

“Pursuing Those Who Wander” – James 5:19-20
October 11, 2020 –Morning Services
Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA
6:00pm Evening Service
Pastor Nathaniel H. Gutiérrez

James 5:19-20

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

This is the word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Let's pray together.**God Saves the Lost and Wandering Through the Church**

This past Friday at our presbytery meeting, a young man, probably in his late 20s stood before us and shared of his desire to come under care of the presbytery. It was after lunch and we were all tired from a long day of business, but when he began to share his testimony I was deeply moved.

He shared of a tragic upbringing and how he had lived in a trailer with parents who were drug addicts. Three meth labs and drugs of all sorts surrounded his neighborhood.

He would regularly break into people's trailers, and one day he came across a nice-looking Bible and he decided to keep it. When he got home, he read it. Later we learned that eventually he realized he needed to be baptized. After telling his father and mother, his mother offered to take him to a Baptist church and there he was baptized.

It was fascinating to hear how God had entered into this young man's tragic life through the perfect placement of a nice-looking Bible, and how he worked through the reading of that Bible to bring that young man to himself. Today he is attending church and being discipled by a preacher named Christopher Bechtel who many in our congregation know. The young man now desires to become a pastor!

As we hear stories like this, we see God's handiwork. We realize God *could* work this way with every unbeliever. Those who are lost or wandering from the faith, could be brought back by a perfectly placed tract, or a leatherbound bible on their doorstep. God could speak into people's lives audibly, through dreams or even visions.

But instead it pleases the Lord to use the church for this purpose. To give us the privilege and responsibility to be the heralds of his good news throughout the world. For he says, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news...." (Is. 52:7)

We remember in Mt. 28 when Jesus brought together his disciples and said, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...."

Here Jesus, having **all authority to do the work of salvation himself**, instead sends his church out into the nations of the world to disciple and usher all peoples and nations into his kingdom.

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While this teaching is familiar to us, we may not appreciate the full weight of what is being said here, or its bearing on our passage this evening.

You see, Jesus Christ has, with all authority in heaven and on earth, **not only given us the opportunity** but the **responsibility** to usher people into the kingdom of God. Those who do not yet believe, and according to this passage in James, those who wander from the truth as well.

And we see this play out clearly in two scenarios in Acts which I want to briefly highlight:

The Ordinary Conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch

Many of you are familiar with the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. Remember the official of the queen of the Ethiopians who was sitting in his chariot reading the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in the desert?

(Pay attention to the play-by-play detail included here for us by the way.) In Acts 8:26 we see that an **angel of the Lord** tells Philip to go into the desert and meet this Ethiopian. Then, when he gets there, the Spirit speaks to him again, **“Go over and join his chariot.”**

“30 So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” 31 And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.”

Next thing we see is that Philip “opened his mouth and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.” The Ethiopian notices water nearby and asks to be baptized. Then as they came out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the Ethiopian went his way rejoicing.

If there has ever been a passage that demonstrates without a shadow of a doubt that God wants his people to be doing the work of evangelism, it is this passage. I mean, the Ethiopian eunuch is literally sitting there. **Already reading Isaiah.** God could have simply opened his eyes to the passage. **But instead**, the angel of the Lord speaks to Philip and tells him to go to this desert location.

One commentator I read noticed that the Greek verb’s usage for our word “arise” elsewhere in the NT seems to indicate that Philip was being told to “get ready”. In other words, the angel was instructing Philip to make **arrangements for a journey** (Kistemaker, 311).

So not only is Philip not nearby, but it appears he will need to take a journey of some sort to find this man. Then the Spirit speaks to him again, **“Go over and join the chariot.”** Then finally the Spirit takes Philip away.

I mean, the Spirit has to act **three times** here in order to make Philip be a part of the conversion story of this man! God could have just converted him in a millisecond. But it so pleases God to

use us that he goes through all of this “work” to bring the good news of the gospel through people like me and you to the lost and wayward!

Saul's Ordinary Conversion

And I won't go into as many details on this next example, but in the very next chapter of Acts, God shines a light from heaven around Saul while he was on the road to Damascus. Then, speaking to him and blinding him, he sends him on a **three-day journey** to Ananias. Then the Lord has to persuade Ananias to witness to Paul because Ananias doesn't want to. he doesn't want to- after all, Saul has gone off the deep end. He is so far from the truth he is jailing Christians!

All this could have been avoided if God just converted him when he spoke to Saul the first time. Instead of putting scales on his eyes so he couldn't see, he could have given Saul salvation and understanding. But God choses to use his servants – **even his reluctant** servants!

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Brothers and Sisters - God doesn't **need** us, in fact it appears to be A LOT more work to use us, but it so pleases him to bring the many wandering and lost souls to glory **through us**.

God has commanded us and given us – you and me – **all** of his children, the great and wonderful responsibility to (in the words of James) **“SAVE SOULS FROM DEATH.”**

With his spoken word, God created all things, he who has all authority in heaven and on earth, who breathed life into us, has given YOU and has given ME all the POWER of the GOSPEL.

“My brothers...whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death” (v. 20).

The POWER to **save souls from death has been given to you.**

Your words bring life to those who are dead in their trespasses. And it is a gift and a responsibility.

The Call to Serve

Throughout this pandemic, I've been keeping close tabs on the situation in South America. Sadly, I've seen something very discouraging. During this pandemic some doctors have refused to attend to people who have contracted COVID.¹ A woman related to our national partner who worked alongside us in Peru broke her femur and the doctors at the general hospital refused to attend to her because they feared she might have COVID. For 45 days she suffered in pain and agony until our deacons were able to step in and make it possible for her to get seen immediately at another medical center.

But this sort of thing is a common experience in third-world countries. And as I looked into the issue further, I realized that this sort of thing has been going on for some time now.

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-52413808>
www.faihtacoma.org

According to an article I read, doctors fleeing during the plagues had become so common in the 14th century, that in 1382, Venice passed a law forbidding doctors from taking flight in times of plague. The practice continued, however.

Apparently, it became such an issue that ethics codes have now been written to address this. “The ethics manual of the American College of Physicians states that ‘**the ethical imperative for physicians to provide care**’ overrides ‘the risk to the treating physician, even during epidemics.’ ... “even in the face of greater than usual risks to physicians’ own safety, health, or life.”²

It is understandable that medical professionals would be fearful of contracting the virus, and it is also understandable why these ethical manuals and laws needed to be written.

Medical professionals are desperately needed, and uniquely qualified to help especially during a pandemic! After all, they are the ones *tasked or called* to help the infirmed.

Of course, we as Christians also have a unique calling.

We too have been tasked and uniquely qualified to help those around us who are in desperate need. And in a year like 2020, where so much pain and suffering has occurred, not only medically, but politically, racially, financially, academically, and so much more, the people of God are needed more urgently.

We all have a sense of the instability of our country, the awareness of the fragility of our life and health. People who have **wandered from the faith** and **people who have never known the faith** are suffering and are keenly aware of their need for Jesus and the gospel news.

And it is **our** unique calling - not just pastors and elders here. It is anyone. We have ALL been given the calling to reach the lost and wandering. We have all been tasked with this responsibility in the Great Commission.

And I think almost all of us know this. But we are often overwhelmed by the things that are happening this year. Every time something seems to be calming down, and we start to make progress in reaching out to those around us, a new distraction pops up.

Issues that would normally be in the news cycles for weeks are buried because much larger issues are overwhelming and burying them. This keeps our mind occupied and full and it can keep us from the calling God has put upon us.

Distraction upon distraction.

If you have ever travelled to a major city, you have a sense of the overwhelming amount of distractions that surround you. And if you have street smarts, you know that you have to be careful with your belongings. You know you should carry your wallet in your front pocket, leave your watch and jewelry at home and avoid carrying things of value. You have to be extra vigilant.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-doctors-duty.html>
www.faithtacoma.org

I'll never forget the group of American visitors who visited us in Peru and when they were returning to the USA, they decided to put all their expensive camera equipment and passports together in one bag so that they could be extra vigilant about just that one bag. In principle it was a good idea. They guarded that bag while they waited for their plane and all 7 of them stood around it in a circle to ensure no one would slip their hands into the bags and steal anything out of it.

I had given them abundant warnings and then left them to check if the counter was open. When I came and asked them to get their passports ready, they realized their bag had been stolen – in a matter of minutes. With all their camera equipment and all their passports. Two little boys with shoe-shining kits had distracted them while someone else snatched the bag with everything in it.

My dad used to say these “thieves are so good at what they do that they can steal the underwear you're wearing without you even knowing it.”

Most people who live in these major cities know that this happens. Even so, I've had friends who have been robbed over and over again. One friend of mine had his hand in his pocket on his wallet and while he was looking the other way, a woman reached into his pocket under his hand and tried to grab his wallet out of his hand! How is that possible? Even when you are on alert?

Well, it is possible through the technique of distraction.

The thief does not work alone. He draws your attention away from what you are guarding with some loud sound or distraction or fight, and when you put your complete focus on that without realizing it, off they go with your bag.

And the devil is not unlike these thieves. He knows that God has given us the calling of saving souls from death and he uses sleight of hand or the technique of distraction to draw our attention away from what is most important in life by distracting us with things that are much less important.

The devil is skilled in this. He seeks to distract us, to redirect our efforts, time, energy, conversations, and focus.

There are many ways in which C.S. Lewis' Screwtape Letters could have a sequel for 2020. We can imagine all the ways in which Screwtape (the fictitious senior demon) would encourage his lesser experienced nephew Wormwood to distract and lead Christians astray.

In 2017, an unknown author wrote this about his present political scene in a Screwtape fashion:

My Dear Wormwood,

Be sure the patient remains completely fixated on politics. Arguments, political gossip, and obsessing on the faults of people they have never met serves as an excellent distraction from advancing in personal virtue, character, and the things the patient can control. Make sure to keep the patient in a constant state of angst, frustration, and general disdain towards the rest of the human race in order to avoid any kind of charity or inner peace from further

developing. Ensure the patient continues to believe that the problem is “out there” in the “broken system” rather than recognizing there is a problem with himself.

Keep up the good work,

Uncle Screwtape

(Not by C.S. Lewis)³

While this quote is not written by C.S. Lewis, nor was it written for the year 2020, it certainly applies well to our present circumstances. Many more additions and chapters could be written regarding the social distancing, masks, cold tent worship, interrupted online worship and crackly communion cups.

Many of us, myself included, have had our focus diverted in Screwtapian fashion onto matters that carry no eternal consequence.

And when we fall prey to the distractions that arise and are consumed by these, we fall into Satan’s trap. We lose focus on our true calling as believers and our greatest responsibilities. As believers our priority is not on the here and now, on the politics and currents of every day’s news cycle - right or left.

There are people all around us that are suffering. That are fighting anxiety, depression and contemplating taking their lives. People who have given up on their faith – because life is too hard.

There are people in our midst or not far off, who have wandered from the truth. People who have fallen into sin. Or people who because of their doubts, have left the church, or are in the process of leaving the church.

While we might think that helping these people is the job of the pastors, elders, and deacons, I want to encourage you to reconsider this way of thinking. Because while that is true in part, James is clearly speaking to all of us. As I mentioned before, God has called all of us to this important task.

This is the responsibility of Christian believers everywhere and this is what it means to follow and imitate Jesus.

Remember when Jesus talked about the lost coin and the lost sheep? He said,
“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? 7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” (Luke 15:4,7)

³ <https://medium.com/@joshdance/screwtapes-fixated-on-politics-quote-is-not-by-c-s-lewis-78b62c6e5e61>
www.faihtacoma.org

You see, it is much easier to stay with the 99 in the open country than it is to go after the one that is lost. But as with the doctors, there must be a code of ethics among us. We cannot abandon our responsibility when there are actual pandemics, or distractions of various sorts. We must pursue those who wander. At all times and in all circumstances.

Imagine that it would look like if we took the parable of the lost sheep and the 99 in open country and imagined what it would look like if all the 99 in open country went after that one lost sheep?

Imagine what it would feel like for someone who is wavering in their faith to receive even 99 text messages or phone calls or visits. It would certainly impact and likely transform their life. Can you imagine how overwhelmed they would be with the love and grace of God through his church if they were overloaded with love and grace?

This year has provided opportunities for us to reach out to people in our church and neighborhoods in ways we have never reached out before. In the same way we are all adapting to different means of accomplishing what we used to, from online services and educations, we can adapt and become creative in our witness. We can find ways to reach out to the wandering and the lost.

Let's not let the distractions we face keep us from reaching out to the lost.

Living it Out

Earlier this week, I came across an article by an author I had never read before. His name is Nick Batzig, and his article is called "*Hope When your Children Stray*" posted on The Gospel Coalition in July of 2017.

It is an article speaking of the struggles he faced as he wandered from the faith. He explained that he was a rebellious child raised in a Christian home. Though he was nurtured in a spiritually and theologically solid environment, he ran from his faith and into spiritual darkness as fast as he could.⁴

The main focus of his writing was to get people to **pray and pursue** the lost and wandering.

And clearly that is what James is calling us to do here.

Earlier in this chapter James reminds us that if any of us are sick, cheerful, or suffering, we are to pray. No matter what the circumstances, prayer is the answer. The prayer of faith stops rain and brings rain. The prayer of faith does miraculous work. What is impossible with man, is possible with God. So, we must act in prayer.

We must pray fervently for the salvation of our covenant children, the salvation of the lost and the salvation of the wayward.

We all would love to hear a story of someone turning from sin in a gentle and simple way. But sin has a way of developing a strong grip on people and turning their lives inside out.

⁴ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/hope-when-your-children-stray/>
www.faihtacoma.org

It often takes a very difficult experience or a sort of “Prodigal Son” type of moment to help people hit rock bottom, wake up and see their condition and repent.

We must be willing to pour our souls out for the lost. To ask God to do whatever it takes to bring people to himself. We must be willing to trust God and rest in his love for them more than be concerned about their temporary well-being.

And if you are a parent who has a wayward child, you know more than any of us how difficult and lonely a battle like this is. How many hours you have spent grieving over and praying over your child or children.

Brothers and Sisters, if we are the family of God, it is our calling to join them in this war over these souls. It is our responsibility and privilege to fulfill our covenant vows by helping them fight for these lives.

May the entire flock of sheep here at Faith Presbyterian push aside the many distractions of 2020 and pursue with renewed fervor the calling to bring our covenant children back.

As we’ve discussed this topic, who comes to mind right now? Who are those lost sheep in your sphere of relationships? Perhaps you do not know them personally, perhaps it is a little awkward.

I encourage you to push those distractions away. To find ways. Creative ways to reach out to those who are far. Pray for them. Pursue them. Don’t wait for someone to tell you how to reach out to them, or to their children. Work hard at bringing them back. Ask God to show you ways, speak to people who struggle with this, ask your pastors, elders, and friends. Find ways to live out this command.

In Jeremiah 1, God calls Jeremiah to speak to the nations on his behalf. Jeremiah responds that he is unable because he doesn’t know how to speak because he is only a youth.

“But the LORD said....

“Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’;
for to all to whom I send you, you shall go,
and whatever I command you, you shall speak.

This evening God is calling you and sending you to act. To speak. May we be obedient to his call.

In Conclusion

This morning, in God’s providence I came across a message that the author of that article, Nick Batzig, wrote this morning. “19 years ago, today, Jesus sought me when a stranger wandering from the fold of God; He to rescue me from danger interposed His precious blood. The Son of Man came seeking and saving the lost.”

It is my prayer that because we hear and act on this passage tonight, we will see many more stories like his in our own church body.

Nick's journey reminds us why James' call to seek out the lost and the wandering is so important. It works. God is using his children, today, to seek after the lost and those who stray. He wants us, as his church to pursue the one sheep that is lost, that is wandering, and to bring him back. To save his soul.

This of course, should be a happy commandment for us to follow. For it is not hard for us to think back on our own helplessness if it were not for God pursuing us – **“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”** (Rom. 5:8).

We have all strayed and gone through different challenges through life. We have all been rescued from our many sins and transgressions. We are prone to wander and to flee from all the good that God has given to us.

And God, seeing our condition, and having a pasture full of 99 other sheep in good condition in his pasture, still chose to come seeking after you and me. And though he uses his church, the body of believers, we must remember that it is still God's work, not man's. God is still he who is doing the seeking and it is he who is saving the lost!

Hear God's very own words. A testimony from his lips of this very work:

Ezek. 34:11 “For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. 12 As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

13 And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. 14 I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel.

15 I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. 16 I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak....”

God himself. He uses us, but it is He who acts ultimately. It is He who does what is impossible. It is God who seeks us out and seeks out the lost and brings back the strayed and binds up the injured and strengthens the weak.

Brothers and sister, the love of our Lord just drips off these pages.

May we feel his love afresh tonight and may we in that love pursue the lost, the strayed, the injured, and save their souls with the eternal life offered in the gospel.

Amen.