



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Discipl(in)eship

SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ DECEMBER 31, 2017

We just celebrated the most glorious of all holidays: the birth of Jesus and the coming of salvation! Now, Christmas Day is behind us and the decorations have already begun to come down although some may remain until New Year's Day or Epiphany. According to the church calendar (also known as the liturgical calendar, for those of you who are keeping score), we remain in the season of Christmas through January 6th, or Epiphany. Culturally we have moved on from Christmas and are awaiting another big celebration — the celebration of the New Year! Who is planning to stay up until midnight tonight? (Having 3 kids who are always up at 6:30 AM, there is no way I will be!) Between Christmas and New Year, we are in the “time between the times.”

Because we are in this time between the times, we may not yet have dropped into the post-Christmas season let-down. Do you know that experience? That dramatic shift in energy you experience after you have spent weeks or maybe months, preparing for the Christmas season, and then after the final present has been opened and the last relative has left, after all the confetti has fallen and the last balloon has dropped (you know how you go overboard for your Christmas parties), you experience a certain emotional and spiritual low. It starts to sink in when the only remnant of the celebration is that your home is even a worse mess than it was before you had company.

When the Christmas season has come and gone, and the only mess is out at the curb awaiting the garbage pickup, many experience what social scientists have called the “post-holiday blues.” I am not referring to the “Blue Christmas” that artists like Elvis Presley referred to in songs about being separated from our loved ones and experienc-

ing loneliness on Christmas. Rather, I am referring to what happens when all the expectation and planning in anticipation of the Christmas season and the exuberant frenzy of the holiday is gone and we return to normalcy, whatever that is for you. In that space, when we go from 60 to zero!

Some are left feeling dissatisfied, even depressed. It is as though something were missing or wrong. With the post-Christmas blues, we start looking for ways to fix what we perceive is lacking. So, the post-holiday blues are often accompanied by post-holiday detox from holiday overeating, and some post-holiday shopping for clothes to fit our post-holiday bodies, or at the very least, a post-holiday gym membership. The flurry of planning for parties is replaced with people making all sorts of plans to make personal changes. It is no wonder that as a result of the post-Christmas blues churches, health clubs, debt counselors, and vitamin shops experience booming business! After the chaos of the season, we are left with the question, what do we do with ourselves now?

The post-Christmas blues are not restricted to this holiday. We experience post event let down **each time we place our hope in anything finite, anything that is going to come to an end.** Some of you remember what happened when you retired from your career. You had given the best years of your life to it, sacrificed time with the family for it, and poured your heart into it. Your career may have given you a sense of purpose and identity. When retirement came, that same question hit you: "What do I do now?" That is not the post-Christmas blues, but the post-retirement blues. The couple that spends 12 to 18 months planning for a wedding may find that when the wedding is over, they experience the post-wedding blues. Once the trip that you planned over 12 months for is over and everyone goes back to work, there is the post-vacation blues. When our purpose, planning, and frenzied activities are directed toward anything finite, once the event has come and gone we experience a sort of let down and disappointment and begin to wonder, "What now?"

Could it be that our hearts were not meant for finding finite purpose and significance? Could it be that God has created us with a longing for the INfinite. Though our minds cannot comprehend the infinite, our hearts long for it. An ancient teacher reflected on this saying, "God has placed eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

This brings us to our text for today. In this lesson from Scripture, we will see several individuals living in that complicated time between the times. Mary has just given birth to Jesus. After eight days, she and Joseph take Jesus to the Temple to dedicate Him to God and to fulfill the expected purification rites. In the temple, they meet an individual who has been preparing for this moment his whole life! And after the event has come and gone, his response is interesting.

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), ²⁴and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

²⁹"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

³⁰For my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles,

and the glory of your people Israel."

³³The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his

mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against,³⁵so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,³⁷and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.³⁸Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth.⁴⁰And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

Luke 2:22-40

Mary, Joseph, and Simeon were living in the time between the times. The most significant and anticipated event in the history of the world had come to fruition—God has become human in the Messiah, Jesus. This event was hoped for and anticipated by everyone! Although the time which everyone had hoped for had finally come, God’s plan was not yet fully realized. After all, Jesus was just eight days old and He had not yet started His earthly ministry. He had not yet completed His perfectly sinless life, He had not yet died for the sins of humanity, He had not yet risen! God has come, but God’s plan has not been fully realized. In other words, Mary, Joseph, and Simeon are living in the time between the times; God’s plan has begun, but is not yet finished.

Living in between can be a confusing and difficult time. Consider Simeon. Simeon had watched for and waited for this event his whole life. Imagine that Simeon would wake up in the morning, roll out of bed and start the pot of coffee. He would do his morning devotions and then he would make that trek from his home to the temple to watch and wait for the Lord. At the end of the day, he would stroll back home thinking, “Maybe Jesus will come tomorrow.”

(As an aside, I want to remind you of the detail that Luke keeps reminding us of. We know that Jesus was born of a virgin, so we know that this is the firstborn child. Luke keeps reminding us of this detail. I wondered why that is, and then it occurred to me that we are always a little overprotective of our firstborn child. By the time the third or fourth child comes along, and we see that they are eating dirt, we think it is fine and that it will build character. But, for the first born, we are overprotective. Now, go back to the temple.)

On that day Simeon went to the temple, and upon seeing Jesus, he took the firstborn child out of the overprotective arms of His mother, held Him close and sang the song of Simeon, "For my eyes have seen your salvation!" It is true, salvation had come, but salvation had not yet been fully realized.

Scripture says that Mary marveled at those words, but I wonder if what she really felt was bewilderment. Can you imagine walking into a church with your firstborn child only to have a stranger grasp the child from your arms and prophesy over the life of that child? It would be a crazy, bewildering experience, right?

We do not know much about Simeon. In fact, this short encounter is really the only time that we meet him in the entire New Testament. We cannot really know his career though his vocation was that of "professional messiah watcher." In his eyes, perhaps he now believes that his career is over and that he can retire. Did you notice his response? "Dismiss me now in peace, Lord." It seems that he is ready to go home and to be with the Lord having fulfilled his life's purpose. But this raises an interesting question to me. What if God is not done with him yet? It is true that the finite event is over, but God's infinite plan is not! What if God has another plan for Simeon after this one? Maybe this is just a chapter in God's unfolding narrative and the next chapter has a new role for Simeon.

Have you ever been in such a situation? You have poured your heart and soul into one significant event and now it is over, and you are left wondering, "What am I to do now?"

I think we have all been there. Everyone from empty-nesters to widows, from graduates to retirees, has experienced this at some time—the time between the times. In fact, spiritually, we all live in the time between the times. We have received Christ and our eyes have beheld God’s gift of His salvation, but God’s purposes are not complete in us yet. God has only begun His good work in us. While some stories end too soon, our story is just beginning in Christ. When we receive Christ, something amazing happens. When God looks at us, He sees us clothed in the righteousness of Christ. However, our personal righteousness is not made whole all at once. (If you believe yours was, let’s chat.)

After we receive Christ, what is next? The answer is simple. It is reflected in the final words that Jesus gave to us. We are to be disciples who make disciples. It is discipleship. Discipleship is the process by which God, who began a good work in us, brings His work to completion. Discipleship begins when we place our trust in the promises of God and start living as if those future realities were already true in the present. A life of discipleship is learning to live as Christ did, and of striving for the perfection that God sees within you.

Have you ever had someone in your life who loved you so much that they saw you in a somewhat unrealistic way? Not your spouse; they see all the brokenness and problems that are in you and they love you anyway. Rather, what I am talking about are the people who love you with a sort of idealism. They see what you can be rather than exactly who you are thus compelling you to want to become what they already see in you. I am fortunate to have some of these people my life. What a blessing to grow up in a home where your parents see what you can be rather than the reality of who you are. God already sees us with the perfection of Christ, and discipleship is about learning to live in light of Christ’s perfection. But how? We can find that answer by looking once again to the example of Christ’s perfection.

Did you catch the end of this passage? The last phrase is a curious one that has baffled and challenged theologians for 2,000 years. Remember, Almighty and All-knowing God has Himself taken on flesh

in Jesus Christ. This is amazing and profound in and of itself. But there is the last, confusing phrase of the scripture: “And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.” Later in verse 52, Luke writes, “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.”

In other words, Jesus, who is God, “learned and grew in wisdom.” Though He was perfect in grace and without sin, He nonetheless grew in wisdom and learned just as we do. If you and I are going to successfully navigate the time between the times, the time from when we began our journey to the time when our journey is complete, we must follow after Jesus and put the “IN” back in discipleship.

“But,” you say, “there is no ‘IN’ in discipleship.” True. But the word “discipleship” shares the same root as another word we use frequently. “Discipleship” shares the same root as the word “discipline” and “discipline” is what we need if we are going to successfully navigate the time between the times.

The word “discipline” sometimes gets a bad reputation. The word conjures up a sort of strict, authoritarian, corrective obedience. However, that is not how I intend to use it. The root that is shared by the word “disciple” and the word “discipline” simply means “to learn.” The way, then, that I would define discipline is “learning to be like Christ,” even (and perhaps especially) when you do not feel like it. Like Jesus, we need to focus on growing in wisdom and allowing God to recreate us in His image.

If we are going to put the IN back in disciple, there are three things that we must learn to do. First and most important, we must learn to daily **“INvite the INdwelling of the Holy Spirit.”** The first lesson we all learned when we received Christ as our Lord and Savior was that we cannot be made right with God by relying on our own power for goodness. Jesus needed to break the power of sin and death in order to restore us to a relationship with God. When we receive Christ, we receive the down payment of salvation, which is the indwelling of the Spirit of God. In the Spirit there is untapped power for our Christian life. If we are to learn and grow in wisdom and al-

low God to complete His work in us, we need to rely on the teacher. Jesus said, “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26).

In order to put the IN in discipleship like Christ has modeled, we must invite the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. All those who profess Jesus as Lord and Savior have the indwelling of the Spirit, so when I refer to inviting the indwelling, I am referring to something that you already possess and encouraging you to rely on the Spirit’s power. Those who wrote the Bible referred to this as being filled with the Spirit.

Secondly, we must learn to discipline our spiritual lives by INdirection. Indirection is a word that I picked up from Dallas Willard in his book about “Spiritual Disciplines.” Indirection refers to focusing energy on something that indirectly causes us to be better at something else. It is like the musician, athlete, or artist who practices certain dexterity techniques to play more effectively and efficiently. These techniques work by indirection. You play scales or perform finger exercises to gain dexterity. The point of the exercises is not to be better at the exercise, but to play music with greater competence. It is the same with the spiritual disciplines.

When we discipline our spirit, cultivating healthy habits like Jesus did, our spiritual lives grow. We gain the dexterity and power from the Holy Spirit to overcome sin and to become like Christ. In other words, we cannot overcome sin just by willing it. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we focus on developing disciplined habits that result in our spiritual growth. This is INdirection. Through worship, prayer, Bible reading, Christian friendship, sabbath, solitude, silence, or fasting, we focus our energies on practices that enhance our spiritual lives: Indirection by spiritual disciplines.

The third simple point for putting the IN back into discipleship is that we must maintain an INfinite focus. As we have already said, our minds cannot comprehend the infinite, but our hearts long for it. It is the reason why, when our lives return to normal following the Christ-

mas and New Year's celebration, we sense that something is missing. Events that come and go will never satisfy our eternal longing. Our journey in discipleship must maintain an infinite focus. Through spiritual indwelling and spiritual discipline God is making us into who He longs for us to be. This is not something that will be complete in this lifetime, so this journey is never over. An infinite perspective helps us to prioritize things that we deem important in the present.

If we are to put the IN back in discipleship, we need to daily INvite the INdwelling of the Holy Spirit, practice INdirection through engaging in spiritual disciplines, keep an INfinite focus, and remember that our journey of discipleship is never complete. You could say it this way, "We need the power, habits, and focus to reflect the righteousness that God already sees in us."

Many of us may begin to feel a letdown at this time of year. The Christmas season is done, life is returning to normal, and we may begin to experience some dissatisfaction. It is because our hearts long for the infinite, and when we place our longings in the finite, we are let down. Before you go get a gym membership or purchase vitamins, might I suggest that you first tap into the power of God for your life of transformation. We are notoriously bad at self-betterment, but we do not have to rely on our own power for self-betterment. It will only come IN Christ. C.S. Lewis said it this way:

If we let him ... he will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a ... dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright, stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) his own boundless power and delight and goodness.

God's infinite plan is not complete in you, but He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion. Through the indwelling of the Spirit, the indirection of spiritual discipline, and maintaining an infinite focus, Christ will complete His work in us when we put the IN back in discipleship!