



Theme: Church Status – It's Complicated
"Being Jesus Christ in a Strange Land"

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber

June 13-14, 2020

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-3; Luke 4: 28-30; Matthew 5: 13-16

VIDEO Sermon Starter

SLIDE Being Jesus Christ in a Strange Land

Today we begin a new series of sermons on what it means to be the church in this time of upheaval. As we were thinking about this idea and how important it is for us to talk about our mission and vision during uncertain times, the image of church status came to us because many of us often post an emoji to describe our status but if we were to do that today for the church, it would be complicated. **We are still the church even though our building is closed** and we are called to still find a way to be the presence of Jesus Christ, but sometimes that is disappointing and discouraging and sometimes there are new things we have discovered which bless us. We thought this graphic captures this idea which is why you sought in the opening video.

GRAPHIC Its Complicated with Emojis

I want to invite you, if you haven't done so, to get out a pen or pencil and something to write on because I hope there will be some things you here

today that you want to take with you. We also hope you will download our Meditation Moments when you get a chance which you can find on our website when you go to the sermons tab and click on this week's sermon. Just below the video you will find a link and there are daily Scripture readings and questions, as well as morning devotionals which are live at 9 AM on Monday through Friday which use these as a guide. You also will find this week several links to ways that you can discover more about yourself and how to be the presence of Jesus Christ in the world today with a spiritual gifts inventory and information about baptism and information about serving in different ways.

I know we live in a different time because many of you seem to have more time to send me emails and reminders about what a strange time in which we are living. As we begin to think about what it will be like to come back to in person worship, I was especially amused by the story one you sent me about the good **Father of Trinity Episcopal Church who put sanitary hot air hand dryers in the restrooms** to be more sanitary and not have to use paper towels. After just two weeks he **removed them!**

When asked why, he sheepishly confessed that they worked fine. The problem was when he went to use the restroom the other day, he saw a sign that read...

SLIDE “For a sample of this week's sermon, push the button.”

After hearing that story, I did request the trustees not install any new hot air hand dryers so I would be spared the signs that I know some of you would put up just because I told you this story. I must say that I wish we had a laugh track that I could use because I miss hearing you groan at my jokes, or even laughing sometimes!

Today we do live in a strange time and we are still called to live out our mission and vision as a church. We say often, but I remind you of what the

vision of Summit Church is.

SLIDE Be Jesus Christ to the World

Our Mission, or the way we hope to move towards that Vision, is to...

SLIDE Building Community, Change Lives and Bring Hope

Over the course of this series, we're going to talk about how we might do that together and continue to live into those lofty ideas which we are called to in the Scriptures and we believe by God. **What's interesting, is that it's actually a biblical theme to seek God's direction and vision even in the midst of uncertain times.** As a matter fact, you can make a good argument that almost every movement of God that we find in the Scriptures happens during the time of disruption like we are experiencing today. **I don't think any of us would argue that our lives and routines** have been disrupted through not only the pandemic but the protesting we have seen happening throughout the world.

Let's take one of the opening stories of the Bible, which really begins the movement of God choosing his people to have a sacred and special relationship with. The story of Abram and Sarah, who later becomes Abraham, gives us a clue to how God will work. Listen to these words from Genesis 12.

BIBLE *The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you. ² I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. ³ I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you."*

⁴ So Abram departed as the Lord had instructed, and Lot went

with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.

I want us to notice three things about the story. First, it had to be a major disruption for Abram and Sarah and his family to leave everything they knew to go to this new land. It took a tremendous amount of trust and a desire to be willing to follow where God leads. Abram was leaving behind everything that he knew and everything that was familiar, and no doubt was going to encounter much that would be overwhelming and difficult at times, going into a foreign land.

Second, notice that Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran to pursue what God wanted him to pursue. He was definitely in the vulnerable category by today's standards! Yet, he was willing to go and I am reminded that no matter what our age or status in life, God has hopes and dreams for each of us, even during times of disruption. I do believe that God will use these moments to do something great.

Which brings me to the last, and most important part of the story for us today. God says these powerful words, that, "All the families on earth will be blessed through your disruption and your willingness to follow." There is this clear idea and theme over and over in Scripture, reminding us that disruptions and willingness to follow God and listen for God's voice in the midst of them, is the key to experiencing blessings ourselves and being able to share them with others.

In a time of disruption like we are experiencing now, there is opportunity for us to be the presence of Jesus Christ in the world, building community, changing lives and bringing hope. The story of Jesus in the New Testament is meant to be a continuation of the lives of people like Abraham, which is why we see Jesus experiencing disruption after disruption in his life. His public ministry begins with him returning to his hometown of Nazareth to preach his first sermon. We talked last week about how that sermon uses the

text from Isaiah which said Jesus came to preach good news to the poor and to release the captives and set prisoners free. He announced the time of the Lord's favor has come.

Jesus had done some miracles and the first part of his sermon was well received as people were moved by his words. But Jesus continues with words that caused disruption as he simply reminds them of the story of the prophet Elisha in Israel. Here's what we read happens next in Luke 4.

BIBLE ***²⁵ “Certainly there were many needy widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the heavens were closed for three and a half years, and a severe famine devastated the land. ²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them. He was sent instead to a foreigner—a widow of Zarephath in the land of Sidon. ²⁷ And many in Israel had leprosy in the time of the prophet Elisha, but the only one healed was Naaman, a Syrian.”***

²⁸ When they heard this, the people in the synagogue were furious. ²⁹ Jumping up, they mobbed him and forced him to the edge of the hill on which the town was built. They intended to push him over the cliff, ³⁰ but he passed right through the crowd and went on his way.

VIDEO Mount of Precipice

There is a place in Nazareth that we visited on our trip to Israel last year which is called the Mount of Precipice and is a place tradition says this story happened. This video shows you what that view was like and I always am humored by Jesus passing right to the crowd and going on his way. I wonder if something changed in their hearts as they listen to Jesus or if they just didn't have the nerve to push the Son of God off the cliff! What is clear is that the words of Jesus, and even his actions, often caused disruption and invite the people of God to live life differently.

When Jesus preaches his first sermon, which we call the Sermon on the Mount, he called his followers to a different way. Just after he gives them the powerful Beatitudes, Jesus tells them to be salt and light in these words from Matthew 5.

BIBLE ***13 “You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.***

14 “You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. 15 No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.

Remember that salt is not only for taste and flavor, but more for a preservative in the first century because they didn't have refrigerators. Jesus is inviting his followers to lead by example even in the midst of disruption. When it feels like things are in need of something to hold them together, the church is invited to do that. How does that happen?

While it is easy to get caught up in looking at much of the negative news which comes our way these days, I am struck by how many churches have shifted during this time of pandemic and upheaval and are doing great things. I have seen story after story of churches bringing hope to their communities by providing food and encouragement, writing letters and helping people stay connected. I have seen you showing up at the Navajo food and supply collection this weekend, bringing hope in many ways throughout the last couple of months.

I know for many it is been discouraging to not be able to gather in the church building, and one of the songs that is come to me over the last few

months has been one I learned as a child written by Avery and Marsh which is in our hymnal. Maybe you remember the song.

SLIDES **I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together. All who follow Jesus, all around the world, “Yes,” we’re the church together.**

The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people.

In 1 Corinthians Paul is writing to a church in Corinth, a community with dozens of temples all around. Some of you have joined me as we have seen the temples and we are hoping to go there again next year’s travel is permitted and it’s safe. The church is meeting in a hall and not their own building, when he says these words in chapter 3.

BIBLE ¹⁶ ***Don’t you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you?***

Paul is writing is that we are God’s building, God’s temple, and it’s not about physical place as much is it about a people. Peter, the one on whom Jesus said he would build his church, writes this in 2 Peter 3.

BIBLE ⁵ ***And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple. What’s more, you are his holy priests. Through the mediation of Jesus Christ, you offer spiritual sacrifices that please God.***

This is one of the texts that our leadership turned to when we were feeling called to this idea of being Jesus Christ to the world. Many times, we drive past buildings and we say something like, “That’s my church.” I want to remind you that the church is not a building in the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people. We together are the church, with the Holy Spirit infused in us. Jesus said that, “Wherever two or

three are gathered in my name, I am with you.”

What is Jesus talking about? Something happens when followers of Jesus come together and we become a sacred assembly and a holy people, and Christ is with us, working through us, doing more with his people together than we can do alone. Christianity is not a solitary sport like the long jump, but is more of a team sport like soccer or football or basketball or softball.

SLIDE ***Ecclesia = Assembly that is called out for some large purpose***

The Greek word for church is ecclesia, which is a secular word that means an assembly of people which is called out for some purpose larger than themselves. This is a term that is used when Jesus is talking to Peter in Matthew 16.

BIBLE ***18 Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means ‘rock’), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it.***

This is a powerful statement because what Jesus is implying is that there will be time when the church will be disrupted, much like we are today. In other words, there will be powers out of our control and while it may be disruptive, those powers in the end will not win. The church will not be conquered by a pandemic or any other disruption.

More importantly, Jesus makes it clear that the church is his people gathered together and he considers us his own, and even the powers of hell will not conquer over us. This is a profound idea that we are meant to grab onto in moments like this, that being a part of the church of Jesus Christ brings us a sense of belonging to something bigger than ourselves that brings a safety and security and gives us strength.

Words matter and we must be careful we say words like, “this is my

church.” Sometimes, people will say things this to me, “Pastor Jeff, your church is...” Most often there is a compliment that follows, and I try to interject and lovingly remind them that this is not, “my church.” The church doesn’t belong to you or me or the trustees of Summit Church. This church doesn’t belong to the United Methodist denomination. The church belongs to Jesus and we are not country club of people. We are a group of people who have been called by Jesus to be his people and do his work in the world.

Paul uses a different metaphor later in 1 Corinthians 12 to get at the same idea.

BIBLE ***27 All of you together are Christ’s body, and each of you is a part of it.***

The Scriptures remind us that God came to us in the flesh in Jesus Christ so we could see what God is like and what God’s will is for our life. Jesus represented God by healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind, forgiving sinners and welcoming strangers in the foreigner. Jesus lived and died and rose from the grave and before he ascended into heaven, he turned his followers and said, **“What I have been doing now you go and do! You are my church, my body at work in the world.”** We become the presence of Jesus in the world and are meant to continue his work, no matter what disruptions come at us.

People often say something like this, “I would believe in God if God would just show up on my doorstep.” God has an answer for that question. He comes each one of us and asks us to show them by being the presence of Jesus Christ in the world. God’s presence is meant to be known through God’s people. We are meant to incarnate the love of Jesus in the world. We are not a group of people who come together to be entertained or being a club. We are meant to find purpose and meaning as we are called by God and we are willing to say, “Here am Lord. Send me and use me.”

This weekend would normally be our Love Out Loud, where we go and be the church in the community and not in our building by serving others. While we could not put those projects together this year because of COVID restrictions, we are encouraging you to do that on your own. Find ways to bless others and serve them in the name of Jesus.

The truth is, when most of us first are coming to church, we are consumers. That's understandable and consumers often ask, "What's in it for me? What do I get out of it?" We plan for that as the church, as a way of reaching people with marketing and our website and sermon series aimed at people's felt needs and our caring ministries which are not called congregational care because we care for people in the community. We want to make sure there is quality music and the sermons are at least tolerable. Jesus told us to go fishing for people and every week that I preach, I look at my role as being the best tasting worm I can be to draw people to Christ.

But, at some point, we moved from being consumers and people who primarily take, to someone who believes that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. Hopefully, we come to a place we realize this matters to us and that we belong to Jesus. We begin to say, "I belong to Christ and I am a part of his church. What does he want me to do and being the church? I want God's will to be done and not my own."

When that happens, we don't get ready on a Saturday night or a Sunday morning or whenever we call our Sabbath and worship, and ask the question, "Do I feel like doing church today?" If we are Jesus followers and consider ourselves his people, that sort of a ridiculous question. Jesus has called us together and we are his church we don't do church or go to church we are the church so when the church gathers, we go and we're a part of it!

SLIDE We are the church!

When we truly are beginning to follow Jesus and realize we are part of

the body of Christ, we don't ask if we feel like going to church. When we gather for worship, hopefully the sermon is good and the music is encouraging, but it's not about simply getting something out of it for me. We worship because Jesus needs us to be there and the people around me need me to be a part of the body as well.

I think of what John F. Kennedy said, **“Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.”** This is what Jesus is saying in many ways to us as we are part of the church body. We moved from asking what Jesus can do for us to, “What can I do for Jesus? How can I be the presence of Jesus Christ in the world?”

We have sent out a worship survey which I hope you will fill out if you haven't yet already. One of the questions is asking if you would be willing to gather with a few others in the church body in your home because even though we can't gather in person yet, we know we need each other. We are calling them Community Groups because we want them to build community and support. While the building is a tool that we use, it's not the church. While we can't gather together in the building as a large group, we can be there for each other in other ways and we are called to do so. We are hoping to do some outdoor worship services this summer, but it still may be a while before we gather in the building because of restrictions that make it difficult.

Many people have let us know that they want to gather as a church, and I think this because we know we need to because we are the church! And because we are the church, is one of the reasons we haven't gathered together, because we care about those who are vulnerable and want to make sure the people are safe. When we do come back to worship, it will be different, and we will do things so that those who gather will feel like they are part of the body of Christ together.

Here is where I feel like we need to challenge ourselves as we seek to

be the presence of Christ to the world. One of the most difficult things has been that our building is actually used by many groups and many people in the community who are not part of Summit Church. Once again, that's a good thing because the building doesn't belong to us. The church belongs to God. You may have heard that we are removing our pews and some people are sad and disappointed because they like pews. I like going and sitting in the pew during the week by myself. I grew up in the church was pews and so not having them will be a bit strange for me.

I also know that if we don't remove the pews, we only have one room in the entire church where more than 8 or 10 people can gather with the restrictions that are in place, and that the Fellowship Hall. By removing the pews and using chairs, not only will it be easier to clean in between services, but we can use the space for other things during the week. I also know that there are no pews mentioned anywhere in the Bible because the church is not about the furnishings or the building, it's about the people.

I also reminded of the truth of what William Temple said...

“The church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members.” –William temple

Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way as he wrote these words from prison and a Nazi concentration camp. He was preaching on the text from Luke where Jesus irritates those in hometown by talking about how it was the foreigners who were healed in the time of the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

GRAPHIC Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“The church is the church only when it exists for others... Not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others.

Whenever I remember those words, I think of the person who sent me

a note after visiting the previous church I served. They told me they had never been to church until they attended ours for the funeral of a friend of theirs. They said they appreciated the sermon and the music and the welcome they received at the front door. The reason they almost left our church before the service began because after they had been seated, someone stood next to the pew they were in and said, “You’re in my seat.”

I was both furious and heartbroken when I received that note. Fortunately, that person did return and eventually became a member and shared their story to remind people the church doesn’t belong to them. When they shared that story, the person who has said it remembered and asked for forgiveness. They shared that their life was in disruption during that time as well and the spot in that pew felt like an anchor. It was a powerful time of being the church as the were vulnerable and share in an act of forgiveness

That’s why we will be moving the chairs all around as we gather again for in person worship, so no one can stake a claim to any spot! We don’t own any chair or any pew or, when we gather outside, any plot of grass. When we become a part of the body of Christ and we seek to be the presence of Jesus Christ, we actually are willing to give up our favorite seat which might be the best seat to be sure others can hear the gospel.

We have this tendency during times of disruption to pull ourselves in word because we are afraid. I remind you that we are called to be the presence of Jesus Christ even in the strange and difficult and disruptive times, seeing people the way Jesus sees them. We forget that Jesus not only entered into times of disruption, but sometimes he seemed to cause it and be the catalyst for change.

As we seek to understand how to be the presence of Jesus Christ in the world during a time of pandemic and racial unrest, I was struck by the words

of Rev. Michael Moore who is an African American pastor leading Faith Chapel in Birmingham, AL. He wrote these words in an interview about the rioting and looting: *“Was the vandalism criminal? Absolutely! Do I condone or agree with their approach? Absolutely not! I’m in no shape or form **FOR** what they did! But to me, there is a difference between being **FOR** people and being **FOR** people’s actions.*

*When I’m **FOR** people, I will develop a level of empathy to make an effort to understand what inequities in my local community would drive people to this level of frustration and violence.*

In Genesis, God vocalized light even when He saw darkness engulfing everywhere. It’s equally important, I think, for [followers of Jesus] to vocalize what “can be” and not settle for simply attacking in detail “what is.”

Many of the protests (not the rioting) are rooted in the deep desire of underserved communities to be seen and heard.

Jesus was so attractive in His day because He paid attention to the needs and desires of those who were invisible in that society...who had no voice or a marginalized one [or were a foreigner].

When a church can articulate who they’re for...when they show that they’re attacking problems and inequities in their local communities instead of attacking people...when they can articulate ways that they are mobilizing and building alliances to serve and improve the lives of local families, local schools, and local communities, I think they’ll experience some of the same momentum that Jesus experienced in His ministry.

During disruptive times, people are attracted to people that they feel genuinely see them and are **FOR them.**

I moved 15 times before I was 12, but it always was to **fairly wealthy, predominantly white communities**. I do remember living next door to **David**

Mineta, whose family was from Japan and whose parents and grandparents were held in internment camps during World War II. They attended the Japanese American Methodist Church in San Jose where we lived.

I remember **not understanding** why anyone would put David's parents and grandparents in jail for being Japanese. **He told me some of the names he was called**, and I witnessed at school a few times, and I still didn't understand. I did understand why they called him **midget Mineta** because he was the **shortest** in our class, even shorter than me. He was also an awesome **foursquare player** and the fastest kid in our class!

The name Mineta might sound familiar because eventually his father **Norman was a councilman and mayor of San Jose**, and eventually served the longest tenure as the **US Secretary of Transportation in US history**. He served on the cabinet of Pres. George Bush and was the only Democrat to serve as a cabinet secretary in the Bush ministraton. One of his best friends was **Sen. Alan Simpson, a Republican from Wyoming**. They met as **Boy Scouts** when Simpson's troop visited the internment camp in which Norman lived.

GRAPHIC Boy Scouts Alan Simpson and Norman Mineta

GRAPHIC Norman Mineta and Alan Simpson

They are both 88 years old and remain close friends today. If you watch their story, you find that their relationship has been a blessing in many ways throughout their lives, yet it happened during the time of massive disruption and they could've easily decided not to be friends. Alan talks about other people teasing him about his friendship when he was younger and even accusing him of being a traitor later in life because he and Norman were in different political parties. Norman could have held it against Alan that he was white and was part of the people who put him and his family in the detention camp.

They both talk openly about their faith and how being in Methodist churches help them not only make their connection but learn the biblical commandments which drew them towards each other and help them discover what it meant to be a blessing to their communities as they dealt with racism that was blatant and literally imprisoned an entire group of people for several years.

I shared this story this week during one of our 9 AM devotional times, and one of our members, Kay Neal, shared with me that her aunt was a Methodist missionary who served in one of the detention camps for the Japanese, serving as a teacher and developing relationships which changed her and blessed the church she was a part of. You may not know that Methodists started churches and schools within each of the detention camps when it was not popular to do so. The teachers and missionaries were often harassed and called traitors for caring for the foreigners which were seen as “enemies.”

My hope and prayer for us is that we would have the courage, even in tumultuous and disruptive times, to be the presence of Jesus Christ in this strange land, recognizing that God does his best often in these moments. I end with these words again from Jesus, which is our scripture memory verse for this week. I hope you will write this down or download it from our meditation moments.

BIBLE *“In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.”* –Matthew 5:16

My prayer is that we will take seriously the call to be the church, be the presence of Jesus Christ, Building Community, Changing Lives and Bringing Hope. Let’s pray.

SLIDE **Prayer**

Gracious God, thank you for calling us to be the church, even in these uncertain times. Just like Abraham, you promise blessings even as we travel into the strange land that is next for us. Help us to see ourselves as your people, called to bless others in ways that bring about your kingdom. In your Holy name. Amen.