

## **“To the Side, and Up”**

**Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant 2/10/19**

*Isaiah 6:1-8*

*Luke 5:1-11*

I worked in the corporate world for a few years, and I had been an operations manager seeking a new, higher position in 2012. I remember when an opportunity was presented to me to move into a newly formed role, process flow management, it wasn't exactly the promotion I had been looking for. My director at the time, seeing my disappointment, said, "Dan, sometimes you have to take a step back before you can take a step forward, and in your case you may need to take a step to the side before you can take a step up." It was an interesting proposition. In a way, she was gently illuminating the fact that my new position, though technically a lateral move in our org hierarchy, it would present more opportunities for advancement than my then current position.

I believe this may be true for God's calling in our individual lives as well. Though I believe that God does place an individual "call" on our lives, a personal tug-of-the-heart in a specific direction, I also believe there are intermittent times along our individual journeys in which a personal call may be paused for the sake of a prioritized (perhaps temporary) group call. We may not even hear the personal call yet or perhaps it hasn't quite crystalized, but we see a larger need in our community that begs to be met, an urgency we simply cannot ignore, so we join in the effort to meet it. Often this reality becomes most clear when confronted with God's very presence, much like Isaiah, much like with Jesus' first disciples. In the case of Isaiah, in a vision or dream, the prophet is confronted with the holiness of God—the splendor of God's presence, and at the same time a reality-check on his own inadequacies. In that moment, in the presence of his Creator, he is broken. Isaiah feels ashamed of his failures, of his imperfections. However, God wipes all those blemishes away. God empowers Isaiah with renewed self-worth, then poses a serious question... "Who will go for us?" In response to the question asked, Isaiah says the famous words, "Here am I, send me." Now if I were to give you the tale of his journey thereafter, you might become unsettled. I will only say this about it: It wasn't an easy one by any stretch of the imagination. It was difficult. And there were plenty of times when Isaiah himself doubted his call to speak truth when it caused him nothing but heartache, chastisement, and rejection over and over.

The same could be said for Peter and the other soon-to-be disciples fishing that day, when Jesus told them to cast their nets one final time despite a long night of failure. Then the miracle of an abundance of fish caused Peter to feel unworthy, convicted of his own fear and doubt, begging Jesus' forgiveness. Jesus told him not to worry, but he would forever be transformed to a simple fisherman to a "fisher of men and women." This is not unlike Isaiah's call. Both had been focused on the daily grind of simply eking out a simple human existence in this world. Neither had felt some larger calling to a life of service to transform the world around them, somehow, and for the greater good of humankind. No.

This reminds me of another law of the universe: We tend to take the path of least resistance. Or as some might say, "we go with the flow." Even if the flow isn't where we had initially intended to go, and typically we do it without even thinking about it. However, a personal calling may alter that flow, and a community call may as well. There may in fact be resistance along the way, but the vision itself most

often outweighs the pain, doesn't it? The hope and belief that our efforts will have a positive effect on our community keeps us doing it anyway. It somehow makes the personal sacrifice worth it.

You may be wrestling to discern what God's call is on your own life. Maybe you still haven't found that divine "peace" that comes when you know you are at the center of what you know to be "God's sweet spot," or as some like to say "God's will." As you journey, you will no doubt discover that very personal call on your life, where fulfillment of mission finally comes into focus for you, where human purpose meets the Divine—and an incredible marriage it will no doubt be—and we will celebrate with you. But in the meantime, there are many community callings that are ongoing, needs that beckon our attention, and I would be remiss as a leader if I did not encourage us to find ways to support them. While our inward journey has precedence in our lives, and we mutually encourage each other to grow spiritually within our process of introspection, we must not ignore the outward journey opportunities that abound in our domain. I can quickly think of the Common Grounds Café, and how it brings such an opportunity of fellowship and communion every Friday morning for its patrons, by inviting people into our community at Cosby Woods, all while raising money to help children throughout our city. In the past few years it has raised more than \$50,000. But it needs your help. It will not survive without a continuous rotation of leadership and volunteers. And especially now as we have expanded our offering to include a more youth-focused Sunday night. Consider joining its mission in one capacity or another to help keep these ventures viable and effective.

Equally important and often overlooked is our Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center. This group has provided solace and refuge for hundreds of patrons over its years, utilizing our sacred grounds for the benefit of individual spiritual journeys, and continues to do so day after day. It too is in need of additional help from us, volunteers to help ready the beds that accommodate its patrons, individuals with vision for retreat programming, marketing, and the like. If it will continue to be an effective conduit for spiritual growth for its retreatants, it will undoubtedly need support from many of us. There is much to do!

Several of us are involved in establishing The Freedom School here in Lynchburg this summer. It is a literacy-gap solution for our children, a program out of the Children's Defense Fund that empowers children with author-appropriate literature, and in effect changes lives. Children who perhaps were once behind with their reading ability are typically transformed by the end of the program to be on level, if not exceeding level, because they have pride in who they are as people, as precious human beings, regardless of color, creed, or class. And this has a counter effect on the school-to-prison pipeline that many children are currently stuck in. However, we still need volunteers and supporters. Maybe this is you!

Others of us are involved in changing the demographics and community makeup of our city by welcoming, resettling, and supporting refugees fleeing violence, war, and economic destitution. There are two organizations that are working in this effort, the newly formed Lynchburg Refugee Partnership and the Lynchburg Immigrant Support Network. And both need a ton of volunteers and supporters to effect real change in the lives of the world's most vulnerable that now find themselves for one reason or another in our community.

Brad Adams and I are travelling to DC tomorrow to look at Church of the Saviour's program called "Life Asset" to see what economic development models we can employ in our city that might help create real, long-lasting economic lift for some of the most marginalized groups in Lynchburg. One of these

pieces is a business-entrepreneur support system that includes micro-lending to help jump-start immediate revenue small businesses. This is just one piece of a much larger plan to help us curb one of the highest poverty rates in the country, right here in Lynchburg. If you feel that this is a worthwhile cause that you find yourself eager to join, please let us know!

Last week, several of us from neighboring faith communities which included our Jewish and Muslim friends, as well as other non-Christian spiritualities, met together in hopes of creating a co-op of theological/ideological wisdoms to be housed in some sort of school of thought. We hope in this eclectic coalescence to form conversation groups as well as classes and seminars in which we can learn from one another and invite others from our surrounding communities to join in, in an ultimate hope to curb the rise of religious fundamentalism and value our common truths and appreciate diverse wisdoms. Several in our church are involved in this growing idea... and maybe you would like to support its development as well.

Maybe you have noticed and on-again, off-again influx of children in and out of our church over the past year. We need more volunteers and supporters for our Children's Worship and Wonder program as well as other, ancillary pieces for our children's focused programming. We need help!

I was in tears as I read the heartbreaking story of the mother who sacrificed it all in Bakersfield, California this past Thursday night. CNN reported, "A mother outside her home in Bakersfield, California, with her daughter late Thursday when the house caught on fire. Four of her children were upstairs. Kristina Stratton ran into the two-story house to rescue her children, pastor and family friend Angelo Frazier said. One of her children woke up to discover the situation and realized she couldn't breathe or go downstairs, where Stratton was. So she and her siblings broke the window and escaped from the top floor. The four children who escaped were left with minor to moderate injuries and treated at a local hospital, according to the Kern County Fire Department. But the 38-year-old mother of five didn't make it out alive. Firefighters found her dead inside the house during the rescue operation."

I leave with this thought, call or no-call, there are needs all around us that beg for our help. Don't be afraid to help where you can! Our outward journey beckons us to engage with the needs all around us, and from that our more defined call will undoubtedly emerge. Remember, sometimes we have to move to the Side in order to move Up. So let's move to the Side together... and then up, together.

Peace unto you all.