



INTO THE WORLD

Psalm 1; John 17:11-19

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This is the season of graduations. On Friday, I attended the graduation ceremony – complete with cap and gowns – for our four-year-olds in the Weekday School. Each one had been asked the question, “What are you planning to do after graduation?” The answers: “go to the beach, visit grandmama, swim a lot, eat peanut butter sandwiches, be a princess, a policeman, and my favorite... marry Grayson.” For older youth and young adults, this is a time marked by packing boxes, leaving home, moving out of dorms, saying goodbye to friends, and opening the door to new endeavors. High School graduates know that bittersweet feeling of letting go of the familiar rhythms that marked the past four years and taking hold of new adventures in work or college. In this time of social isolation and online learning, graduations can feel quite different. A sense of loss, exhaustion, and uncertainty can hang over the festivities. I hesitate to ask the dreaded question, “What are your plans after graduation?”

It is not only recent graduates who live with a sense of uncertainty about the future. It can happen to all of us. In this pandemic, the work that many people were prepared to do has dried up; the careers that

brought a sense of purpose and fulfillment to many have been cut short. While some folks may be flourishing, many teachers, restaurateurs, business owners, sales representatives, and importers have found themselves facing the loss of business, jobs, or income. We know the struggles and uncertainties marriages face and the anxious worries about our children, be they young or grown. When the things that give us satisfaction and define our sense of well-being drop out from under us, we may find ourselves in uncharted economic, emotional, and spiritual territory. Times of transition, disappointment, graduation, change, and even failure, call us to reconsider the foundation of our lives, the bedrock of our existence. When circumstances bring us face-to-face with the most basic questions of life, the scriptures can guide us in rediscovering our purpose.

The scriptures tell us that what matters is not so much what we do as who we are. It is not by accident that the Book of Psalms opens with a blessing on those whose lives are marked by faith in God. Psalms is the prayer book or hymn book of the Hebrew people. The Psalms touch upon every dimension of human existence:

war and peace, life and death, prosperity and poverty, injustice and goodness, doubt and faith, betrayal and fidelity. Yet, the book opens with the promise that a fruitful life of blessing comes from the quality of our relationship with God. A righteous person is a person who is in a right relationship with God, that is, a person who loves God and seeks to do God’s will. The psalmist writes:

They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

It does not say that the blessed are the wealthy, the influential, or the well-known. It does not say blessed are those who think they have it all figured out. Blessedness, or happiness as a few translations express it, is not a matter of having a certain kind of degree, a particular type of job, or a certain level of income. A life of happiness flows from the quality of our relationship with God. When our sense of well-being comes from God, then the outward circumstances of life have less power over us. We know people who have little of the world’s goods, yet who are rich in the things of God. We know people who face crises in their personal lives and difficulties in

their families, yet who face these situations with a deep peace and confident faith.

There was a family in a former congregation who were very involved in the leadership of the church. Both the husband and the wife had served as elders. Their two children were Presbyterian pastors. The wife was an outgoing person who served the church as an educator, church greeter, and hostess. The husband was a quieter person who served behind the scenes in less noticeable ways. In the early 1990's, the wife became ill with AIDs, having become infected with the virus from an earlier blood transfusion. She died after a period of difficult illness. About a year after her death, their son, who had contracted AIDs from a different source, became ill and died. In those early days of fear and misunderstanding about the disease, the family was open about their illnesses. Their openness and acceptance taught the church something new about the depth of faith and the power of love. This husband and father, with a secure faith in God, overcame his reluctance to stand up and his hesitancy to speak out. He began to meet with groups of all ages in a variety of churches to help people overcome their ignorance and fear about AIDs. He became like a "tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaves do not wither. In all that he did, he prospered." Through his

relationship with God, he entered a new season in life.

When our sense of well-being comes from our relationship with God, then we can live in the world in a new way. The gospel of John tells how Jesus gathers his disciples together on the night of his arrest. He prepares them for the time when he will no longer be with them. He promises that he will not leave them alone, but he will send the Holy Spirit to be with them. He prays that God will keep them safe, even as Jesus himself has kept them safe. The world can be a dangerous, unpredictable, and frightening place. Yet, it is also the place we are called to go. Just as God sent Jesus into the world, so Jesus sends us into the world.

We are to be in the world, but not of the world. That is, we take our cues from who we are in the eyes of God. We get our sense of identity not from the world, but from our relationship with God. To be a Christian is not to retreat from trouble, but to enter into situations of need with the confident faith that God will keep us safe and see us through. As followers of Jesus, we know that we are not here by accident, but we are sent by God to this time and this place. To be a Christian is to know that we have a purpose. We are to bear witness to the light of Christ amid the darkness of ignorance, betrayal, greed, and apathy. We are to embody the love of God in the midst of the hatred, bitterness, and violence of

the world. We are to demonstrate that abundant life consists not in the accumulation of things, but in the quality of our relationships.

These uncertain times give us an opportunity to see the holiness of life that can be a part of everything we do. What matters is not so much the particular things we do, but how we do them. Martin Luther understood this when he talked about the sanctity of the common life. He said that God is glorified as much by the simple peasant who sweeps out her cottage as by the monk who goes on pilgrimage to Rome. Today, many people find themselves taking on new kinds of work, facing difficulties in their professions, or learning to live with less. Diminished resources in retirement do not have to mean that life will be less abundant. No matter what we do or what we have, we are sent into the world to bear witness to Christ.

In our 11 am service, we will be recognizing our High School Graduates. The question we should be asking is not, "What are you planning to do after graduation?" but "Where is God sending you into the world?" God is sending them into the world to be witnesses to Jesus Christ, to use their gifts to serve Christ. They may be leaving home to go to work, attend college, or serve in the military. No matter where they go, they will go in the grace of God and God will keep them. They will be "like trees planted by

streams of water, which yield their fruit in season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.” Our task is to pray for them, to guide them, to pick them up when they fall, and to encourage them so that they know that wherever they may go, God is with them.

So I ask you, “Where is God sending you this day?” A day at home alone, a walk through the neighborhood, an afternoon at the lake with the family, back to the computer to tackle unfinished work, a telephone conversation with a friend, or to join another zoom meeting?

An orthopedic surgeon in another church I served found great joy in volunteering on Saturdays in the food pantry at the church. The pantry was open multiple days a week and served a large number of folks. He told me that what meant the most to him was helping the guests carry the bags of food out to their cars. As they walked together, he would listen to their stories. He told me that if you just listen long enough, people will share their struggles and tell you the most amazing things. For my friend, the world where Jesus sent him was not only the operating room but also on those Saturdays, the parking lot.

No matter where we go, whatever challenges we face, or at whatever stage of life we find ourselves, Jesus promises to be with us as we witness to the truth. When the props get kicked out

from under us, when the dark night of the soul comes, when we wonder what it all means, remember that it is God who keeps us safe. We become “like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in their season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that we do, we prosper.”

We are sent into the world to be witnesses. The world begins at the door of the church. God will keep our going out and our coming in, from this time forth and forever more.