying "No" even to peoples' legitimate needs. Why? *Because he was listening to the voice of God.* He knows what he came to do, and he's going to do it, even if it doesn't please all of the needy people back at the house of Simon's mother-in-law or in all of Capernaum... Jesus is going to proclaim the gospel for *all* people...

In the midst of all the busyness of Jesus' ministry, he takes time to get away from it all, early in the morning, to spend time with God. As we were planning for the Leadership retreat this coming Saturday, Cindy Graziano mentioned an article that surveyed medical doctors about what is needed to stay healthy. They had different answers, but one thing they all said in one way or the other was "Oasis Time." Even a couple minutes each day. Stop. Breathe. Orient to your North Star.

We may not be able to slow down the world, but we can pray. Prayer is a way to focus our lives, re-center on what really matters. It could be argued that nothing of lasting value is accomplished without prayer. Prayer is an intentional putting ourselves before God not just to speak to God, but to listen. It could be devotional reading in the morning, a walk, a hike, a cup of coffee or tea, kneeling by the bed, or a sit by the fire to just *be*. Prayer is paying attention, and I think Jesus was doing a lot of paying attention, listening for God's voice, putting himself in a position of openness to the presence of God to listen for guidance and encouragement.

The calling that Jesus extends to us - to follow him and become his disciples - is not for a select few in the body of Christ. The New Testament vision of a healthy church is based on the truth that each person has a gift for ministry, that each one of you here has a purpose, a gift to offer toward the building up of the body and furthering of the kingdom of God. We are called to be a church which helps one another discover the deeper purpose God has for our lives, and to help each other discover God's gifts and what we have really come to do in this life.

Knowing your unique calling, or your purpose in life can help you then better evaluate how you will share your time and resources. Saying *yes* to God's invitation can give you the strength to say *no* to those other voices which keep calling but will sooner or later just use you up. My favorite definition of an idol, a false God, is that which demands more and more of you, but gives you less and less. If each of us is listening to how *God* is calling us, then we can be more intentional about pursuing the new and abundant life God desires for us.

As the prophet, Isaiah, put it "*... those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not grow faint.*"

I find it interesting that the basic meaning of the Hebrew verb here "to wait," is *to wind* or *twist*. From this root comes other Hebrew words like "rope" and "spider web." To wait for the Lord, you see, means to be integrated with God's Word, to embody God's calling, to be bound or caught up in God as your lifeline. Faithful waiting is not passive waiting at all, but active; paradoxically stopping, listening, acting. The emphasis in this word is not on waiting *inertly* but waiting *eagerly*.

One of my favorite stories is about the great pianist Vladimir Horowitz. He made his debut at age 17 in Kiev, a performance which stunned the audience so that they immediately jumped to their feet in prolonged ovation. The critics interviewed Horowitz and asked him what he thought of the crowd's wild enthusiasm for his playing. He stunned them all by saying that he didn't pay attention to the crowd at all. He only really cared what his mother thought of his playing, his instructor since the age of five. He said, "When I play a concert, I'm really only playing for an audience of one..."

Perhaps this is at the heart of our faith: We're really only living for an audience of one. We have not come to conquer, but rather to serve and restore, turn and trust our Loving God each day; step out in faith and share God's love in any way we can. Today we come to this table for spiritual food, to be reminded that we are beloved, called to glorify and enjoy God forever. Even here, may you find yourself, with wings like eagles, being lifted up, and caught up in God's love, renewed for the loving ministry and mission to which God calls us...

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. AMEN.