

I Corinthians 12:12-31
Luke 4:14-21

Poised to Leap

When Barack Obama and John McCain were campaigning for president, one of their stops was at Saddleback Community church in California. Pastor Rick Warren held a forum on leadership and compassion in August of 2008. Last January when President Obama was inaugurated, he invited Warren to offer the invocation. Many of us have read Rick Warren's best selling book The Purpose Driven Life. It was a good book, at least one or two small groups delved into it here. I have my issues with many of the things he wrote; but I have quoted Warren at least three or four times in my sermons because he is a thoughtful and faithful church leader. I read an interesting comment on Warren's book this week by Ernest Hest a Presbyterian Pastor in Atlanta.

"Citations from scripture fill this book, dozens in every chapter, which makes it even more surprising and troubling that Luke 4:14-21 (our Gospel reading today) is never quoted. Apparently this succinct and powerful statement of Jesus' own purpose is not considered relevant for informing a Christian's purpose driven life." End of quote

It seems to Hest and it seems to me that a Christian's understanding of his or her own purpose, and the church's understanding of its purpose and mission should be informed by Jesus' understanding of his purpose and mission.¹

Context often helps us to appreciate what Jesus is teaching us. This passage from Luke is about an event that occurs very early in the ministry of Jesus. Luke 1 and Luke 2 are the Christmas stories. Luke chapter 3 is about the ministry of John the Baptist who baptizes Jesus. Luke 4 is about the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. After Jesus is baptized by John, he enters enter the wilderness for a forty day period of fasting, soul searching and prayer. Jesus was tempted by evil to ignore his call but he came out of the wilderness, resolved to fulfill God's purpose.

The first place that Jesus went after his time of solitude was home to Nazareth. This is his childhood home, where he played and worshipped, where he learned the Torah and carpentry. He knows the people. He knows their faces and names. It could be that many of them are aunts and uncles in addition to neighbors. Jesus is poised to leap into ministry and his first teaching, his first act of

¹ Ernest Hest in Feasting on The Word, Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C Volume 4 page 289

ministry is to speak to the hometown crowd. He stands up and chooses to read from the scroll of Isaiah.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

This was Jesus’ mission statement. This was his purpose. . Poised to leap into action – this was his work. You could legitimately spiritualize this text because most of Jesus’ teachings are layered with meaning. You could argue that this is about evangelism – sharing the good news of the Gospel. You could argue this is about healing broken hearts. You could argue that this is about offering people insight into their lives. You could argue that this is all about being freed of the many glittering things in the world that distract us from God and hold our hearts captive. You could argue that this is about Christian Education and building community and you would be absolutely right. But there is no escaping the evident and no ignoring the obvious. Jesus was all about helping the poor, healing the sick, enabling the powerless, empowering the oppressed and freeing the

prisoner. Jesus had a spiritual and a social agenda and his purposes were not divided.

Ark & Dove Presbyterian Church is a community of disciples that embodies the life & spirit of Jesus Christ so that lives are transformed and God's dream is carried into the world. That's our mission statement.

Our core values are rooted in the life and ministry of Christ Jesus:

- They are Love, Respect and Faith.

Our support values are rooted in our energetic interpretation of God's call to us in scripture:

- They are Service, Commitment, Enthusiasm, Risk Taking, Compassion and Unity.²

Next Sunday evening is the Annual meeting of our congregation. Usually on that Sunday, I try to preach and reflect upon the mission of our church, how we are doing, whether we are progressing. However since next Sunday is also youth Sunday and we have three cracker jack youth preachers lined up with homilies; I am taking the opportunity to reflect on our purpose and mission today.

What do you do when you achieve a major goal? What do you do when you have been working on something for years and years

² From Our Mission www.arkanddove.org

and then you accomplish it? We do in several ways find ourselves in this position. 2009 was the first year we actually had enough space in our church building to undertake the ministry we feel called to do. 2009 was the first full year we were not held back by the size of our building. 2009 was the year that our church crossed over from theoretically desiring to be a post modern permission giving equipping church to actually living out that model. 2010 is the year that we will call a full time Associate Pastor to lead us in the arenas of education and discipleship. It is just around the corner.

The kingdom has not arrived. We are not God's greatest church on earth. We have not achieved perfection. The President, the Pope and the Queen of England likely have no idea we exist and we have lots of room for improvement; but we have had a very good year. Several barometers of church health continue to show positive trends. Giving is up, membership is up, worship attendance is up all of them four years in a row. Sunday School, Logos attendance and participation in adult small groups were both up in 2009. For a while there we were on a bit of a plateau – we weren't going backwards, but we were a little stalled and now we are again moving forward. Our Elders, our Deacons, our Team leaders and Small Group

Leaders have been very consciously and carefully evaluating and critiquing our ministry for years now. For the past six or seven years we have been working with consultants from the Presbytery of Baltimore and an organization called Deep Shift. The outside unbiased perspectives have helped us to come to grips with our strengths, our weaknesses and our dreams and this work has paid off.

I know it's been celebrated a few times before; but any evaluation of our past year has got to include a positive word about our experience with the Winter Relief Homeless Shelter. This was an idea that bubbled up among members, not elders, not staff not team leaders. The leaders blessed this grass roots movement because it fit our values. Permission was given. This grassroots movement called out team leaders, analyzed the opportunities for ministry, planned skillfully, coordinated carefully, and equipped their 150 member minister workers with prayer, training and moral support. People were equipped for ministry. Our member minister workers crossed over barriers, stepped over stereotypes and stepped out on faith, went out side of this building to pick up homeless guests, worked as partners and teams, not as masters and minions and

brought them to our brand spanking new facility so we could show them Christ's hospitality. That's called post modern. We could do this because we lived into our long time goals and dreams and we had the space in our building and in our hearts to host them. What we found was that by their presence they blessed us as we blessed them.

When we built the Marshall room at the other end of the hall; we did not know that three beloved members would die in 2009 and we would host receptions for their families and loved ones in the new room right after we worshipped and gave witness to the resurrection in this expanded sanctuary. The deacons were just awesome this year. Prayer in motion. I want to tell you that if Jerry Anthony hadn't worked for nine years to expand the building we would not have had room for the 220 people that came to his memorial service. Many avenues of ministry have been made possible and took place this year because our larger building.

2009 was a year of huge transition for staff. Mark Edwards moved from Interim Director of Contemporary music to permanent. Rebecca Bell was called as Director of Music. Corinne Baker retired after 6 years as our interim Associate Pastor and den mother. It

takes real spiritual energy to welcome new staff and to say goodbye and you as a congregation did very well at both ends. I do want to say how appreciative I am for the musical gifts of Mark and Rebecca; but I am especially thankful for the community they have created in our music ministry, particularly in their work with children and youth.

So I have this theory and I think I have shared pieces of it before. Basically it goes like this. We have said for years that as a church we would like to grow and we have grown in little bits and pieces over the last six years; but not dramatically. What we realized through our working together and working with consultants is that we weren't ready to grow. As a congregation we had just enough ministry gifts to stay healthy and to stay open to God's Spirit; but we had work to do. There was construction needed - first of all in our hearts and faiths, second of all in our infrastructure as a congregation – the way we do church and third and perhaps least important of all construction was also needed on our facility. God is not done with us yet. We individually and corporately all have much work to do on our souls but we just might have turned a corner this year.

In some ways we are like Jesus in Nazareth. We have been born – you know newer churches really have to put a lot of energy

into survival at first. Let's say that takes ten years. We have been baptized, we have been commissioned. We have developed a personality that is open hearted and open minded and not too fundamentalist about our passionate form of postmodern evangelical progressivism or you could using 20th century words call us a conservative or moderate liberal church. Let's say that commissioning has taken us eight years. Now maybe like Jesus we are in Nazareth we have read the scroll and we are ready to really start some ministry. Maybe just maybe we are poised to leap. I will tell you this, that across our denomination a majority of our congregations are in decline and we are not. In our Presbytery many of our churches are stuck or loosing ground. We are one of those churches that other churches talk about when they are looking for ideas and inspiration. That's a responsibility we have to take seriously. That's responsibility that is a weight to carry. There are many fears and ills in the post modern world and the 21st century needs churches that can negotiate this strange new world. Our job is to be translators. Like Jesus we need to speak the Gospel in a language that our culture can understand.

I almost hate to bring this up – but right after Jesus sat down after reading the scroll from Isaiah, he got into some hot water with the hometown crowd. Sometimes the Gospel of Christ Jesus is hard for people to hear. Our culture has a certain proclivity for ignoring the hard parts of Jesus' call. If we remain truly faithful to Jesus' mission statement and our own, not everything we do will be welcomed by visitors and potential members and that's OK because this is not a club; it is a church that has a plan for serving. I hope that you will be able to attend the congregational meeting next Sunday and the Potluck. We have much to share with each other and much to celebrate.

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