
WHAT IS *SHIFT*?

Compiled Information given to the congregation,
in preparation for Fall 2017 Small Groups, and the SHIFT process
for deepening discipleship.

THE EQUIPPING TEAM:

JACK CALL, KENDRA CRABTREE, ELVA MILLER, HEATHER POLIKOFF, AND SCOTT SMITH.

BLACKSBURG PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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*All Sermons can be listened to at blacksburgpres.org/audio.
Look for the titles in parentheses above.*

Introduction

Small groups will be offered this fall starting September 10th/13th through November 12th/15th (10 weeks). The small groups are designed to deepen our experience as a church community and grow in discipleship, allowing us to grow in faith and trust of one another, and build a shared vision for ministry.

The groups will be offered on Sunday mornings during the Sunday School hour from 9am to 10am and Wednesday nights from 6pm to 7pm with the option of dinner starting at 5:30pm. While Sunday School is offered for children on Sunday morning, childcare will be provided for those participating in a Wednesday night small group.

We pray you will consider this opportunity and will join us in the fall! If you would like to participate please fill out the blue card and return it to the church office. The blue cards can be found at the Welcome Window in the Gathering Space.

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church

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February 16, 2017

Dear Members and Friends,

We are writing to let you know about the next step in faithful ministry for BPC. We are the Equipping Team, a group put together by the Session to follow through on recommendations made three years ago by Ministry Architects.

For those who are new or may not remember, Ministry Architects (MA) was hired to help us determine how best to staff the church for the 21st century. An MA team spent a full weekend here, holding small group sessions with people of all ages. Based on what they heard, they recommended hiring a Director of Communications and Church Life, putting a team in place to change some aspects of Children and Youth ministries, and rewriting Catherine's job description to give her more time for pastoral care. All that has taken place.

Now we hope to tackle a tougher recommendation: finding *a single shared vision*. The MA consultants saw that BPC was healthy and thriving, that we have a good mix of ages and stages, and that we are engaged in all kinds of ministry to the community, and that different groups in the church have lots of passion for lots of things. But our lack of focus keeps us divided into little groups who are sometimes wary of each other, limiting what we can accomplish for Christ.

Last August the Equipping Team was formed by the Session to find a process for building a *shared vision*. We researched, studied, prayed and talked with folks in other churches. We picked a discipleship process created by pastor Mark Tidsworth called *Shift: Three Big Moves for the 21st Century Church*. We practiced some of the steps ourselves, then practiced them with the Session. Now Session has approved a timeline for sharing the *Shift* process with the whole church. It will be introduced from the pulpit in Lent and begin in earnest this fall.

BPC is a healthy church because it's been responsive to God's calling throughout its history. We trust that God is speaking again. We've found a good process, but building a shared vision means hearing from *everyone*: long time members and new members, children and adults, those who are here every week and those who come when they can. BPC is a family. It will take all of us discerning together to focus our vision faithfully.

This is the first of two letters you will be receiving—in other words, only the beginning. We are not going to rush through this process. We ask you to begin now to be in prayer for Blacksburg Presbyterian Church and for your role in the discernment process to come.

In Christ,

The Equipping Team:

Elva Miller; Heather Polikoff; Jack Call; Scott Smith; and Kendra Crabtree, staff

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February 27, 2017

Dear Members and Friends,

A few days ago the Equipping Team wrote to you about a **visioning process** we as a congregation will undertake this fall. That letter shared the history behind the decision to focus our vision along with a **discipleship model** the Team recommended we use. It's based on the book *Shift: Three Big Moves for the 21st Century Church* by pastor Mark Tidsworth. The Equipping Team also invited you to be in prayer as we begin this new phase in the life of BPC. My job is to share a few more specifics, but first some things need to be said.

Many of you may have taken part in discernment processes before—at work, in school, or in other churches. They may have involved gatherings where a lot was said but nothing of lasting value was accomplished. If so you may be thinking, "Great, another big waste of time. No thank you." Having gone through some of that myself, I understand that response. But a "been there/done that/no thanks" response is only valid if the following is true:

- God has played no role in the life of BPC up to this point
- God is not present or at work at BPC now
- BPC has no calling to serve Christ in Blacksburg and beyond
- Fellow church members and friends are not committed to BPC ministries

As far as I'm concerned, none of the above is true. Unlike many of our sister congregations today, BPC's pews are filled with people of all ages, and the nursery is busy. The budget is stable and the level of commitment to ministry here is high. Why? Because *BPC seeks to make disciples, not church members*. Several years ago we committed to being a "sailboat" church, trusting God to fill our sails and set our course, no matter how surprising. The *Shift* process is another tool in trusting God to lead us.

What's involved?

- During Lent I will preach about what it means for BPC to be a **missional** church, a hot button word that means partnering with God take on God's goals, not our own.
- In the spring we plan to hold a Saturday retreat for all who want to attend, led by a *Shift* trainer who will share more about what it takes to be God's missional people in the 21st century.
- Over the summer the Equipping Team will recruit and train small group leaders in the *Shift* pattern of discipleship
- Small groups on Shift discipleship will meet this fall, some on Sunday mornings and others on Wednesday nights. Our future focus for ministry will arise from the work of these small groups.

I pray that you will begin now to think about taking part in *Shift*, trusting that God wants your voice to be heard as BPC defines its vision. More importantly, I hope you will decide to let God engage your heart in a process of deepening discipleship.

Peace, Catherine

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Catherine".

“Shift” (Audio Title: 1st Sunday of Lent)
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 and Matt 4:1-11
Dr. Catherine Taylor
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
March 5, 2017

Lent, the season of reflection,
the season for looking at ourselves
and working to mend whatever we see
that keeps us at a distance from God.

We do this mending in a small way
every time we pray the prayer of confession,
but in Lent we take the time to look deeply,
so that we might arrive at the cross six weeks from now
with open eyes and a clear heart.

The word for this mending is penitence,
but I have a feeling most of us
don't really use or like that word any more.

It means remorse, regret, sorrow, or contrition,
another word we seldom use.

Because Lent involves deep searching
through the wilderness of our own faults,

I fear we think Lent is gloomy and dark.

But what is gloomy about drawing closer to God?

Shouldn't removing barriers to God's love for us
be a good and welcome thing?

I felt that goodness Wednesday night as about 50 of us gathered
to mark the start of Lent with the sign of ashes.

The ashes represent our brokenness and regret, and the knowledge
that we are mortal and will one day die.

Because of Rob's recent illness I have been more aware
of that reality than ever.

We are creatures and our days are numbered.

In other words we are not God.

Instead of being God, we *belong to God* in life and in death.

This year we were invited to say that
as the ashes were placed on our foreheads:
“In life and in death I belong to God.”

Both our texts for this first Sunday of Lent are about the ways
we try to *be* God instead of belonging to him.

In the Genesis story, Eve, and through her Adam,

listen to the crafty serpent instead of listening to God.

“You will be like God,” the serpent offers
when he tempts Eve eat the fruit of the forbidden tree.
They *do* eat and they *do* gain insight,
the first of which is a sense of shame about their bodies,
something God never intended us to feel.

Yes, they know things they didn’t know before
and with it comes guilt, anxiety, and other burdens
that come with putting ourselves in God’s place.

In the Matthew text, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness
where he is tempted by the devil.

The devil offers Jesus things as substitutes for belonging to God:

- Go ahead, make your own bread,
swallow the illusion that you provide for yourself.
- Go ahead, jump off the building, make your own achievement
the point and purpose of your life
- Go ahead, worship whatever gives you power.
Make that your God, so you can feel important and admired.

In this story, though, Jesus resists every temptation,

using nothing but tools that are also available to us:
trust in God and familiarity with scripture.

In other words, he chooses belonging to God
over trying to take God’s place.

Most years the Lenten journey is one we take as individuals.

We look into our own lives and faith
asking if there are changes we should make
to belong more fully to God.

This year I am inviting us to look at that belonging as individuals
but also as a congregation.

You've should have gotten a couple of letters now,
introducing you to a visioning process that will begin this fall.
We're doing it because we have so many
causes and passions as a church,
so many groups doing their own thing
that our sense of knowing who we are together
has been less well-tended.

There are a lot of reasons for this.

Some have to do with the way churches
structure themselves into committees and ministries
that may not communicate well.

The church in the United States after World War Two
had a great run of growth and expansion,
building education wings and recreation centers
often managing themselves like businesses
and less like the relational body of Christ.

When that surge came to an end beginning in the 70s,
many Mainline churches kept operating as if nothing had changed,
attracting people with worship and programs,
while at the same time de-emphasizing
the need to witness to our personal faith.

There has been a sea change in the country now,
again, for many reasons, in which people
trust history and institutions less and less and less.

People now put a huge emphasis on individual experience,
on whatever they can see with their own eyes or
feel is authentic themselves.

They just don't trust positions or institutions anymore.

They look at churches and see lovely buildings and busy programs.

They look at church members see exactly that: church members,
not people who live as followers of Christ.

When they do spot obvious Christians,
too often they are fundamentalists
who spout bigotry and even hate.

It's common now to hear the media use the word "Christian"
as if we were all one bunch, a deeply conservative bunch
who have come to extreme conclusions about marginal biblical texts.

The voice of the Mainline church proclaiming God's gracefulness
has been muted, in part because
we were convinced we didn't need to speak up.

That is a far too short summary of where the Church finds itself today,
but as far as it goes it is accurate.

And, oddly enough, the whole situation is good news.
The Holy Spirit in the Matthew story, remember,
led Jesus into the wilderness, after which his true ministry began.

Perhaps the disenfranchised place where the
mainline Church finds itself today
is a place of incredible opportunity.

I mentioned last Sunday that this year, 2017,
is the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

All kinds of great celebrations are taking place around the world.
But more important than celebration is imitation.

It is time for the church to undergo reformation again.

In her book *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis Tickle
uses a rummage sale as a symbol
for great periods of renewal in Church history.

Roughly every 500 years, the Church has cleaned out its attic,
from the birth of the church, to the fall of the Roman empire in 590 AD,
to the division of the Eastern and Western church in 1054
known as the Great Schism, to the Reformation in 1517.ⁱ

We are the product of that last rummage sale.

Our motto is "The church reformed, always being reformed."

Notice the word "being": God does the reforming,
not us, and it is happening again.

Far from being distressed about the shift in our context
and the need for 21st century congregations to shift themselves,

I think this is a wonderful time to be the church and to be asking:

- What does it mean today to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?
- What does it mean today to be a gathered community of disciples?
- And, finally, what does it mean to be a gathered community of disciples
who join God's in mission in the world?

Those three questions transformed one man's spiritual life.

Mark Tidsworth was an exhausted pastor in a struggling church.

Finding God in an institutional church, he writes,
"felt like a hide and seek game."ⁱⁱ

He thought he knew what it was to be a disciple of Jesus,
and how to teach others.

But his answers no longer fit the context
in which the church finds itself today.

Tidsworth found himself moving from trying to be in charge of the church
to belonging to God, asking questions and talking
and listening to others who were asking questions, too,
and then helping other churches by writing the book
Shift: Three big moves for the 21st Century Church.

His work is the work we plan to use
to see where God is leading us in this time and place.

At the end of the process we hope we will have
strengthened our discipleship and defined our mission
as a body of Christ in ways that will be faithful
and exciting and renewing for us all.

There's no set agenda, no magic formula involved.

It will be us sitting down with us and
and seeking to belong to God
rather than fall for the temptation to be God.

This fall in small groups, we'll be reading scripture
and sharing about our own journey of discipleship.

Several of these groups will meet on Sunday mornings
during the Sunday School hour,

and there won't be other adult options this fall it will be a choice of these groups.

Other groups will meet on Wednesday nights.

You get to pick your own timing, whether you meet on
Sunday morning, or whether you want to do it on
Wednesday nights, or whether you want to do it at all.

There's a workbook and scriptures and prayers

we'll be using from the *Shift* material,
but most of all there will be us, letting God fill our sails,
stepping out in faith that God is leading

the Church to a new reformation even as we celebrate the old.

As I said, some of us won't want to do this.

You may feel that small group bible study and prayer is not your calling,
or even if it is, you just can't make room for it in your life.

If that's true for you, then I invite you to pray
for those who do want to take part,
and more importantly to trust that God is at work,
leading us into and through the wilderness
of the present context in which the Church finds itself.

To the extent that some of us engage in this work
all of us will benefit, for as Paul teaches
what benefits one benefits all.

Meanwhile worship and ministry will continue as always.

There will still be lots of groups with lots of passion
for lots of things, who will communicate well sometimes
and not so well other times.

But my own prayer is that in each group
there will be two or three or four of us
who are taking part in Shift work,
welcoming a deeper look at themselves
and how they follow Christ,
learning from each other and being uplifted and encouraged
and deepened as disciples by what is learned.

Beloved, belonging to God is not a task or a burden.

It's a release from the shame and exhaustion
of being your own God,
an invitation to life in a garden of grace
where we care for each other
and partner with God to care and heal the world
one day at a time. AMEN.

**“Community of Christ” (Audio Title: 2nd Sunday of Lent)
Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17
Dr. Catherine Taylor
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
March 12, 2017**

Here we are in the Second Sunday of Lent
and this is the second of three sermons on the shifts
churches can make to fit the context we find ourselves in
in the 21st century.

Last week the focus was on the intense desire
felt today for authentic personal experiences,
and how that has arisen over of the last couple of decades
out a distrust of institutions.

Not many people look for a church today
based on its denominational affiliation.

What matters is personal experience
and authentic relationships with each other and with God.

Although you’d think that is what churches would always be
for lots of reasons we talked about last week, they’re not.

This seismic shift in what people are seeking in a church
is good news for the Church of the 21st century.

Because it means that today churches must focus on
helping people grow as disciples of Jesus Christ,
not simply be names on a membership list.

This second sermon was planned to look
at the second of the shifts required by our new context,
the shift from being individual disciples
to being true communities of Christ,
gathered disciples who uphold and support each other
lovingly in everything we do.

That, at least, was the decision made months ago
as we decided to introduce the SHIFT process during Lent,
long before anyone had looked at the scriptures.

So once again I am astounded by the Holy Spirit
who is indeed always ahead of us, even when
or perhaps *especially when* we think we are calling the shots.

Because today we have two scriptures about people
facing major shifts in their world view and their way of being.

In one story, Abram, makes the shift

from his former life almost effortlessly,

along with his nephew Lot and both of their households.

In the other story, Nicodemus is so thrown by his encounter with Jesus
he is left speechless, all his certainties in shambles.

The harder story, for me at any rate, is Abram's.

This is the very first time in scripture that we meet him.

All we know about him is that he is from Ur,

and that he came with his father Terahⁱⁱⁱ and nephew Lot

from Ur to Haran and settled there,

and that Haran is where his father died and is buried.

We also know the Hebrew meaning of his name:

Abram means "father of height," or "high father."

A few chapters on from now God will change his name

to Abraham, which means "father of a multitude."^{iv}

And that is it. That's all we know about Abram

until Abram hears God's voice:

"Leave your country and your home place

your extended family and your daddy's burying ground,

in short, all the things you know and understand,

and go to a place that I will show you," says God

—and Abram goes.

For whatever reason, Abram *knows who is talking to him*.

He trusts the speaker. He believes the speech,

even though no evidence has been presented

to go with God's astounding promise

that Abram will be a blessing

and that others will be blessed through him.

We know from the rest of Genesis
that Abraham is no paper saint.

He will have moments of fear and deception--
he will treat his wife horribly and hand her around as his sister
to save his own skin.

In this crucial moment, though,
Abram is silent, decisive, obedient, and faithful,
and for this he will be known as the father of faith
as well as the father of a multitude.

How was he able to trust God so completely?

The truth is that the story has absolutely no interest in that
psychological aspect of things. It's just not going to help us.

But it's worth noting that he does not place his trust in God
all by himself. Abram has a community with him,
his own family and laborers and those that belong to Lot.

Whatever risks Abram takes
to embrace the newness he hears in God's voice,
and they are real risks, mind you,
he is doing so in the company of other people
who are doing the same thing with him.

Nicodemus, on the other hand, is on his own.

He is a leader of the Jews and a Pharisee,
meaning he's one of the religious elites in Jerusalem,
but he steps away from that one dark night
to go check out this rabbi Jesus he's heard so much about.

The darkness matters.

It suggests that he doesn't necessarily
want his other circles to know what he's doing,
and that he chooses to do what he does in isolation.

But he's heard a lot about this Jesus,
enough that he's confident
that Jesus' extraordinary gifts mean
Jesus has been sent from God.

It's an accurate deduction,
and his urge to check it out is moving and spirit filled and good,
until the conversation goes in directions that he's mentally
unprepared for, and quite frankly, we're not prepared for it either.

The story of Nicodemus has words in it that have become slogans
catch phrases for Christianity: "Born again"

And, of course, it contains the beautiful and familiar John 3:16,
"For God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten son,
that whoever believes in him should not perish but have
eternal life."

The chapter and verse numbers John 3:16 have themselves become
an abbreviation for Christian faith.

But even if there were no slogans in this story
that mislead us into thinking that we, like Nicodemus,
already know exactly what's going on,
even if there were no slogans it really isn't possible
to comprehend this story fully in English.

Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus

is packed with Greek words that have double meanings.

You can't hear it in English and get any of the wordplay!

We *can't* over hear the nuance or the poetry
of the meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus
in the middle of the night.

The best we can do is hear an explanation

that the word in Greek that means born from above,

or born into life in the Spirit of God,

also means born over again, which hangs Nicodemus up
as he tries to sort out the impossible biology.

[It's worth pausing to name the wonderful reality

that the term "born again" still causes problems today!]

Jesus has a long conversation with Nicodemus.

He explains the mysterious workings of God in the human heart

and the life that opens up to those who are willing

to shift their point of view, but Nicodemus is a sophisticated,
rational man, and he stumbles on his own certainties.

He started out with all kinds of words
about who Jesus is and what Jesus was up to,
and he was not wrong as far as he could go,
but Nicodemus hits an intellectual barrier that he can't navigate past.

He goes from lots of words to being confused and silenced.

It matters greatly that Jesus, though frustrated,
is not in any way unkind.

Perhaps he knows that the best way to help Nicodemus
is to muddle him, to leave him in a state
where his preconceived ideas of who Jesus is fall short
of what Jesus is really offering.

In the end Nicodemus, like Abram, is silent, before God,
which to me signals great hope.

In my life, at least, when I am silenced by misunderstanding or confusion,
that's when new thoughts and understandings can finally begin,
much like the oft told story of the guru on the mountaintop
who pours tea into a talky know-it-all's cup
until it spills over the rim and runs into his lap.
There is no point in seeking to learn something new
if you are already overflowing with your own assumptions.

Abram was able to make the shift,
to rely on God wholeheartedly the moment he heard God's voice.

Nicodemus can't shift toward God
and he goes home silenced.

The primary difference as I've already pointed out
is that one came in darkness alone,
the other had a community.

I think I may have shared with you before
about my friend, Barbara Gifford
who founded a ministry to women in prison Georgia.

She tells a story about a woman serving time
in the big penitentiary in Milledgeville.

I don't know what her crime was. I'll call her Sharon.

Sharon's faith helped her survive her prison term.

Her faithfulness was so evident that other prisoners
often sought her out when they needed help.

Sharon herself found support from a minister from an Atlanta church,
who felt a special calling to visit prisoners.

As long as Sharon was in prison
he came to see her, counsel her and pray with her.

When Sharon got out of prison her expectations were high.

She was free, and with the help of God
she was determined to start her life over.

But she had trouble finding a job.

She was reunited with her children
but the transition to being a full-time parent again
was harder than she expected.

Her faith, which had been so strong in prison was faltering.

So, one day, when she knew she was way down,
she called the minister who had given her so much help.

Sharon started to tell him what was going on
but he cut her short.

His comment was shockingly brief and to the point:
"I can't help you now," he said, and hung up on her.

It was clear to her what "now" meant:

It meant that helping Sharon was suddenly too risky--
she was not safe behind bars.^v

The minister could not move out of prison,
he could not move into new territory in faith.

I've known this story for a long time,

But it just now occurred to me what really happened.

I am guessing that minister was doing prison ministry alone,
not as part of a team from his church.

It was probably his thing, not a congregational commitment.

If it had been, he may not have been so afraid
of offering help to Sharon once she was free.

But he was alone, so he was the one who was imprisoned.

A few months ago I went onto the board of the only
historically Black seminary in the PCUSA, Johnson C. Smith.

I was surprised to be invited and wondered what someone like me could
possibly bring to Smith until I went to my first Board meeting and learned
about their commitment to having a diverse board
of men and women, clergy and lay people, of every ethnicity
from all parts of the U.S.

I also learned that Smith Seminary, as the school is now called,
has started a program to help congregations assist
those who are coming out of prison
as they transition in to new lives.

With 30% of African-American men in the United States spending time in prison,
the black community in particular wants to be there to help them transition.

Bringing grace and new life to people who have been incarcerated
is not something to be done alone, it takes a community.

Had the pastor Barbara told me about all those years ago
had support, he might not have been imprisoned by fear.

Beloved, if the future of the church lies in being disciples of Jesus
instead of church members, then it also depends on our being disciples
together, who together can hear and respond to God's voice
without fear and life each other up and give each other help.

The gospel is a journey from old securities to new gifts.

“Abram heard and went, destined for utter,
dangerous, wondrous newness.”^{vi} Nicodemus did too.

We know from the end of John's gospel that Nicodemus
appeared at Jesus tomb in full daylight
with a hundred pounds of spices,
a risky and public gesture of love
for a man who was already dead.

Nothing is said about it, but I am guessing Nicodemus made that shift
with the support of others who also loved Jesus
with whom he could talk and listen and grow in trust and faith.

That's what happens when
we leave the security of what we once knew
and move into the future together with God. AMEN.

“See with God’s Eyes” (Audio Title: 4th Sunday of Lent)

Ephesians 5:8-14; Psalm 23 and 1 Samuel 16:1-13

Dr. Catherine Taylor

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church

March 26, 2017

Last week I drove a pregnant woman to doctor’s appointment.

She is the mother in a family of six,

soon to be seven with the new baby’s birth in June.

A volunteer brought her to the church parking lot,

and we hopped in my car for the drive to the clinic in Radford.

She does not speak English. I do not speak Farsi,

the language of her native Afghanistan.

The Google translate app on the phone was no help for two reasons,

Because I haven’t learned how to make it speak

and life in a refugee camp can result in illiteracy.

So as we met we smiled a lot, gestured with our hands.

A swoop, a point, and an enquiring look

was enough to ask “How far along is the baby?”

She responded with a splayed hand, for five months.

Then we fell into silence for most of the drive.

Here we were barreling down the road on a lovely spring day,

what we could see, and little music from the CD player

the only shared experience we had.

I could not even ask her if she liked the music.

But there were the rolling hills, cows and horses grazing.

More pointing, nods and smiles.

At one point I tried to point out a magnificent hawk

perched in a tree by the highway,

but there was no way she could have seen it without

my being able to give any context to my jabbing finger.

I could not help but wonder at all the things this woman has seen

that I have no knowledge of, and how she might be feeling

in the midst of all kinds of new sights.

Fortunately, a fluent translator

was waiting at the doctor’s office,

and a volunteer childbirth educator.

They whisked the mom away, and an hour later

handed her off to me with happy smiles and the news

that everything with the baby is just fine.

They shared goodbyes all around,
and I could not help but wonder
what the other moms and dads
in the waiting room were seeing.
Another mother here for a medical exam?
Or, swathed as she was in a black sheath and head scarf,
a representative of death instead of life.
I'm glad not to know, because lately I have learned
that people can look at the same thing, and not see
the same thing at all.
Later as we arrived back at her apartment
she did what everyone I've encountered
from the Middle East has done,
invite me warmly with gestures and smiles
for food and drink and a chance to meet the family.
Sadly, I was expected elsewhere, so I had to say no.
I missed out on whatever I would have seen inside her door.

All our scriptures today have something to do with seeing
and not seeing at the same time.
Our Old Testament story today is about
looking and seeing as God's sees,
with the heart instead of just our eyes.
In the Ephesians text we are urged to live as children of light,
and to share the light of Christ
on things we encounter that thrive on dark intentions.
The gospel, had we read it, has Jesus healing a blind man,
And the psalm is a vision of what life lived
in the realm of God can look like when seen by a grateful heart:
abundant, protected, and well aware
of being accompanied by God forever.

This sermon today is the last sermon
in our series on the shifts congregations must to make
to fit the new context of the 21st century.
The Lectionary readings about how we see or fail to see,
feel once again like a perfect match,
like the rod and staff of the Holy Spirit,
guiding us on right paths.

Our first sermon in this series
talked about the need to shift from being
church members to being disciples of Jesus.
The second about being a gathered community of disciples,
helping and holding each other in faith.
Making such shifts will mean letting go
of some old and comfortable ways of seeing and being Church.
Then last week Rick Ufford-Chase brought us the news
that looking at the world through the eyes of privilege
is going to leave the church of tomorrow blind.
The faithful churches of tomorrow, say Rick,
will be the ones that seek to partner
with what God is doing in the world,
and God's favorite place to work is on the margins,
not in the middle and never at the top.

Our story from Samuel, though, doesn't seem to fit that pattern.
It is a story from the top, as God sends Samuel
to find a new king,
For reasons that are never very clear,
God has lost confidence in King Saul,
and wants someone new to be Israel's King.
It is a dangerous assignment
that requires subterfuge on Samuel's part.
Apparently, king-making can get you killed.
So God tells Samuel to pretend he's going
to the hills near Jesse's place to worship,
and to look Jesse's sons over meanwhile.
The elders in the community are no fools.
He knows the political landscape is unstable
and he's frightened for his family.
There is a genuine sense of near violence.
So he asks Samuel flat out as he approaches
if he comes in peace.
Samuel uses his cover story,
and whether anyone believes it or not, everybody goes along.
So the sons of Jesse are paraded past,
probably beginning with the eldest,
and each one looks better to Samuel than the next,
capable, strong, and kingly—whatever that means.

But it seems this is not a top down story after all, since God is there in Samuel's head
saying "no" to every candidate.

"You are looking with your eyes," says God,
but I am looking on the heart."

The line-up of splendid sons runs out.

Isn't there anyone else?

Well, yes, the youngest son, too unimportant
to have called away from tending the sheep, there's him,
but he cannot be wanted, can he?

He of course is David, the last and least,
a shepherd boy, not a warrior king in anyone's eyes.

This youngest son is the one God chooses,
so Samuel gets out his horn of oil,
and anoints him as God's own.

We would do well to be reminded of
the other reason why this is a story from the margins
rather than the top or the centers of power.

Israel is a nothing state, a tiny collection of tribes
who happen to be a fertile and geographically useful valley
surrounded by empires that are going to rise and fall and sweep through
just about whenever they please.

But God does not choose the empires, no.

God chooses tiny, vulnerable Israel as the place
where the next chapters of God's story will unfold.

If we want to be part of God's next chapter as a church,
a church for the 21st century,
then we'll need to get comfortable on the sidelines, too.

We been working there for a long time already.

For a long time this congregation has been busy
helping school underserved kids,
house homeless men and families,
feeding the hungry, aiding the shattered,
getting medicine to the sick in programs here and down the road
and across the ocean, caring for students,
knitting clothes for babies,
teaching people how to avoid
having the electric bill cut off again next month
and the month after that, and working for justice
in large and small ways as we can.

These acts of faith are surely one of the reasons why
our pews are still full and visitors still come through our doors
in these times when people are looking for the church
to be authentic and geared to experience, not yak.

Our missions are good and needful things.

That isn't going to change, and shouldn't.

But the change in the context around the church today
is inviting us to go about these things with new eyes,
eyes that no longer look on outward appearances,
but on the heart, our own hearts
as well as the hearts of people God wants us to serve.

The days of being little more than cultural Christians,
as we've said now for three weeks, are over.

To partner with God today, as Rick Ufford-Chase said
means sharing our own hurts and burdens,
so we'll be able to do God's work helping others.

It means being a community

where we are being shaped and formed ourselves,
a place where sacred partners care for each other
and are the real presence of Christ for each other.

Gather with any group of people for any length of time today,
and you are going to get glimpses of hurt.

Not one of us is free from real burdens,
yet sadly church is often the last place
where our hurt is revealed.

Too often we walk around looking with our eyes
but keeping our hearts locked away,
and when we do there is no chance for healing or for change.

"Let us live as children of light," admonishes Ephesians,
urging us to give up the shadows where too often we hide.

There is an idea here that transparency
is the way toward all that is good and right and true.

There is also the sense that what God wants for us
is light-filled lives, that can stare down every form of darkness.

Psalm 23 is a psalm about this God-filled life,
It has always been an irony to me
that it is used so often for funerals.

It is filled with images of wholeness and health,
of the safety that the presence of God with us can bring.

Most people don't know that that final lines of the psalm
are not just pleasant poetic images:

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

The words are much more dynamic.

Goodness and mercy here are not attributes
nice things to live to live by, not at all.

According to Walter Brueggemann we should read them
as capitalized: Goodness and Mercy are names for God.

The word usually translated “follow” is not follow either.

In Hebrew it's much closer to “pursue.”

Pursue is a lot more powerful than follow.

God is actively seeking you all the time.

Goodness and Mercy—God's own self—intends to continue
this pursuit forever, bringing you into closer touch
out of God's sheer desire
to shroud you in safety and love.

All three of these texts, then, are invitations
to very deep partnerships with God and other people
that hold out newness for us and for the church,
and all three of them also contain hints of risk.

For who among us trusts death or welcomes change?

As I hope you know by now, this fall the church is offering us all
the chance to become part of a small group
where we will read scripture, share our day to day lives
pray, and practice being as Christ for one another.

That really is it.

They are not issue groups or topic groups.

The topic will be you and your life and me and mine
and whatever we happen to hear in scripture together
that frees, fills, challenges, soothes, bothers, puzzles,
calls, lifts, irks, surprises, thrills, baffles, or convicts each one.

All the groups will use the same scriptures and prayers.

All the groups will covenant to hold their conversations sacred, confidential.

No one is to talk outside the group about whatever might be shared.

It is all voluntary, of course, and the point

is to prepare us as a people and as a church

so that we can be a place of deep relationships and genuine partnership
with each other and God,

simply because that is what the world needs most
for the church to be right now.

My prayer is that the growth and depth of faith

that will result from these friendships in Christ

will be transforming for me and for those who choose to take part and

give us as a congregation the courage to be part

of God's next chapter in the New River Valley,

whatever that turns out to be.

There are blue sheets in the bulletin for you to use

to indicate whether you think you'd like to be in a group,

and when, with space on the back for comments or questions.

During the offering today we invite you

to put them in the offering plate as it comes by

to help us plan to include you.

Meanwhile, whatever you choose

the God whose name is Goodness and Mercy

has plans for us and for our neighbors.

God is now and always will be in pursuit of us,

looking on our hearts and seeking to draw us

ever more fully into lives that are filled with light. AMEN.

ⁱ Phyllis Tickle, from *The Great Emergence*, as quoted by Mark Tidsworth in *Shift*. See below.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark Tidsworth, *Shift: Three Big Moves for the 21st Century Church*, Pinnacle Leadership Press, 2015, p. 1

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 11:24

^{iv} Abram means Father of height or high father; Abraham means Father of a multitude.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/all-men-bible/Abram-Abraham>

^v My Thanks to Barbara Gifford, founder of Prison Ministries with Women, for the true story of "Sharon."

^{vi} Walter Brueggemann et al, *Texts for Preaching, a Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV, Year A*, p.194.

Frequently Asked Questions

Will there be other Adult Education classes offered in the fall?

Yes, BPC Café, an unstructured fellowship hour will continue through the fall in the Gathering Space.

How will Wednesday night be organized?

Wednesday evenings will start at 5:30pm with dinner prepared by the Fellowship Team for a small cost. Small groups will meet from 6pm to 7pm. Nursery will be provided and a program from school aged children will take place while the small groups meet.

How long will the small groups last?

The Shift Small Groups will run between Labor Day and Thanksgiving. The weekly meetings will last one hour with the extra half hour for dinner on Wednesday nights.

What will happen in my small group?

You will be going through *Making the Shift Field Guide*. Each group session is laid out in detail and your group facilitator will lead you through it. In your group you will pray together, share together and engage Scripture on a personal level. Your responsibility is to be open to the how the Holy Spirit would lead you to participate.

Do I have to buy a book?

No. The books will be provided to you. In fact, you can opt in to having the daily engagements sent straight to your email each morning.

How much time will it take to be part of a group?

Outside of your one hour a week spent in your group there are six daily engagements. Each engagement consists of a short reflection, a question or two to ponder, a prayer and an action step for your day and are no longer than four paragraphs. It is up to you how long you spend with each daily engagement.

Will these groups continue after Thanksgiving?

We don't know. We are leaving that up to the Holy Spirit to guide each group in what they would want to do after Thanksgiving. The curriculum will end but the groups don't have to.

How will it be determined which group I will be in?

The aim is for each group to be intergenerational and diverse. The equipping team will be creating groups based on the day that you wish to be in a group.
