



**Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church**  
*Connecting faith with everyday life*

Sermon Archives

Date: March 19, 2017

Title: "2020 Vision, Part Two: Gifted Past, Bold Future

Scripture: John 4: 5-15

Description: The Christian faith is a life of being on the move. Pleasant Hill Church is entering a transition, a change to our next era. This is one of God's great gifts to us. I challenge you to be grateful for our past so that you can enter into the future with boldness.

We didn't start out being Christians, you know. In the very beginning, before the New Testament got written down, we were called "People of The Way." We were eleven chapters into the book of Acts before the term "Christian" was used. Sometimes I wish we'd kept our original name. "The Way" conveys movement, something in motion. Before long "Christian" turned into "Christendom", or as someone says, "Christian-dumb." Official, important, bureaucratic.

The story of Jesus, on the other hand, is the story of someone on the move. He followed the pattern of the Old Testament, whose main stories are the Exodus and exile, two stories of people headed for someplace new. The Bible is all about the tension between being secure and moving on. Ever feel that tension in your own life? Jesus invited disciples to "follow me," not "believe in me." Jesus himself was perpetually in motion, leading his disciples from town to town. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests," he said, but he had no permanent home. He was always on the road. His first challenge was to "follow me," and his final instruction was "Go into all the world."

Following their lead, traveling has always been a spiritual event for people on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, or Rome, or even North Georgia on a mission trip. Any of us who have passed through Hartsfield-Jackson or regularly commute during rush hour probably don't recall it as a spiritual experience, but still, faith is a journey.

This church is poised to go on a journey. I believe that impending journey is God's great gift to Pleasant Hill Church. I believe God has marvelous surprises in store for you. Okay, it's hard for me not to use the words, "marvelous surprises in store for us. I will begin, for the first time, to speak of PHPC as "you." That's hard. It's

upsetting. The first part of a journey is always the scary part. But it is going to be a grand journey, because it will be a journey of faith. Faith kicks in when we stop putting everything into pigeon holes and start following the wild dove. (Aside: you know by using the term “dove”, I’m alluding to the scripture’s symbol for God’s Spirit. Whenever the Spirit is embodied as a dove, the dove is always in motion, always in flight. You never see the Holy Spirit perched motionless on a telephone wire.)

Faith is like the sun, not like Neptune. Faith isn’t a dead planet, it’s made up of a series of explosions. The explosions are what gives the entire universe light and warmth.

Sometimes faith is the glue that holds us together, that prevents us from falling to pieces. Sometimes faith is the solvent that dissolves structure and that takes us apart, *so we can be rebuilt*. When we fall apart and then are remade in a new, creative way, that’s when we realize we’re shaped by a power beyond ourselves. Like an acorn breaking through its shell or a chicken hatching from its egg, God punches holes in our comfortable wholeness so things can escape and come alive. Faith enables those in-between times to be rich and ripe.

This is one of those times, isn’t it? Neither the church nor I are certain what lies ahead. But I have confidence in you, and I have strong trust in the God who holds both you and I in her arms like a comforting mother and in his hand like a dad taking his child on a first camping trip. I look forward to being known as the second best pastor this church has ever had. And I anticipate these first three decades soon being described as the preparation stage for what Pleasant Hill will become. We are not certain what that future will be. But do you trust enough to make a commitment to that bright future?

That’s what faith is—a commitment. It isn’t a collection of beliefs that you can pack up in a trunk. It’s putting your trust into action. I know that President Trump and Congress make all the headlines these days, but the real news this year is the announcement that Ringling Brothers circus is closing. For generations, people have bought tickets, not to mention cotton candy, to watch the grand finale act—the flying trapeze artists. We pay the big bucks to watch the performer release the bar, that breathless split second of mid-air flight, the all-in trust that the partner is present and that those arms are strong.

All I want to do in this sermon today is one thing: I want to convince you to take a flying leap. I want you to not only trust that God’s strong hands are ready to catch you, I want you to be ready to put your trust into action. At the close of this sermon,

I'm going to introduce a team of people who are already to make that commitment, expressing their gratitude for what God has done in our years together and their trust in God's faithfulness for our future. We've expressed that commitment in a four-word phrase: Gifted Past, Bold Future.

"Gifted Past, Bold Future" will get us poised for that bar God is swinging this way. I challenge you to not hold onto the past, but embrace what's next with boldness that arises from confidence in God.

I spoke last Sunday about the potential that can be unleashed if we raise enough funds to eliminate our mortgage. We've been in debt for thirty years, debt that has enabled us to build these facilities and establish a strong presence in our community. Now that debt is holding us back. So let's pay it off, releasing \$130,000 per year from payments to the bank and turning that money into creative, imaginative ministries that change lives. Let's not go timidly into the future, cringing in fear; let's step out boldly, exclaiming, "Alright! Whatcha got?"

That boldness will arise from opening our eyes to how we have been gifted in our past. And from affirming some of the decisions we made, even when those decisions cost us. Rainbow Village is a ministry that seeks to break the cycle of homelessness and violence in families. A few years ago, Rainbow Village became homeless itself. Following God's call to move from scattered places in Norcross to one location in Duluth, they had no place for their programs. "Use our place," said the leaders of Pleasant Hill Church. Every day, after school, those homeless kids would come to Pleasant Hill, where they were greeted by caring adults, receive help with homework, and best of all, build friendships with each other. Twice a week their parents would join the kids for dinner in our Fellowship Hall before attending life-skill classes.

Sixty people, including kids, holding a "church-night supper" twice a week for—it was beautiful. Homelessness is so lonely, so isolating. When you're living in your car, with kids sleeping in the back seat, how do you make friends? Zero chance of that happening. Suddenly, twice a week in our Fellowship Hall, those families became church to each other. Parents sharing stories about their day, their kids in a safe place—it was beautiful! It was also devastating. After four or five years, the carpet was totally trashed. I'm not saying they abused it; they simply used it. Have you seen that carpet lately? Don't look! It's gross. Coffee stains and spilled juice and worn patches.

Our leaders knew that was coming. But when those homeless needed a place, they didn't say, "Okay. But wait until we raise the money to replace the carpet after you

leave. Wait until we have reserve funds to cover the wear and tear.” Nope. They said, “Come on in. We’ll deal with the carpet later.”

Gifted Past, Bold Future affirms that and other sacrificial decision this church has made, decisions that have gifted our past. It also replaces our embarrassing carpet, so we’ll go into our future, not worn out and stained but bright and new, ready to welcome whoever’s next to enter Pleasant Hill Church.

We want to affirm our Laundry Love program that has made us neighbors with people in our community living on a shoestring budget. Supplementing the quarters you give, we want to provide funding so that those kids go to school the next morning confident that their clothes don’t smell bad because they haven’t been washed.

Speaking of a Gifted Past, some years ago, one of our members purchased a bus for the church, an act of generosity that has touched hundreds of lives. Actually that was fifteen years ago. Let’s turn that gifted past into a bold future. Let’s replace our old church bus, so youth can go on mission trips with their parents feeling safe about the transportation; so that older adults can take outings that keep their horizons interesting and their lives eventful; so that people recovering a hurricane in New Orleans or a tornado in Alabama can see a Pleasant Hill Church vehicle pull up and know that caring help has arrived.

Gifted Past, Bold Future. This is not an idea that you can say, “I believe in that.” Like faith, it’s a plan of action. It swings a trapeze bar towards you, challenging you to reach out, proclaiming, “I’m in!”