

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
The Mission: Ready to Launch  
June 7, 2020  
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Matthew 28:16-20; Deuteronomy 34:1-8

I felt like we saw about everything there was to see in the Holy Land. Almost exactly two years ago Cindy and I went with a group from the church for our first visit to Israel and Jordan. We went to Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. We spent part of a morning in the Garden of Gethsemane and waited in line to get into the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. At each location different people in the group were moved by their connection to Jesus and or to our story of faith. For me, the one place that truly moved me, was the last one we visited, Mt. Nebo, yes the same Mt. Nebo in our Old Testament text. I suppose it might be strange that of all the places we visited that were associated with Jesus and his disciples, what moved me was one connected with Moses and the people of Israel. It moved me because from Mt. Nebo, you can see much of the Promised Land; the land that was to be the home of God's people. It stretches out before you, green and inviting. As I stood there peering out over the land, I somehow wondered what it must have been like for those Israelites. They had been in the wilderness, fought their way to this point and now were about to enter uncharted space. They were about to launch into a new adventure, unsure where it would take them, or the obstacles they would face, or perhaps even the outcome of their journey. They were also going without Moses who led them for the last forty years. The one thing I believe they did know was that they were ready to launch.

What I mean by this is that God had given them everything that they needed to launch their adventure into this new territory. God had given them each other. The Israelites were not a rag-tag band of people who just happened to meet on a mountain top. They were a family joined together by circumcision. That physical mark was a sign that they were different from all of the other peoples around them and that they had been chosen by God for a particular mission. I know that only men were circumcised, but in their patriarchal culture, the circumcision of fathers and husbands tied wives and daughters into the family. They were ready to launch because they had a manual of operations. They had the Law. The Law had been given at the outset of their journey in the wilderness and it had come to shape how they treated one another and those whom they encountered. It was God's manual for how to be a community that loved God with heart, soul, mind and strength, and loved neighbor as self. Finally, they were ready to launch because they had a physical reminder that God was with them. This physical reminder was the Ark of the Covenant, yes, the Raiders of the Lost Ark, ark. It was a tangible reminder that they were not alone and that the God of the Exodus was traveling alongside them. They were ready to launch.

For the disciples who met the resurrected Jesus on the mountain in Matthew 28, I doubt any of them could have missed the connection. Jesus was acting as the new Moses, sending his followers on to their new mission. And he reminds them that they too are ready to launch. They are ready to launch because they have each other; they have a family connected this time not by circumcision but by baptism. And this time baptism is a sign of belonging to the family for both men and women. "Make disciples," Jesus says, "And baptize them." They were ready to launch because they had an expanded manual of operations. Not only did they have the Law of Moses, they had Jesus' teachings, on the Law to guide and direct them. "Teach them to observe all I have commanded you," Jesus continues. Finally, they were ready to launch because they had a physical reminder that Jesus would be with them. This physical

reminder was not an ark but a meal; a meal he told them to celebrate whenever they were together. “And I am with you to the end of the age,” Jesus concludes. They were ready to launch.

My friends, what this means for us is that we too are ready to launch; ready to launch on our new mission of being a Matthew 25 church. All of you may be asking yourself, what is a Matthew 25 church? Matthew 25 is a movement of Presbyterian churches, based in Jesus’ call in Matthew 25 to care for the least. And it asks us to care for the least by working on three things. I will give you the first and the last on the list, then the one in the middle. The first is to create vital congregations in which peoples’ lives are transformed. I believe that we have been doing this well for a long time. Through Bible studies, mission endeavors, wonderful worship and small groups we have created a vital congregation. The last on the list is eradicating systemic poverty. In some ways we as a congregation have been at work in this area, both individually and collectively, for a considerable period of time. Through our work at Alcott Elementary, our work with Foster youth and through much of the work many of you do with organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs and Focus Hope we are using education to help lift people out of poverty. It is the middle challenge, however, that has gone unanswered. It is the one on which we are called to launch. The middle challenge is to dismantle structural racism. Of the three challenges to serving the least this one is the most difficult. It is the most difficult because it deals with people’s hearts and with our cultural “DNA.” Let me give you some examples from scientific papers. Schools punish black children, especially boys, more harshly for the same actions than they do white children. Physicians tend to ignore symptoms in black persons and fail to listen to them more than to white people. Housing for people of color tends to be more substandard than it is for whites. Law enforcement tends to treat people of color with suspicion and more harshly than it does white people. And all of this happens not because people get up each morning, wave the Confederate flag and think to themselves, I am going to oppress some people today. No, it is hard wired into the system and into people’s hearts and minds.

Thus then, to make a difference in this area requires a tremendous lift, yet we are ready to launch into this new endeavor of doing our best to help dismantle structural racism. We are ready to launch because we have each other. Because we are a family bound together by baptism with all of our brothers and sisters, of all skin colors and socio-economic conditions. We are ready to launch because we have a manual of operations in the scriptures that remind us that we are all one in Christ and that we are to care for the least. We are ready to launch because we have Christ with us. We have this table reminding us that in Christ transformation and new life is possible.

In some ways we are on our own Mt. Nebo, peering out over a landscape that is unfamiliar to us. My challenge to you on this Sunday is this; to pray. I challenge you to pray and see if you are willing to come on this challenging, and at times uncomfortable journey, that we might help to change the world.