**Next Steps to Risk Taking Discipleship**

**Anchored in Hope: Next Steps in Prayer and Worship**

**Hebrews 6:19 and Luke 11:9-10**

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If you think about the future - about the future of our planet, of our world, of our country or our church, what do you hope for? What change would you like to see in the world?

*(Illicit answers from congregation)*

Everything you just said tells me that what you are hoping for is the fulfillment of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is God’s vision of a world in which all God’s people are safe and healthy -free to live in peace and abundance. When we hope for our world to become a healthier, safer, more loving, more joyful, more just place, we are joining God in that vision. In fact, we are God’s people of hope, and God created the church as a place for us to gather and work together to make that vision reality.

But, here’s the catch. For us to keep our hope, sustain our energy and not begin to despair, we have to continue to grow in faith. We have to practice faith. Today, we are starting a new sermon series, “Anchored in Hope: Next Steps to Risk-Taking Discipleship”. For the next five weeks, whatever you thought of when I asked what you hope for, I want you to hold onto it. Keep it in the forefront of your mind. Cut out a picture that represents it for you and put it up on the fridge. Don’t dismiss it and say “oh, that will never happen”, don’t walk away and forget about it. Keep it close. Make it be your anchor of hope as you challenge yourself to grow to know God more deeply.

Earlier this week, as I listened to the news out of Washington and heard reports about the devastation of Hurricane Michael, I found myself writing in my journal, “How do I turn despair into hope, paralysis into action”? And I realized I only have one answer to that question - and that is to be the church. God created the church to be an alternative to the despair and darkness of the world around us. That is no less true today than it was 2000 years ago.

If you don’t like what you see happening out there, you will find hope here. However, that can only continue to be true if you are willing to commit yourself to hope, commit yourself to living a life that nurtures hope within you and embodies hope in the world. And that means working at it.

In the early church, the symbol for hope was the anchor because of the scripture passage from Hebrews that we just heard, “we have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” And so I’ve made that the theme of our annual stewardship campaign, anchored in hope. By stewardship campaign I mean our annual financial giving campaign which we kick off today, but I mean much more than that, too. Committing to hope means honestly examining where you are in your discipleship journey and what your next steps might be. Does that mean your next step in financial giving? Yes, because giving is a discipleship practice. However, it also means choosing next steps in your prayer and worship life, your learning, your service, and your witness.

So, that’s what we’re going to be talking about for the next five weeks. No matter how long you have been on your spiritual journey or how far you have come, what can you do in your life of faith that helps the world get a little bit closer to whatever your hope for the future might be?

We’ll start with your worship and prayer life. Here’s the thing about making the world a better place - it takes courage. And there is no greater source of courage than God. So, you need to work on that relationship. Where are you in your prayer and worship life right now? Do you pray? How do you pray? What do you pray about? How often do you come to worship? Why do you come to worship?

Both prayer and worship are spiritual disciplines. Both are important because they bring us into alignment with God and help us prioritize God’s values. Prayer we typically do privately. Worship we do corporately. Both provide us an avenue for understanding what God is doing in the world - what is important to God - so we can evaluate whether we are doing what God asks of us.

The word worship comes from the Anglo-Saxon and, if we were living in England centuries ago, we would not have said “worship” but rather “worth-ship”. Worship means to attribute worth to something or someone. So, coming to worship is a way of recognizing the importance of God, the worth of God. We take this hour once a week to praise God, to thank God for all that we have, and to return God to God’s rightful place in our priorities.

Because, like any spiritual practice or spiritual discipline, worship not only brings us closer to God, worship works to transform us, as well. There is a beautiful quote from Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple: “To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.” Do you see how that works? In worship, we recognize and praise God’s worth - the holiness, truth, beauty, love, and purpose of God. But, as we do that, we are changed. Our conscience is quickened, our minds fed, our imaginations purged, our hearts opened, our wills aligned with God’s purposes.

We come to worship both to acknowledge God and to open ourselves to transformation.

Sadly, worship attendance is going down in mainline churches across the country - including here. We have so many conflicts - family visits, soccer games, chores at home, work to catch up on. We become caught up in the daily tasks of life and lose track of the bigger picture. Worship is our opportunity to remember what really matters and to be grateful. And to do that in a community of other people who are struggling with the same things but who are willing to stop for one hour a week and remember the kingdom of God and return God to the center of our lives.

Different people approach coming to worship in different ways. Here is one thing I know - like any practice, the more you do it, the more impact it will have on you. If you are here today, then you are not just a Christmas and Easter Christian. You choose worship as your priority at other times, too. How often? And are you willing to take a next step, to come just a little bit more? If you come once and a while, are you willing to commit yourself to once a month? If you already come once a month, are you willing to try for twice a month? Would you consider scheduling those dates, reserving them on the calendar, and not allowing anything else to become a higher priority. If you generally come about twice a month, would you aim for three times - or even four? And if you already are here almost every week, what are you willing to do to deepen the experience for others? Will you give a ride to someone who needs one? Read scripture in worship? Help to design a new worship service?

Worship can be life-changing, faith-forming, and community-building, but, like anything else, for you to gain what is good from it you have to show up.

While worship is communal, prayer is personal, but their purpose is the same - to put God and God’s priorities back in the center of your life. The thing I hear people say most often about prayer is that they don’t know how to do it. So, I’m going to tell you the secret - I went to seminary for three years to learn this. There isn’t a right way. You can’t do it wrong. The only mistake you can make is to not do it at all. And, honestly, I think most of us pray more often than we realize. “Oh, God, please let him get better.” “Help me get through this awful meeting.” “Give me courage to do this hard thing.” “Bring her home safely.” I think we say these little prayers all the time and don’t even recognize what we’re doing.

The act of prayer puts words to what we care about most, but it doesn’t have to be complicated. In fact, I think in many ways, less is more. If you are taking the first steps toward a conscious prayer life, don’t worry about getting all the words right or being in the right place, mood, circumstance. Don’t worry about setting aside 15 minutes in the morning or at night. Just talk to God. Just say what’s on your heart. “The sky is beautiful - thank you.” “I’m hungry and there is food in my fridge - thank you.” “Help, I’m scared.” “Help, I want my child to be happy.” “Help, I feel like the world is falling apart around me.”

If you already pray sometimes, what might be your next step in growing in prayer? There are so many ways to pray. Creating is prayer - knitting, writing, painting, singing. Silence is prayer - and something we could all benefit more from. Sitting at the bedside of someone who is sick is prayer. Meditation and mindfulness are ways to pray.

And there are more structured ways to pray, too. You can use a devotional. There is the practice of the examen, a guide to prayer that you use every morning and every evening. There is the practice called Lectio Divina, a way to pray through scripture.

Tomorrow, you are all going to receive an email from me. In that email, I’ll include some suggested next steps that you can take in your worship and prayer lives. Choose one and make a commitment to trying it - just one small step. Why? Because if we really want to see our hopes for our world realized, the kingdom of God fulfilled, God needs us and we need God. God needs us to be God’s hands and feet and heart in the world. We need God to help us know right from wrong, to keep us humble and grateful, to give us courage and wisdom, strength and determination. The waters of the world are turbulent, the winds blow wildly with upheaval and fear. God needs us to grow deeply and risk faithfully, and we need God to keep us anchored in hope. Amen.