

**Looking Back, Flying Forward**  
**Psalm 78:1-8**  
**Matthew 28:16-20**  
**Fort Hill Presbyterian Church**  
**Clemson, SC**  
**September 6, 2015**

On Thursday I received a phone call from our eldest daughter, Hannah. Hannah is doing her student teaching this year and she had just finished her day in class with seniors when she called me. She told me that along with her mentor teacher, they had to have a “Come to Jesus Meeting” with their students about what college was really like and how they could not plan on going if they did not do their work their senior year. At the end of the day that experience made her cry—she knew it was a critical moment with those students, a moment of decision to learn and apply themselves or merely exist.

Psalm 78 tells the history of the people of Israel and their relationship with YHWH, their God. The opening verses are reminiscent of the Shema’s, “Hear O Israel” sounds like “Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth.” In some ways, these too are “Come to Jesus moments.” Before we ever meet Jesus, God calls the people together to learn from the divine words, to pass on the story of God’s mighty acts of providence, salvation, forgiveness, and love.

YHWH commanded the people to teach their children about God’s faithfulness so that their children would set their hope in God and then in turn teach the next generation. The disciples would have known this psalm as one of the historical hymns with the primary purpose of *torah*—instruction for living. What this psalm instructs the people of Israel to do is not to be like their faithless ancestors who have gone before them, but rather to learn of God’s faithfulness and be obedient to God.

The psalm was written for the Jews. In contrast, the gospel was written for the disciples to share with the world—Jews and non-Jews alike. The commission is something bigger than any of us wants to admit—it is for the disciples to go to all the world. This commission means that as disciples we are not just to go to the ones we know who are like us, but even to ones we would not include—you see, God is messing with our world because it is not ours at all. It is God’s world, and this God will be the God of the whole world, not just of the Jews.

This traditioning is the mandate to Go to the World with God, with the Holy Spirit. Prior to now in Matthew Jesus had given his disciples authority to preach and heal, and later even to baptize, but now Jesus adds the commission to teach. They are to go and teach about this steadfast love, this faithful God who forgives even the ones who say they love God but do not obey. To be one of Jesus’ disciples means we follow, and we Go.

When we hear a story we remember what is important to us—the knowledge or information that touches us deeply. It is true in every era that the faith of the people of God “is only one generation away from extinction.”<sup>1</sup> We must understand that this story is not just history of the

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<sup>1</sup> A quote by former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, in 2013 at Christian Conference in reference to the church in England. I have heard this said about the church in general prior to Lord Carey’s stating of this concern. It is nothing new to the post-modern church. Here is the link accessed on September 4, 2015, for the quote: <http://www.christianpost.com/news/christianity-is-a-generation-away-from-extinction-in-britain-says-former-archbishop-of-canterbury-109184/> (p. 993, big NIBC)

Jews, but it is God's story and our story—God living and moving in the lives of those who follow God. Understanding is the “thought of God” that is the first value in our Youth Ministry Value Statements. The “thought of God” is more than just knowing information, it is being formed by that knowledge, shaped by that understanding, not only in the mind, but also in the heart. Calvin said, “In all prayer, public and private, the tongue without the mind must displeasing to God.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, we are Christians who value a thinking faith. But Calvin goes on with his thoughts about knowledge.

“The knowledge of God which we are invited to cultivate *is not* that which, resting satisfied with empty speculation, only flutters in the brain, *but a knowledge* which will prove substantial and fruitful wherever it is duly perceived, and rooted in the heart. The Lord is manifested by his perfections. When we feel their power within us, and are conscious of their benefits, the knowledge must impress us much more vividly than if we merely imagined a God whose presence we never felt.”

There is movement in being a disciple. It goes from

- Hearing to Being to Doing
- Information to Formation to Transformation
- Knowledge to Commitment (Obedience) to Serving

We make disciples by teaching with lives of faith, modeling the sermon on the mount and the great commandments—Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself. We are called to know God in Jesus Christ; to live the word of God as the body of Christ.

Tangibles that Jesus gave to his disciples are the sacraments. The disciples go out and baptize to mark the seal of God's love on Christ followers. God does this through the disciples by the power of the Holy Spirit and we participate in the promise—the vow to raise the disciple, young or old in the faith. The congregation as the body of Christ fulfills this vow through teaching the faith—you who are commissioned and blessed this day are living out your vows made at every baptism.

Together we commit, we obey the responsibility to nurture disciples in the faith so in turn they will too. Parents especially make this promise, it is lived out not only here in this building, but wherever you go. Children and others will observe disciples to see if their faith which is spoken is also lived out. For faith without works is dead.

The congregation, the people of God commit to helping parents raise their children in the faith—together and God blesses those commitments—for this is not a lonely, solitary exercise but a messy and challenging journey that is shared by the community. Commitment/obedience is what moves individuals into the body together and we learn from our ancestors' successes and mistakes. Like the Sankofa<sup>3</sup> bird of the Akan tribe in Africa, we are creatures who are called to look back and learn from the past, to grasp the egg, that is life and to bring it into the present and then fly forward into the future with hope. Salvation history is not only for the Jews, but it is

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.xx.33.

<sup>3</sup> I first learned the word “sankofa” when it was used as the theme for one of the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators' conferences. It is a powerful symbol and meaning of moving forward into the future. Here is a link about its meaning and a few pictures too. Link accessed on September 4, 2015: <http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/animals/birds.html> .

our story too. The Great Commission was not only for the disciples then, but also for all of us now, as disciples of Jesus Christ today.

Let us look back to God's mighty acts in the lives of our ancestors at Fort Hill and in other places and learn from them. Let us grasp the gospel story that God was with them, is with us, and will be with our our children and our children's children.

Adults, we too are children of God and our faith is like seeds that are planted in good soil. The body of Christ is a seedbed, a seminary to germinate our "thoughts of God" with the Word of God to fertilize us to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. We may or may not have learned anything about God as a child or about being a disciple, but we are not to stay there, with a stagnant faith. I have heard a pastor say, "There's nothing wrong with a third grade understanding of God as long as you are in the third grade." He was speaking of adults who are satisfied with a child's knowledge of God rather than growing up into maturity, into Christ who is the head of the church.

Occasionally I will hear someone say that they wish the church would stay out of politics or not be so political. Whenever I hear that concern raised, I think about God's love for the least of these and how Scripture directs us to have God's heart for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the least of these, the marginalized. Time and time again God works through the leaders of systems, through even those who do not believe in God, such as Cyrus in the Old Testament who did not believe in God, yet achieved God's purposes.

The church definitely is called to be political, to be active in the *polis*, the city, in which it is established, to be an advocate for those without a voice, to work for justice, and to hold leaders accountable to serve those they represent, to make decisions for the common good. The church can lead in transforming the society, if we believe that God is sovereign. Racism is one issue that is political that the church must be involved in to maintain its integrity and identity as the body of Christ. We will be discussing racism at The Bridge.

"Do not put off until tomorrow what you can do today."<sup>4</sup> Now that is a parable or riddle or dark saying from of old that definitely applies in this present day. In my early years at church I met a man in his late 70s who told me, "Do not wait until you are my age to get to know God, learn about God now, ask questions, pray, read your Bible, and share your faith with others both inside and outside the church. I wish I had not waited until I was old. But I am thankful that I know God now." I could tell his words were from the heart.

In my more recent years, I have heard other adults say, "I will study God's word when I retire because then I will have time to do so." Treating it as an academic exercise, but not really. Or maybe, "I don't have time to come to the Bridge. I have time for worship and that is all I can give the church." My goodness, the Bridge is 52 hours long each year, that is barely just over two whole days of one's life. Jesus was in the tomb for three days and he had the time for us.

I am proud of our parents of children and youth here today. So many of you have volunteered to lead in the faith formation of your sons and daughters through your service as Bridge Builders, Youth Advisors, Children's Ministry Team and Youth Ministry Team. Studies for decades have shown that parents are the primary faith educators of their sons and daughters. By committing to your roles in service you are strengthening their faith as well as your own.

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<sup>4</sup> Many people think this is in the Bible, but it is actually attributed to Ben Franklin. At least that's what I found on many quotable websites.

If you want your son or daughter to believe in Jesus Christ then the best way for that to happen is for them to witness you believing it and living out that belief with your commitments. Young people are hypocrite radars too. For the rest of us we too can be models of faith, by standing with parents—to live alongside, to continue to cultivate our own faith with one another in this body of Christ called Fort Hill Church. We too are called to grow in our faith, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. And it doesn't happen for us by osmosis. We too need traditioning to mature in living as Christ's disciples.

"But some doubted"—in every generation, we know some doubted, their commitment wavered, but Jesus still entrusted them with his mission to carry the gospel into the world. In spite of our inadequacies, perhaps even because of our inadequacies, God is with us, God loves us.

People have been asking me, "What is the Bridge?" I know we have been saying it is a new name for Sunday School, but really I think it is not a What at all. The Bridge is a Who! You see, the Christian Education Ministry chose the word because it had the *most life* of all the possible names we considered and we liked it because it continued the Bridging Generations theme from the capital campaign. A few weeks ago, I decided to see where the words "bridge" and "bridging" were used in Scripture and found out that they do not appear in the Bible anywhere. It makes sense when you think about the times in which the Bible was written.

But I do think The Bridge is there, present in the texts. The Bridge is actually everywhere in Scripture—the Bridge is God in Jesus Christ. Jesus reveals the nature of God, loving us and coming to us as a baby bridging the divide between heaven and earth, divinity and humanity. Jesus Christ is the Bridge—extending grace in making us new in baptism. The Bridge is the Emmanuel, "God is With Us" in Matthew chapter 1 all the way to Matthew chapter 28 where he promises the disciples he will be with them always, to the end of the age.

Look back on your baptism when parents and the community promised to teach you the faith so you could fly forward to do the same for another. Fly like the Sankofa bird and take the risk of Going forward to Make Disciples.

Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me."<sup>5</sup> Jesus says, "Come and follow me."<sup>6</sup> Jesus invites us to the table. "Come and eat."<sup>7</sup> "Remember, I am with you."<sup>8</sup> Whenever you go, look back and fly forward, knowing you are not alone, but remembering you are always invited to the table again and again and to the mission field in our own pews and in the world outside these walls.

To borrow another saying, "Mind the Gap" in these places—Think on Jesus, who is our Bridge.

This Come to Jesus Meeting is one that everyone is invited to attend. And I do use this term with a sense of finality—that a decision, a commitment is worth making. It is what we as disciples do. The amazing thing is Christ is here whether we believe in him or not. Jesus invites us to to meet God, to learn from God, to learn from one another in the presence of God as the body of Christ. Then we will be ready to Go and Make Disciples and Baptize and Teach because we have his Word that God is With Us.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 19:14.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 4:19.

<sup>7</sup> John 21:19.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 28:20b.

That Come to Jesus Meeting I mentioned in the beginning...Hannah was calling to tell her father and I "thank you." And what she got out of that meeting was gratitude. What we received was a precious gift too—gratitude for passing on the value of a good education. Let's do the same with our children and youth and one another in our faith education. What do you say, shall we pass this Good News on to the next generations? Come to the Bridge for the answer.