

## G3 Sermon for 5/28/17

“Okay”

Good morning. My name is Bob Richardson, and I am the assistant pastor at G3. Thanks so much for being here this morning.

It's been a heady couple of weeks. Thanks to Pastor Ron, we have considered the origins of what brought us into existence, the hard work and ceaseless prayer that undergirded the early months, the milestones and pratfalls we've encountered along the way. And then came last week, and that remarkable constituting service. If you weren't here, at one point 100 people stood to sign the membership role to join G3. **(SLIDE ONE)** I texted Pastor Ron later that for me, at that moment, we were no longer in Meadowlark Elementary School. It was as if I was gazing upon what it must have looked like as the founding fathers signed the Declaration of Independence **(SLIDE TWO)**. I'm serious folks; it was that dramatic to me. We've had our July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776. We've had our birthday, but as Ron said last week, now we can begin the long delivery.

My favorite movie of all time is a 1972 Robert Redford film called “The Candidate”. It depicts a Jerry Brown type California community advocate, the son of a former Golden State governor, named Bill Mackay, who makes an unlikely challenge to the sitting U.S. Senator. Now, spoiler alert, Mackay wins. In the last scene of the movie, in the midst of all the tumult of victory, Mackay pulls aside his campaign manager, played by the late Peter Boyle, for a question. Watch this scene from the movie: **(SLIDE THREE: CLIP OF MOVIE)**

“What do we do now?” Without going into detail, there are about 112 steps that must be undertaken in the establishment of a new church. I'm overstating just a tad, but there are a great many hoops through which you jump to become a Methodist church. All understandable, all valid, all time tested. I get that. But the battery of requirements still will not completely prepare us for what's to come.

There's a really cool tool we Methodist pastors can employ in the preparation of a sermon. It's called a lectionary, or a listing that contains a collection of scripture readings appointed for Christian worship on a given day or occasion. There is a Methodist lectionary, and it really speaks to another keenly Methodist notion of what's called Connectionalism, or a peculiarly Methodist understanding of what it means to be the church. According to connectionalism, the church is defined not by formal structures or doctrine or lines of authority. It's defined by connections between people: connections between pastor and pastor, between pastor and laity, and between laity and laity. When The United Methodist Church claims to be a connectional church, that means that we hold such interpersonal connections in so high a regard that we understand them as the essence of the church. But it also means that there are hundreds of churches considering the same verses of Scripture on the same day. I don't know about you, but that fills me with just another extraordinary assurance of community.

Of the four verses of scripture suggested for today, I'd like to touch upon the one that addresses the question of what happens now. What can we expect now? It's from the Apostle Peter's first letter to the church that was itself experiencing a long delivery. By way of background, Peter was one of the original 12 of Jesus' followers. Peter was a fisherman by trade who came to be the one on whom Jesus said he would build His church. Peter was the one disciple who walked on water. Peter denied

Christ early on, but later was martyred in Christ's name in a most horrific way. But Peter was perhaps the original bull in a china shop. **(SLIDE FOUR)** Peter was not dainty; Peter called it as he saw it. Peter was a straight shooter for the church. So, in this first letter, he sees a church assured by the promise of eternity, and yet a church that is suffering a measure of persecution as well. It's a church undergirded by community but a church undermined by worldly conflict. It's a church that's asking "what do we do now?"

Verses 12-16 of the fourth chapter of the letter, as well as verses 6-11 of the fifth chapter are the passages that the lectionary suggests we consider. Hear these words:

**Verse four-**

**"<sup>12-13</sup> Friends, when life gets really difficult, don't jump to the conclusion that God isn't on the job. Instead, be glad that you are in the very thick of what Christ experienced. This is a spiritual refining process, with glory just around the corner.**

**<sup>14-16</sup> If you're abused because of Christ, count yourself fortunate. It's the Spirit of God and his glory in you that brought you to the notice of others. If they're on you because you broke the law or disturbed the peace, that's a different matter. But if it's because you're a Christian, don't give it a second thought. Be proud of the distinguished status reflected in that name!"**

**And from verse five:**

**<sup>6-7</sup> So be content with who you are, and don't put on airs. God's strong hand is on you; he'll promote you at the right time. Live carefree before God; he is most careful with you.**

**<sup>8-11</sup> Keep a cool head. Stay alert. The Devil is poised to pounce, and would like nothing better than to catch you napping. Keep your guard up. You're not the only ones plunged into these hard times. It's the same with Christians all over the world. So keep a firm grip on the faith. The suffering won't last forever. It won't be long before this generous God who has great plans for us in Christ—eternal and glorious plans they are!—will have you put together and on your feet for good. He gets the last word; yes, he does.**

These verses have not been far from my sight for the last couple of weeks, and I've not grown weary of having them in such proximity. I'd like to share what that growing familiarity has unearthed. **(SLIDE FIVE)**

**"...don't jump to the conclusion that God isn't on the job....This is the spiritual refining process..."**

Tuesday will mark the sixth anniversary of the day Susan and I, and our daughter Lulu, arrived in Portland, Oregon after a ten day road trip across America. We had gone there because Susan was about to begin her tenure as director of an initiative called Reclaiming Futures, which was based at Portland State University. In the months

leading up to this move we just knew that God was in every sinew of its evolution. We just knew it. We got to town, toured around, moved into our apartment, and then the next day came and we took Lulu to the airport to fly back here to NC. And that's when God dropped me like a bad habit. I tried to say goodbye to her and I couldn't speak. I couldn't breathe. It took everything in me not to dissolve into a puddle of tears. I watched her walk away, and when she was out of sight Susan and I went to the car and I drove her to her first day at work. I dropped her off and went back to the apartment. I walked in, laid down on the air mattress, curled up into a fetal position, and pretty much stayed that way for the next few months. Not literally of course, but certainly spiritually. I was convinced that God had abandoned me. He had brought me 3000 miles to dump me. It would take me months of conversation and introspection to finally realize what God was doing. I finally came to see that God was still on the job, but I had been the one to leave my post. I had relied on my own wits, gifts, pride, whatever for too long, when I should have been relying on Him alone. Ever seen those vanity plates that say "God is my co-pilot"? That was me! For too long I had thought I could fly the plane, and had told God He was no longer needed. And I paid for it: in misery, in tears. And the further shame for me was that Susan paid for it too. She was collaterally damaged. Blessedly I was walked back from that abyss though, and spiritually refined. I would be hard pressed to say yes to a return to Portland. I'm so glad those days are over, but ultimately I'm gladder still that they happened. They made me a better man, but more importantly they made me a better child---of God.

**(SLIDE SIX) "The suffering won't last forever. It won't be long before this generous God...will have you put together and on your feet for good."**

There's a member of the growth group that Susan and I lead (Sunday nights...6 o'clock...our house...would love to have you) who deals with more physical maladies than many of us could probably tolerate. I cannot begin to imagine the pain they endure. There are days when just arising from bed is an impossibility, so intense is discomfort. And yet every Sunday night they're there, providing wit and wisdom, guidance and care. One time I asked how they did it, and they told me that they knew, when the rest of life provided no relief or answers, they knew that ultimately God provided, Jesus saved. They had every blessed assurance that God would one day let them in on why they had to run this ghastly race. In his second letter to the church at Corinth the Apostle Paul writes **(SLIDE SEVEN)**

**<sup>8</sup> Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.**

**<sup>9</sup> And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."**

"Gladly I will boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Paul wrote it; my friend lives it out, full in the knowledge that for them, the perfection of Jesus awaits.

Finally, **(SLIDE EIGHT) "He gets the last word; yes he does."**

I may have shared before that one of my very favorite books is “Runaway Bunny” by Margaret Wise Brown **(SLIDE NINE)** It’s the story of a little bunny who comes up with a variety of strategies to evade his mother. He’ll run, he’ll swim, he’ll fly. But she always comes up with a counter strategy to find him, and she always will, for he is her little bunny, and there is no greater love.

Except God’s. That’s what Peter’s saying in part. Like the mother in the story, God will make all things right. God will be the tree to which we come home. God has the last word; yes He does.

So where does all of this leave us? What’s our answer to Peter? What’s our answer to God? Anybody know what the most universally understood word is? No? It’s okay. No really, it’s **(SLIDE TEN) “OKAY”**

Okay can be a tremendously powerful word, for it can be the pathway to acceptance. There’s ultimate, I think, liberation in acceptance, of taking strength and comfort in knowing that though I may not know why things are as they are, I am a child of the master who *does* know. Eckhart Tolle once said **(SLIDE ELEVEN)**

**“Acceptance looks like a passive state, but in reality it brings something entirely new into this world. That peace, a subtle energy vibration, is consciousness.”**

**(SLIDE TWELVE)** This is a still from the 1978 movie “The Deer Hunter”. Robert De Niro plays Michael Vronsky, a Pennsylvania steel worker who loves to hunt. But he has a fervent belief that a deer has to be felled with one shot. It’s more than a belief; it’s his very ideology. Michael is drafted into service in Vietnam, is captured, and is forced to play Russian roulette by his captors, where the one shot ethos by which his life had been defined now potentially spells his doom. He manages to escape and make his way home. In one of the movie’s last scenes he goes hunting again, and happens upon a magnificent, towering buck. He aims, pauses, aims again, and then fires. Into the sky. The next scene sees him sitting in front of a magnificent cascading waterfall. It’s more than beautiful; it’s baptismal. The imagery is that clear. Michael looks at the waterfall, then closes his eyes and arches his whole body to the sky. He shouts out one word over and over again. “OKAY!” He’s been living his life by a macabre standard. He may not know where he’s going from here on, but he’s willing to be lead. He’s okay.

I don’t know what happens next for G3. I know that we continue to pursue our purpose to help those who feel far from God come home. Nothing changes that. It’s who we are, and why we’re here. I know that we are in the midst of a world that feels that God isn’t on the job anymore. We get to show and tell them differently. Okay? I know that we are in the midst of a world that is suffering. We suffer ourselves. But we also get to show and tell them, and ourselves, that joy comes in the morning, as the psalmist wrote. Okay? I know that we are in the midst of a world that doesn’t wish, for whatever reason, to accept the promise of God’s goodness. We get to show and tell them differently, of the reason for our hope, as we read elsewhere in First Peter. Okay?

The world faces a mountainous problem: of disbelief, of disenchantment, of disenfranchisement. That’s too much dissing. We get to show and tell them differently: a God of hope, a God of care, a God of love.

Okay? Okay. Let’s pray.

