



BelPres Church

Purpose Bigger Than My Plans

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Great to see all of you here, those of you online, and those of you who are here in the room, thanks for joining us for worship. Just before I preach, I want to give you an update on where we are with our Unleashed projects.

In December, to coincide with our 70th anniversary as a church, we all began a journey to be Unleashed as individuals and collectively together as a church to bring more of Jesus' healing than we're already doing. Forty percent of you have made commitments to give your time, money, and influence to the eight Unleashed projects that we talked about. That is a very strong response after only just a few weeks of preaching about it, so well done, and thank you.

And we're not done. As we said all along, this is not a capital campaign. It's an ongoing vision for our church, so we will continue to invite people into it periodically, so that we can, because it's going to take all of us to do this. Financially, it's a little too early to figure out what our new giving patterns are going to be in light of the commitments. But so far, really strong, it looks really, really solid. We'll give you some more information later in March.

We've been contacting folks who have made commitments of time to help them discern where God may be calling them to serve. The one-roof gatherings of all of our different communities that we talked about will be here in the spring. We've already done a trial run on one of those, just to kind of start to work it out, what it's going to be. And we have three trips planned this year for our ministry to Muslim refugees who are becoming Christians. A few of us, including Rich and myself, will be going to Germany in the spring to train pastors who are from Afghanistan. So lots, lots, lots going on.

And then just as a PS, just to put this in there, we had 68 people in our new members class last week, which is just awesome. So God is just doing a ton of stuff right now, and we're just super grateful. If you have more questions, just feel free to ask us. We will be happy to answer them.

All right, end the update. Start the sermon. There is a life that wants to be led through you. What is it? There's a life that is trying to be led through you. What is it? Or another way to phrase that would be, what does your life want to do with you? God made you on purpose for a purpose. And when we live into our purpose, we experience Jesus a lot more, and more of his hope, his courage, his joy.

The poet TS. Eliot wrote a very depressing poem called The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, which is about a life without meaning and without purpose. And he wrote, for I have known them all already, known them all, the evenings, the mornings, the afternoons. I have measured out my life in coffee spoons. I grow old. I grow old. I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled. Super depressing.

I have a friend who writes parodies of famous poems. He wrote those last lines. He wrote, I grow fat. I grow fat. I shall wear my mother's garden hat. We were made for way more than TS. Eliot poem says, way more than a life measured out in coffee spoons. We were made on purpose, for purpose. And when we live our purpose, we experience more of Jesus and his hope and his courage and his joy.

So if you have a Bible, turn to Mark chapter 1. Mark is the second book in the New Testament. Or you can just follow along on the screens if you would like. Mark chapter 1, beginning in verse 1, the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the son of God. And in the original Greek, the word there that's used for good news is euangelion. And that's the word we get our word evangelism from, which doesn't mean arguing with people until they accept our truth claims. It means good newsing people. Evangelism just means good newsing people. That's literally what it means. And I'll talk a little bit more about that later in the sermon.

Then the verses that follow talk about how John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus. And then starting in verse 14. After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. The time has come, he said. The kingdom of God has come near. So what is the good news that Jesus is proclaiming? Is he running around going, hey guys, great news. I'm starting a new religion. Sign up today. The good news is that the kingdom of God is arriving. It's coming near. And the kingdom of God is when things begin to

happen on earth more like they are happening in heaven. Sins forgiven, shame erased, injustice eliminated, relationships healed.

Jesus' mission is not to start a new religion. Jesus' mission is to heal you, me, and this entire world. And man, does our world need healing, right? That's Jesus' mission. Repent and believe the good news. This phrase good news shows up three times in just 14 verses. And we're doing a sermon series right now on all the different ways that Jesus is good news in our life. And one of those ways that we're about to see is that he gives us purpose bigger than all our plans. He gives us purpose bigger than all our plans.

Verse 16. As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. Come, follow me, Jesus said, and I will send you out to fish for people. At once, so there's an urgency to our purpose. At once, they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay, there's the urgency again, he called them. And they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

So in these verses, one of the things we see is there are two, there's kind of two general purposes Jesus calls all of us to. The same that he's calling his disciples to. Follow him and join his mission to heal the world. That's the general purpose of all of us. But then along the way, Jesus also gives us particular and individual ways to live out that general purpose. And some of you have been living out your purpose for years. Well done. And I hope this sermon encourages you to keep going. And others of you may be like, I don't know what is my purpose. I have no idea.

So let me talk a little bit about what are the characteristics of a God-given purpose, and then how do we discern what it is. So first, God-given purpose is individualized. Jesus says to fishermen, I'm gonna send you out to fish for people. He doesn't say I'm gonna make you accountants of souls. He doesn't say even I'm gonna make you ecologists, which are people who study fish, right? He says, fishers are people, because that's who they were. It's tailored to them. Jesus takes our skills, our passions, our stories, our wounds, our mistakes, our failures, our weaknesses, and he uses all of them in his rescue mission. It's tailored to us in some way. Got our name on it in some way.

Next, a God-given purpose is all-encompassing, right? In this text, Jesus says to the disciples, follow me on Sunday mornings. No. You guys are looking at me like, that's what he said. No, wake up. No. He says, follow me, period. Everywhere

you go, everything you do, every word you say, follow me in all of it. It's not just we follow him here and there. It's all-encompassing.

I think when we think of purpose, sometimes we think, oh, that means I got to quit my job and go be a missionary or start a nonprofit or something like that. Sometimes Jesus' purpose involves a career change. You know, it did for me. But more often, our purpose can be exercised anywhere we go, to the store, to school, to work, as a tech worker, retired person, stay-at-home parent, caregiver. Follow him in all of that. Jesus says, let me influence how you do these things. Keep fishing, but you're going to fish with a different purpose.

This week, I heard about an 86-year-old woman who, along with one of our staff, every day prays for all the people in their apartment building. At 86, she's living out of her purpose from her apartment. While back, I heard a man talk about how every morning he prays, Lord Jesus, show me how I can be part of what you're doing in the world in my job today. Praise that every morning. And one day, he was at the dentist getting a filling, and the dentist said, you're Mr. Beckett, aren't you? And he said, uh-huh. She said, yeah, you fired my husband.

He said, there's nothing like having the person holding a drill in your mouth say, you fired my husband to inject terror into your soul. Right? And she said, I want to thank you for that. He failed a drug test. And you told him that according to company policy, that you had to fire him. But you also said to him, look, you're at a crossroads and you can use this as a wake up call or you can keep doing what you're doing. And the results are going to be predictable. And you also said to him, I really like you. And you've got a ton of talent. Please don't throw it away. And you gave him a list of recovery programs that he could be part of. You gave him a generous severance package. You prayed for him and you followed up with him week after week after week for several months to encourage him to do it. And now he's been sober for ten years and he's a great husband and a great father. So thank you for firing my husband.

Jesus' purpose for that manager was individualized. It used his skills as a manager. He didn't change jobs. He just did his job differently. And he saved a family from the pain of addiction. And it is a good day at the dentist when someone says to you, you saved my family. Now open your mouth.

If you're a caregiver, if you're a stay-at-home parent who is exhausted, how can you invite Jesus into that? Someone in my sermon review group this week said, you know, changing diapers can be just as holy as preaching a sermon. I'd say it's even holier because like at least when you change a diaper, something

changes, right? That doesn't always happen with sermons. Third, you laughed too hard at that.

Third, God-given purpose is often an interruption. Not always, but it's often an interruption. The disciples have plans, right? They've got plans to fish, catch as many fish as they can, sell as many fish as they can, do that the next day and the next day and the next day and the next day. But Jesus interrupts their plans and says, I've got a purpose for you that is bigger than all your plans.

The way that manager that I just told you about fired his employee, it was an interruption. It took more time to do it that way. He had to find the recovery programs for him, followed up with him for weeks trying to encourage him. Took more time. There was a cost. But Jesus used him in his mission to make all things new.

So here is a dangerous prayer that I dare you to pray. Jesus, wreck my plans and give me your purpose.

Jesus, wreck my plans and give me your purpose. I've prayed that, and that's why I'm here, not teaching Shakespeare at some university, and I'm glad.

Next, a God-given purpose requires the Holy Spirit's power. We can do a lot of things in our own skills and in our own strength, but we'll only get what we can do in our own skills and our own strength. We need the Holy Spirit to help us spot the opportunities we have at school, or work, or in the store, to be part of what Jesus is doing in the world. We need the Holy Spirit to give us eyes to see it. We need the Holy Spirit for us to do it in a way that somehow people experience Jesus through it, so it's not just a good deed, but it's pointing to Jesus.

Individualized, all-encompassing, an interruption requires the Holy Spirit, and finally, a God-given purpose is hard and deeply rewarding. Look at verse 14. After John was put into prison, whoa, that's a way to start going calling more people to follow you, right? There's a cost. There's a cost to living out our purpose, a cost in time. It may cost us money. People may criticize you, but it is deeply rewarding.

If you look at the rest of the chapter, after the verses I read, like Jesus drives out a demon from a man, Jesus heals a bunch of people, like this is meaningful and rewarding stuff. It's hard, but there's a cost, but it's also deeply rewarding. And sometimes we don't even see the results of our faithfulness. Had that manager not gone to that particular dentist, he may never have known how he

changed that family's life. But just even if we don't see the results, just being faithful, we often experience God saying to us, as I believe he's saying to many of you right now through this sermon, well done, well done.

So those are a few of the characteristics of a God-given purpose. So then how do we figure out what that is for us? How do we figure out where God is calling us? How do we discern that? Well, just a couple of things.

First, as some of you heard me say before, our purpose often lies at the intersection of what makes you mad, sad, and glad. So maybe when you see kids not getting what they need to thrive, it makes you sad. And what makes you mad are the conditions that keep them from thriving. And what makes you glad is when they get what they need to thrive. So your purpose may have something to do with helping kids thrive. Maybe being a tutor or teaching Sunday school here or working to eliminate roadblocks that keep kids from thriving.

One of the things that makes me sad is when people reject Jesus. And what makes me mad is when they reject him because they've got a false view, they've been given a false view of who he really is, often by other Christians. And what makes me glad is when they see the real Jesus and turn to him. And yeah, I live that purpose out as a pastor, but long before I was a pastor, long before I was a pastor, I was also living it out teaching in the Stanford English Department, which was very hostile toward Christianity. But I let everyone know that I was a Christian and I tried to show them who Jesus really is. For instance, with my students, by not just talking to my students about their school stuff, but actually also saying, How you doing? How's it going? You doing all right? To show that I cared about them. It showed up on my student evaluations over and over and over. Dr. Dudley cared about me. That should not have been noteworthy, but at Stanford it was, because most professors were focused more on their research than the students.

I tried to show Jesus by making sure my scholarship was excellent to dispel the myth that people who follow Jesus are uneducated or stupid or that sort of thing. I used to say back then that my goal was to confuse people, and what I meant by that was I wanted people to go, wait, wait, I thought Jesus and being a Christian was all this stuff, and you're stupid and you're mean and blah, blah, blah, but you're not like this. Ah, ah, my worldview is collapsing. I lived that purpose before I was a pastor. Sad, mad, glad.

Second way to discern, your misery is often your mission. God grieves over the painful things that happen to us, but one of the ways he brings good out of it is

to use our pain to help other people in similar pain. If you're a refugee, you can understand the needs of refugees and the trauma of being a refugee better than folks who aren't. If you're a recovering addict, you can help other addicts because you know what the challenge is.

Third, we discern through listening prayer and community. None of us can do this on our own. We need people who know us well to say, I see Jesus move through you when you blank, to help us figure out our purpose. And we need to do listening prayer where we ask Jesus, show me where you're leading me, but then leave space to listen for the ways he speaks, maybe by thoughts that he puts into our minds, or maybe something someone else says to you somewhere along the way. Someone told me this week that she knows when God has spoken to her, because she gets a thought and then realizes, wait, I'm not as smart as that thought, this must have come from God.

And then last, remember that way leads on to way. Jesus may guide you to a volunteer opportunity, or a job, or a relationship that leads to something else, that leads to something else, that leads to something else. I've told you before that when I was teaching at Stanford, I went to a party where a person I didn't know told me about a volunteer opportunity to lead a Bible study of college guys, which led, and I started doing that, which led to the college pastor asking me to teach the whole group sometimes, which led to the church asking me to then lead that college ministry when that college pastor had left, which led me to coming here. I went to a party. I didn't think I was making a career move. But way leads on to way, leads on to way. And there's some trial and error. We try stuff on, see if it fits. There's a table in our lobby. Lots of places, lots of ways you can volunteer with us. As a church, one of those things might be a fit for you. And as long as we keep asking Jesus to guide us, I believe he gets us where we need to be. As long as we keep following him.

So two action steps for this week. First, do this week's exercise in the journal. That journal is on our app. It's on our website. And this week, the question is in a couple of sentences, complete this phrase, Jesus used me when blank. And think of a time or a couple of times where Jesus used you to bring his kingdom. Not just that you did a good thing, but that you felt Jesus moved through you to bring his kingdom, working through you. And if you don't have a time like that in your life, ask him to give you one this week.

And then second, invite someone to church or a church event. Because this sermon series isn't just meant to encourage us with all the ways that Jesus is good news in our lives. It is meant to do that. But the other thing it's also about is that word that shows up three times in this chapter. Evangelism. Which is not

arguing with people to get them to accept certain theological truth claims. It's good newsing people. And we are equipping you to do that with this journal. If you do the exercises, by the end of this series, you're going to have a whole journal full of ways that Jesus has been good news to you, which will encourage you, but will also equip you to share those stories with other people, which is the best way to tell people about Jesus. Your story will show Jesus way more than a thousand arguments.

And just kind of easy, low-hanging fruit is invite someone to church or a church event, like our Easter party in April, or Alpha, which is a course that talks about who Jesus really is, that's designed for people who don't know Jesus. Invite someone to that, go to Alpha with them for that, or just invite someone to church. Because all our individualized, God-given purposes have one thing in common. They are all meant to lead people into a life-saving, eternal relationship with the God who would rather die than lose them, so he did. It all leads to that.

I've shared with you before that my dad tutored prisoners a couple of times a week in prison to help them get a high school diploma. He'd also lead a Bible study in the prison a couple of times a week, and he did this even into his 80s. He did this. I've told you that before. What I haven't told you is that was not his plan when he retired. His plan when he retired was to just do a lot of golfing. Lord knows why, but he liked it. A lot of golfing and travel. But one day in church, he heard an announcement inviting people to go to the prison to lead a Bible study. Just this one time, just once. It was just meant to be a one-time serve. So my dad responded to that announcement, and he did it, and he never looked back. He was hooked. It used all of his gifts as a former teacher and as a coach. It used his rough childhood, growing up in poverty so dire that sometimes they didn't have food to eat, and he could connect to prisoners because of his own background in that kind of poverty. It was individualized to him.

So in his retirement years, he spent more time in prison than on the golf course. And after he died, we got a letter from the sheriff that oversaw the prison that my dad served in, and the sheriff's letter said this, Gene, that was my dad's name, Gene always had such a twinkle in his eye every time he came into our jail. He truly loved the inmates. One day, Gene asked me if he could incorporate Bible stories into his writing assignments. He wanted to take tutoring a step further by having the inmates reference their problems to Bible verses. He said he wouldn't force his faith on anyone. He just wanted to know how much God loved them. I told him to go for it. He beamed like a little kid at Christmas.

I frequently would ask the inmates for feedback on all the volunteers we had. Hands down, Gene always won the vote with the inmates. I can't tell you the number of inmates that Gene touched. One was a man who couldn't read. Gene brought in some beginner children's books and patiently taught him how. One day, Gene stopped by my office to tell me that this inmate had passed his reading test, and he gave me some books to give to this man when he got out of jail to use to teach his kids how to read. I told that inmate what Gene had done for him, and tears came into his eyes. You would have thought he had been given a million dollars. And he promised me that he would teach his kids to read and that I would never see him in jail again, and we never have.

Gene frequently helped them change their lives. I would hear all the time that inmates really appreciated having someone just talk to them without judgment because they knew that they had done wrong and weren't widely accepted in society. It's not hard to get volunteers to help the, quote, good people, but the people who need it the most are often seen as undesirable and it's not easy to find people willing to help them. Gene will be greatly missed by the jail staff and inmates, and I know God has a special classroom for him in heaven.

And after my dad died, we got all kinds of letters and emails from prisoners saying, your dad changed my life. Without him, I don't know where I would be. People found Jesus, started new lives because of how Jesus worked through my dad in that prison. And my dad would tell you it wasn't him, it was Jesus. Jesus who led him to it, Jesus working through him. And whenever my dad talked about those inmates, my guys, is what he would call, he'd get tears in his eyes, because he loved them so much.

My dad's plan was to golf, but Jesus sent him to jail, to change the world, to change the world. Jesus is the only hope, the only hope for our messed up, broken and hurting world. And he calls us to join his mission, to heal families, restore justice, give people in need a hand up, and usher people into a life changing relationship with the God who loved them enough to die for them.

You are not just a student or a tech worker or a retired person or a stay at home parent. Those are things you may do. Those may be your job. But in that and through that, God has so much more for us than what we have planned for ourselves. The almighty God of the universe decided that there needed to be a you. You were made on purpose, for a purpose, to heal the world in Jesus' name. It is the greatest adventure in the grandest mission with the noblest leader there is. And we get to be part of it, as Jesus makes all things new through you and through me.

Jesus, you could do it without us. You could do it better without us. But in your grace and in your love, you invite us to be part of it with you. So Lord, help us to hear your call. Help us to be guided by you into the ways we can live out our purpose wherever we go this week. Wherever we live, work, play, or learn, Lord Jesus, help us to live that purpose out and point to you so the world will know how good you are and how you are the hope of the world. We ask this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following (note: we use the same scripture reflection questions each week so that we can practice using the same tools over time as we examine different scriptures)

- What do we learn about God's story in this passage?
- What do we learn about our story in this passage?

Talk:

- Where do you spend most of your everyday life and how could Jesus use you right there, as you are?
- Has Jesus ever redirected your plans in a way you didn't expect? What happened?
- Who is already in your daily path that Jesus might be inviting you to notice with love and intention this week?

Action Plan:

Review the action prompt below, share any initial ideas of how you might pursue this practice this week.

- Think of someone in your current rhythm: co-worker, neighbor, classmate, barista, coach, teammate. Serve them in a natural, non-weird way; carry something, show up early, bring coffee, offer help, invite them to sit with you, or send encouragement.
- If they ask why, answer simply: "Because I follow Jesus, and He sees you."
- If they show curiosity, say: "If you ever want to explore Jesus more, I'd love to bring you with me to ____ and offer one clear invitation: for a walk this week, for dinner at my house, Sunday worship, etc."

No pitch. Just presence.

Closing Group Prayer:

Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Take the challenging parts of your conversation to Jesus. Thank God for the time together, the conversation

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shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement for the week ahead.