

“God’s Next Steps”

Today we come to the final week in this series that maybe (to some of you) has seemed like it would never end. We’re in week ten (of ten) and after today, it’s on to something else. Now, that’s bad news if you’ve liked what we’ve been doing (and want to see it continue) and it’s good news if you haven’t and you don’t. Either way there is light at the end of this sermon series tunnel and in about 18 more minutes it’ll all be over.

The trouble (however) with this series (and its topic), “Next Steps” is that although the actual series will come to a close, the challenge to take the next steps in our faith walk with Jesus never will.

I don’t want to simplify this too much, but the Christian life is really nothing more than that. It’s a series of next steps in our faith walk with Jesus. (That’s what it is.) No matter where we are in life, how long we’ve been at this Christian calling we have, we are always being called to take the next steps.

If you’re here, then Jesus wants you to move here. If you’re here, then he wants you to move here. What he doesn’t want is for us to stay where we are and not move. If you’re not moving, then you’re not moving, and if you’re not moving, then you’re stagnant, and if you’re stagnant, then it’s only matter of time before you start moving in the other direction.

All throughout life, regardless of this series, every time we come in contact with God’s Word, we should always be asking the “next step” question. What is God saying to me in my life? What is he trying to (tell me) in my life? Where is he leading and how does he want me to respond? And then, when we hear it, our calling is to respond to it. To take what we’ve heard (in his Word) and allow it to shape what we do in life.

That’s what being a disciple of Jesus is all about. It’s listening to what God is saying, responding to what he says, and always (in every situation) trusting that he knows what he is doing.

His goal in life is simple. His goal in your life is simple. What he wants is for you to become mature as a Christian. He wants you to grow in your faith. And as you grow (and mature) in your faith, he wants you to take what you’ve learned (through your faith) and pass on that faith to someone else.

In this series, if you think back with me for just a few moments, we’ve been challenging ourselves with this “Next Steps” question from a number of different directions. (See how much of this you remember.) We looked (in week one) at the calling of those first disciples, Peter and Andrew, James and John, and we looked at it from the perspective of two different gospel accounts.

If you remember, in the one, it seemed as if they just dropped what they were doing and followed. (They were fishing and all of a sudden they were following.) In the other, we begin to realize that it wasn’t quite that simple. It was only after Peter realized who Jesus was and how far in his (own life) he had fallen short that he was able to leave everything behind and follow. It’s the same thing today. Only as we recognize our need (for Jesus) are we able to take that step of faith.

From there, we talked about the calling of Matthew, a tax collector, and we made the point that everyone Jesus called was a sinner. In fact, we went so far as to say it was a prerequisite for the calling. Jesus didn’t come to call the righteous, but sinners. Again, what was true then is true today. Jesus’ calling is for sinners, for us.

After that (fast forward), we talked about how (as Christians) troubles in our lives will come, but we put our faith in the one who is greater than our fears. In week four, we looked at the clothing we are to wear, remember that, (Chick Flick PG), how we are to dress ourselves each day in clothes that will identify us as followers of Jesus.

From there, it was the question of the cross and how (as followers of Christ) it cannot be avoided. It’s central to the Christian life. Then, it was the question of what we want, and of how (in following Jesus) our calling is to want what God wants more than what we might want. It’s not easy, but it’s possible...with his help.

In week seven, it was the call to stand out by being servants to others. Two weeks ago, it was the choice of following or un-following Jesus. “Lord, (if not you), then to whom shall we go?” (There’s no one else who

offers what Jesus offers.) And finally, (last week), it was the calling to expand, to multiply what we are doing in the lives of others. That's the commission we have and the calling we share.

All of that to say, in each of those areas of life, there is always a next step. There is always more that God wants to see happen in us, more that he wants to do through us; and not (to do) through us as a way (for us) to get into heaven. That's where this all started. We don't do what we do to get into heaven. We get into heaven because of what he has done for us. That's the cross. That's the resurrection. Your salvation is secure because of Jesus. What we do (in our lives) is because of what he has done (for us) in his.

Now, I don't want to spend a lot of time with this, but in this final week, it's important for us to recognize that when it comes to these next steps, (these things we've been talking about), that it's not just in our own lives (individually) that it happens. It happens (for all of us) on a variety of levels.

Just think (for instance) about what happens here in the church (for us) as a congregation. We're asking a lot of "next steps" questions. Our staff (and elected leaders), they're always seeking to know what God wants next. Questions about our vision, how to implement it and move it forward? Questions about our ministries, which ones to start and to strengthen, and which ones to stop and let go? Questions about our staffing.

We have a Call Committee seeking our next pastor. We all know that. We need to be praying for that. (We really do.) I'd encourage you to do that every day. We also will soon have (some of you may already know this), a vacancy in our children's ministry.

After fourteen years, (in just a few weeks), Maria Bones will be stepping away from her position. She has accepted a new position at a theater (that's her background) in downtown San Jose that really comes (in her life) at a wonderful time. It's a great opportunity for her and even though we're going to miss her on our staff (there's no doubt), it's a great opportunity for us to ask an important "next step" question in our shared life. On the congregational level, there are always "next steps" to take.

It's the same thing in our church body on the national level. I spent four days this past week in Columbus, Ohio, meeting with other pastors and leaders. We talked about our structure as a denomination and what needs to happen as we grow. We talked about our seminary and the need we have to continually be encouraging our young people to consider the ministry as a calling. Our pastors are not getting younger. Ten years from now, there will be a shortage. We need to encourage the next generation.

Maybe some of you (here today), high school students, college students, are being called by God to go to seminary. If you think you are, then let us know so we can pray for you and encourage you and help you to sort it out. We also talked about finances and about mission starts and about what it's going to take to become a church body known for its emphasis on discipleship.

The next step questions are not only for us as individuals. On a variety of levels, there are always next step questions we need (to ask) and to answer. The Christian life is nothing more than a series of next steps. Again, I think we all know that and realize that; it's moving from where we are (in life) to where God is (leading us) in life.

What we also need to know and to realize, and this is how this all comes together, that it's not just us who takes next steps. We're not alone in taking next steps. Even God takes next steps; even God takes next steps.

Now, God's next steps are not the same as ours. (I think that's obvious.) Our next steps are always steps of faith, because we can't see where those next steps might lead. But he can and he does and that's why (in his next steps) he's leading us in ours.

Maybe you noticed (in our readings today) how they each have something to do with God's next steps, with God working to carry out his saving plan. The passage from Deuteronomy (in the Old Testament), where the nation of Israel is about to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land; Moses is telling them that what's about to happen is something God has planned from long ago.

Chapter nine, verse five, listen to where the action (in the story) comes from, who it is that's doing the work. Moses is speaking (and he says), "It is not because of your righteousness and your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the Lord your God

will drive them out before you, (and now listen) to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” In other words, God was at work, God had a plan, and God was working and carrying out his plan (taking his next steps) through them.

In our second reading, it’s a different context (and reason for writing), but it’s all the same. The apostle Paul is writing to the Philippians. In chapter two, most of what we read is an encouragement to live our lives as Jesus lived his. He gave it all up for us when he entered our world. He humbled himself when he walked the path of the cross.

Where that led for Jesus (Paul says), because of what he was willing to give up, is that the day will come when his name will be lifted up and when that happens, “every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” That’s where it leads for Jesus.

Where that leads for us is what Paul says next and, again, this is how this all comes together. He says, “Therefore, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – (he says), “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling (and, again, now listen) for it is God who works in you to will and act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”

What’s he saying? He’s saying that God is taking next steps (in you) to carry out his purpose. God is working and acting (through us) to bring about his greater good.

It’s the same thing in our gospel reading from the book of John. I don’t want to get into the whole story; if you read the whole story, it takes you all the way through chapter nine. It’s a fascinating story about how this man who couldn’t see, now can, and about how this man who was blind, was able to see more than those who had sight. It’s fascinating.

What’s even (more fascinating) is the way the story is framed. Starting in verse one, (it says) “As Jesus went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ They wanted to know why it had happened, why this man (from the time he was born) was unable to see.

Do you remember what Jesus said? (He said), ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned’ (don’t ever think that’s why things like this happen; it’s not), ‘but this happened’ (he said), and, again, now listen, ‘that the works of God might be displayed in him.’”

Did you hear it? This happened...that the works of God might be displayed in him. This happened that the will of God might be carried out through him. This happened (in his life) long before he realized what was happening in his life, that the plan of God, the purposes of God, the next steps of God (to save the world in Jesus) might be witnessed to by this man whose life (in his name) was changed.

Now, there’s a lot (in this story) we could (pick up on) and talk about. We could spend the rest of our time on just that one verse. But to focus on just that one verse, this idea that what happened in his life was for the purpose of God’s will and plan to be carried out?

I don’t know about you, but for me that changes everything. This is all so much bigger than us. (It’s all so much bigger than us.) What God is doing through our lives is so much greater than what’s happening in our lives.

What’s happening in our lives is limited to what’s happening in our lives. But what’s happening through our lives, as our lives are used by God, goes far beyond what’s happening only in our lives.

Let me give you an example. This morning I woke up and came here to church. When I came here to church (because of the calling I have), I’m now here in front of you preaching this sermon. That’s what I did. That’s what happened (what’s happening) in my life. I got up and came to church.

In your life, it’s the same thing. When you woke up, you woke and you got up, and you came here as well. And now you’re listening to what’s being said. (Most of you are listening to what’s being said.) And you’re trying to follow and to figure out what this means for your life.

That’s what happened here today, in your life and in my life, insofar as that’s what we did. We got up and came to church. And so, (if you keep that same line of thinking going), if what’s happening here today (in

your life) and in my life is limited only to what you do (or I do), then what (you and I do) only goes so far. There's only so much we can do if (what we do) is left only to us.

But what if it's not left only to us? What if what's happening in us is that God is at work through us to carry out his saving plan for us? Do you think that would make a difference?

For all you English students (here today), did you hear those prepositions? What's happening in us is that God is at work through us to carry out his saving plan for us. In us and through us and for us. This is so much bigger than us. This is so much bigger than you.

Think of it this way, and (again) this is all in light of our focus on next steps. If our next steps are only for the purpose of our growing (individually) as disciples, then (it's important and it's worth doing), but it only goes so far. If it's only for the purpose of my benefit or your benefit, then there's benefit, but the benefit is limited only to us.

But what if the benefit of what you do (in your life) and I do (in my life) in relation to these next steps we take; what if our next steps are not only for us (and our benefit), but what if they are being used by God (as he takes his next steps) for the benefit of the world?

If that's true (which it is), then what we do in our life and how we respond to Jesus is so much greater. We could go back to (any one) of those topics we took on in this series and apply what we just said, and it works.

Our calling to be disciples; it's not just so we can become disciples, (so that we benefit), but so that God can work in us (to grow us), to work through us (to reach others), and to work for us (as his kingdom) changes how we come at life.

The clothing he calls us to wear. We don't just wear it (to wear it). We wear it so he can work in us (to change us), to work through us (as a witness to others), and to work for us as (what we wear) has an impact on the fullness of our life. And it keeps on going.

It's the same thing in each of these areas we talked about. What's happening as we take our next steps is that God is working to take his next steps in us. And not just in us, but through us, and for us...to change and to save his world.

Let me close today, (close this series) with three passages that speak to what we've been saying and how our next steps are used by God as he takes his next steps in the world.

Three passages: Philippians, chapter 1 (1:4-6): (Paul says), "In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

Ephesians, chapter 3 (3:10-11): "God's intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And from First Peter, chapter 1 (1:3-4) "In God's mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you."

"God's Next Steps"...in us, through us, and for us...in Jesus. Amen.