

## Sabbatical Sermon (*Master-Teacher Slide*)

March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017

After 16 years pastoring here at the Vineyard, I felt it would be good to have a short time away.... **to re-envision**, to **dream fresh dreams**,

- to **deepen my spiritual disciplines**, and to **just soak more** in the Word and in His presence.
- It wasn't that I was burnt out... but I knew **I needed some focused time with God** without, at the same time, carrying all the regular responsibilities of the job.

Far from being an extended vacation, this would be a highly intentional time between me and God.

- And so, Clint and I sat down and talked about what it would look like if I took a 6-week mini-sabbatical.
- He immediately supported the idea as well as others here in leadership.

Now, this word, “sabbatical” comes from the Hebrew words, “Shabbat,” which means “ceasing”.

- But as appealing as it might sound to just “cease” for six weeks, nobody thought that would be easy for me!
- Unless, I was to just get away somewhere, there would inevitably be many distractions.

What I didn't expect, however, was that **just the day before the sabbatical was to begin**,

- we would face a bit of a crisis in our family, which ended up being the focus of our lives for the next four weeks...
- which is why Clint and I **affectionately call these past six weeks** as the *“sabbatical that never was.”*

And yet, even though I was only able to really get away for a week and a half, **God really met me** in a very deep and moving way.

- I'm not surprised by that, of course... because **as Psalm 23:5**

**says**, “*Surely Your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life.*”

- It reminds me of what God said to the Laodicean church in **Revelation 3:20**,
- “*Here I am! I stand at the door and know. If you hear My voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends.*”

Well, even though I’ve been **out of the pulpit for a while now**, I was hoping that you’d indulge me one more week...

- Where, **instead of sharing with you the sermon** I prepared for today,
- **you’d let me share some of the things God** was interacting with me about through these past few weeks.
- **Is that ok? Good! (Change Title Slide)**

Truth is, life’s intrusion into what was supposed to be a 6-week sabbatical isn’t such a surprise, is it?

- In fact, it’s one those things we’ve all experienced... that **life simply doesn’t always go the way we plan.**
- “I thought my life would be settled at this point in my life.” “I wasn’t supposed to struggle with depression.”
- “I was supposed to be married by now.” “I wasn’t supposed to lose my job.”

You see, we all have plans. But **to a people whose plans didn’t turn out** anywhere near the way they expected,

- God offers these words in Jeremiah: **“For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”**
- Of course, these are great words that can offer a lot of encouragement **when some grief or challenge intrudes into your life... & interferes with your plans.**

But, sometimes we read these words so fast that we’re not paying

attention to what's actually being said.

- You see, God doesn't say, "*For I know the plans YOU have for you.*" **He says, "I know the plans I HAVE for you."**
- Truth is, all through Scripture, God is always interrupting somebody's plans.
- **Adam** didn't plan on getting created. **Noah** didn't plan on building an ark.

**Abraham** didn't plan on becoming the father of a new nation in his nineties.

- **Esther** didn't plan on having to stop a genocide. **Moses** didn't plan on having to defy Pharaoh. **Mary** didn't plan on how and when she'd get pregnant!
- Not a single story in the Bible begins, "*Then some human being had a great plan*" **because it's ultimately not about my plans or your plans.**

So, the first real lesson of my sabbatical was to **pay less attention to what I perceive as interruptions and more time recognizing the movements of God in my everyday life.**

Let me highlight this by **looking at the context of those words God shared with Israel** through Jeremiah.

- But, as I do, keep in mind that, **in the ancient world, every nation** pretty much had their own gods.
- And, the **status of those gods**, particularly outside of that nation, would rise or fall depending on how well the nation was doing.

So, if your nation was the strongest, most powerful, and wealthiest, then your god was seen as a pretty great god.

- And, if your nation wasn't doing well, that your god was a weak God.
- Well, at one point of Israel's history, they were being invaded by three neighboring nations.

- There was no way they'd survive... except God promised Jehoshaphat, the King of Judah, that He would fight on their behalf.

And so, believe me, when word got out that Moab, Ammon, and Edom were defeated **without one Israelite dying, God's status in the region grew** by leaps and bounds.

- It clearly seemed that God's plan was for them to be this great nation where their God & King was seen by all nations as the God of gods and King of kings.
- But then, a world power emerges called Assyria... and Assyria comes along and completely obliterates the northern Kingdom of Israel.

And then, 150 years later, the new world superpower, Babylon, comes along and conquers the southern Kingdom of Judah.

- Not only are the city walls destroyed... not only is Solomon's temple demolished...
- But the people of God are forced to live as exiles in the city of Babylon. Everything they had was gone.

Believe me... nobody planned for that kind of future. And, it wasn't just about losing their homes and dreams.

- It also raised the deeper question, "How can we speak about a God who is strong and good when the lives of His people have been shattered?"
- Scripture says that, "*by the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept as we remembered Jerusalem.*"

But one day a letter comes to them from the prophet Jeremiah who is still in Jerusalem.

- They were no doubt hoping to have all their questions answered... questions like,
- "how long will we have to stay here?" "When will God deliver us?" Well, this is what Jeremiah wrote to them (Jeremiah 29

starting in verse 4):

*"This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.*

*"This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:*

- How Jeremiah starts this is important, because he's reminding them that their God is still the Lord Almighty...
- That He's lost none of His power even though their plans aren't working out the way they planned.
- "This is what the Lord Almighty; **the God of Israel** says..." You see, He hasn't forgotten His promise to be your God even though you think He has.

But then look at what He says, "to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon."

- Well, wait... we thought Nebuchadnezzar forced us into this mess?! Maybe there's more to this exile than it seems?
- Then He says, *'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters...'*

In other words, "You're going to be in exile a long time." In fact He says,

- *"When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill My gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to*

*give you hope and a future."*

What He's saying is that for this generation hearing this message there in exile, you will never return.

- And yet, **even in your exile, you can prosper...** because **what you really need** is not just in Jerusalem...
- It's in Me... and, **I'll be with you** in Babylon.
- It's just like God. **Even in the Garden**, because of their sin, Adam and Eve were exiled.
- And yet, God didn't remain in the Garden... He remained with the!

Truth is, I spent the first three weeks of my "sabbatical" feeling a bit frustrated that the plans I had for my sabbatical just wouldn't happen.

- The funny thing is that **one of my main goals for the sabbatical** was to deepen my spiritual disciplines.
- In other words, **I wanted to make a deeper shift away from simply "making time with God"** in my everyday life...
- To **experiencing God through all the moments** of my everyday life.

Well, I'm not sure *how I thought* that shift would happen... but what happened sure wasn't in any script I would have written!

- You see, God knew the "plans" I had for how this sabbatical ought to look...
- but, more importantly **were the plans He had for me!**

In fact, as I was praying on one of my hikes, I felt like He put in picture in my mind.

- It was of a fish in the ocean. Not very profound, huh?!
- The fish was supposed to represent me and the ocean represented God's presence.

- That's what I wanted for my sabbatical... to just "be" in His presence. But then the picture changed.

Now there was a strong current taking me where I didn't want to go. I was fighting the current, trying to stay in that place I wanted to be.

- But fatigue got the best of me... and, now, feeling very out-of-control, I was being taken by the current.
- I soon realize that, **in spite of the current**, I still have everything I want. I'm still in His presence.

If my plans are a **quiet, peaceful, healthy, safe life**, with lots of **entertainment & financial safety nets**,

- Thank I'll always be fighting the currents.
- But, if we build our lives around the plans He has for us, in spite of the challenges they might bring,
- Then we'll discover that His plans really are to bless and not harm... to give you hope and a future.

You see, **when life throws a curveball...** when you find it a bit **harder than you can comfortably bear...**

- When you **suffer**; when you're **disappointed**; when the **script you've written for your life gets edited**;
- If you look really carefully, **you might just see that little sign along the road, "Welcome to Babylon!"**

And, if right now in your life you're feeling like an exile in Babylon...

- Then I want to challenge you to **not focus your energy and prayers** on simply "getting out of Babylon."
- Instead, I'd like to **challenge you to discover God** in the midst of your Babylon.

Because, if you're willing to do that, you might discover, in a way you never had before...

- **the One who chose an exiled life** from heaven... In order to be your **Redeemer**, your **Savior**, your **Counselor**, your everlasting Father.
- Believe me, He understands the exile life like no one could.

**And that sort of leads me to another thing God was really highlighting with me over the past few weeks:**

- And that is that **“my problems are God’s problems.”**
- Those five words got into my head about five years ago, when I heard Rick Warren share this:
- He said, *“If you are God’s child, then your problems are his problems... and that He’s much better at fighting your battles and solving your problems than you will ever be.”*

What struck me about what he shared **wasn’t so much the content...** but the context and timing.

- You see, he shared those words one year after his 27-year old son committed suicide, back in April of 2013.
- He could have uttered those words just after the horrific tragedy of his son’s death, but they would have meant nothing;
- Because those are the kind of words that **can only have real meaning after you’ve had to truly wrestle over them.**

Needless to say, nothing can compare to what Rick and Kay went through (and continue to go through).

- But for us, what we were dealing with was very real and very weighty nonetheless.
- To call it a distraction from what I hoped my sabbatical would look like would certainly be an understatement.

And so, as I said, **what I first needed to do was to stop fighting the current...** And instead, simply discover him in the midst of it.

- But **then I needed to figure out what battles were mine to fight and which were His.**
- And it was then that I **happened to read 2 Chronicles 20:17...** the story of Jehoshaphat.

It must have been terrifying for the people of Judah. As I shared earlier, three nations had joined together to destroy them.

- In fact, these armies were already at the western shores of the Dead Sea. They could be in Jerusalem in a day or two.
- Whether it's **invading armies** or **invading circumstances**, it's easy to just scramble...
- To **try and somehow control** what, deep down, we know isn't really controllable.

But we're told, **in verse 3, that while Jehoshaphat "feared," he immediately "resolved to seek the Lord."**

- So, with all the "all the men of Judah standing before the Lord with their wives, children, and little ones," as verse 13 says,
- Jehoshaphat cries out to God, in **2 Chronicles 20:6**, saying:

"O LORD, God of our ancestors, you alone are the God who is in heaven. You are ruler of all the kingdoms of the earth. You are powerful and mighty; no one can stand against you! <sup>7</sup> O our God, did you not drive out those who lived in this land when your people Israel arrived? And did you not give this land forever to the descendants of your friend Abraham? <sup>8</sup> Your people settled here and built this Temple to honor your name. <sup>9</sup> They said, 'Whenever we are faced with any calamity such as war,<sup>[d]</sup> plague, or famine, we can come to stand in your presence before

this Temple where your name is honored. We can cry out to you to save us, and you will hear us and rescue us.’<sup>10</sup> “And now see what the armies of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir are doing. You would not let our ancestors invade those nations when Israel left Egypt, so they went around them and did not destroy them.<sup>11</sup> Now see how they reward us! For they have come to throw us out of your land, which you gave us as an inheritance.<sup>12</sup> O our God, won’t you stop them? **We are powerless against this mighty army that is about to attack us. We do not know what to do, but we are looking to you for help.”**

I’ve thought a lot about that last line... “We don’t know what to do, but we are looking to you for help.”

- Truth is, we often look everywhere but God for help... but Jehoshaphat runs right to Him in his fear.
- I wonder if he was reading the words of David for himself. In Psalm 118 he writes:
- *“In my distress, I prayed to the Lord and the Lord answered me and set me free. The Lord is FOR me, so I will have no fear... Yes, the Lord is FOR me; He WILL help me. Give Thanks to the Lord for He is good! His faithful love endures forever.”*

Standing there as a young man, up against Goliath, the fiercest of Philistine’s army,

- David measured his foe not against his size of his sword but rather the size of His God.
- And so David says to Goliath in **1 Samuel 17:45**, *“You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel!”*

David knew that God was for him... and, if God was for him, then who could really stand against him?

- It's why the write of **Hebrews, in 13:6**, writes, *“So we can say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper so I will have no fear.’”*
- So, there's Jehoshaphat and all Judah standing before God... “powerless against this mighty army that is about to attack.”

And, what happens next? God speaks. In **verse 15**, He responds to their cries and says,

- ***“Do not be afraid! Don't be discouraged by this mighty army, for the battle is not yours, but God's. Tomorrow, march out against them...”***
- *Verse 17... “But you will not even need to fight. Take your positions; then stand still and watch the Lord's victory. He is with you, O people of Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid or discouraged. Go out there tomorrow, for the Lord is with you.”*

The battle is not yours, but God's... don't be afraid or discouraged... for the Lord is with you.

- You know, I certainly don't wish “exile” on anyone. But **it's only in exile that we really learn what it means** that the battle is the Lords... that He is with us.
- It's only in “exile” **that we discover in our hearts** what we might have already known in our heads...
- **That our problems are His problems.**

Maybe you're feeling the weight of encroaching armies... the weight of serious health issues...

- the weight of a child not doing well... the weight of financial or relational challenges.
- Any one of those things can be hard enough... but, perhaps, like Judah, there isn't just one army coming up against them, there's three.

I've been feeling some of that weight... **but this is what God's been reminding me...**

- That my shoulders aren't strong enough to carry all that might come against me. **But... HIS are.**
- And so, **whenever I've felt that immediate intrusion of worry, fear, or anxiety**, I've just said it out loud:

"God, these are **real problems. But, You're MORE real.** So, God, you have a heck of a problem or two on your hands!"

- "I don't know how you're gonna figure all this out, but these things are **YOURS** to figure out."
- My problems are really His problems. In fact, while I was hiking in the San Gabriel mountains two weeks ago,
- I felt God telling me to **build a monument and to write the words beneath it... "My problems are His problems."** (*see pic*)

Truth is, some of that weight was keeping me up at night. And, while Joyce typically can just fall asleep even when things are tough, **my mind doesn't always know how to shut down.**

- But then, **as I sat in the House of Prayer in Pasadena, where I spent at least a few hours a day,**
- I stumbled into a familiar passage, **Isaiah 40:28.**
- This is what Isaiah says, "*Have you not known? Have you not heard that the Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, never faints and never grows weary?*"
- I then thought of **Psalm 121:** "*He who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, He who watches over Israel will neither slumber or sleep. The Lord watches over you... He will watch over your life... He will watch over your coming and going*" (verses 3-8)

As I meditated on these passages... regardless of what might be stirring inside of me, if our God was really who I know Him to be;

- If the Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth **NEVER** grows weary;

- If this God who take the greatest pleasure in calling me His son watches over me day and night; if He **neither sleeps nor slumbers**,
- Then I figured that **there's just no reason for both of us to be up all night**. And why? Because my problems are His problems!

Maybe this morning, **you just need to wrestle with that simple reality** that your problems are God's problems.

- Maybe you need to just **share with Him those things weighing you down** in your life right now...
- and declare that He is more real and more powerful than they are...
- And that **"these problems, God... they're big... they're overwhelming... but they're now Your problems!"**

A few weeks ago, I took Sarah down to Liberty University for a four-day program for incoming freshman.

- It's hard to imagine that our youngest will be leaving in August (5 months).
- And, at the end of the program, which was on a Sunday, I went a large church down there... and their worship team played a song called "The Lion and the Lamb."
- **PLAY SONG...** And as I do, surrender the weight you've been carrying. Give your problems to One who will always fight for you.
- *"Our God is a Lion, the Lion of Judah. He's roaring in power and fighting our battles. And every knee will bow before him... Who can stop the Lord Almighty? Who can stop the Lord?"*

**And that leads me to a third thing God was highlighting with me over the past few weeks:**

Don't worry... I'll keep this one brief. But, it's really how my

time with God started over these past few weeks.

- **It has to do with settling in your heart who He really is.**
- As I mentioned, **I took Sarah down to Liberty University** in Lynchburg, VA.
- And, after dropping her off, I spent four days at a **bed-n-breakfast in the mountains of the Shenandoah Valley.**
- I got to my room, started a fire, and sat down with my Bible.

I've been reading through Mark and was reading an account of Jesus walking with His disciples.

- They had just seen so many amazing things, which they couldn't stop talking about.
- So, Jesus, turns to them and asks, "*Who do the people say that I am?*"
- "Well, some people say Elijah, others say that You're one of our prophets."

**But then He asks them, "Who do you say I am? Who am I to you?"**

- Now, I know how Peter answered that question. He said, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*"
- But as I was reading this, I found myself in the middle of this scene.

And, suddenly, Jesus was looking at me... and He asked me, "*Who do you say that I am?*"

- Of course, I knew what the right answer was. But Jesus was clearly asking me to speak truthfully from my heart.
- "*Well, Jesus... You're my constant companion, my friend, You're my hero...*"

*But I think I've forgotten Your majesty... I've lost sight of Your power & authority to lead my life however You wish...*

- *I've forgotten that my problems really are Your problems.*
- So, Craig, who do you say I am? I wrote this in my journal:

*Well, Jesus... with a faith weaker and more weary that I would have wished for...*

- *With hope and expectation a little dimmer than I would have wanted, I can say this...*
- *That You, Jesus, are everything I will ever truly need... that You are Almighty God, my powerful Savior, my King and Warrior who goes before me.*
- *You are my Knight in Shining Armor, My steadfast anchor, My treasure and hope."*

You see, for us to find peace **even while exiled in Babylon...** For us to know that **He fights for us** and that **our problems are His** problems,

- We first need to be able to answer that question, "Who do you say that I am?"
- **When armies are invading...** when you **find yourself in exile,**
- it's **easy to allow our circumstances** to grow so big that, without even realizing it, **our God has suddenly grown so small.**

**There's a song that you might already know... but it really ministered to me as I was processing all this.**

- It's called "What a Beautiful Name." I'd like to close with this song before asking the worship team to come up to close the service.

- And as the song is playing, I just want to invite you to bring one or more of these things to God:

1. God, I've been fighting my circumstances so much that I've lost any sense of what You're doing and saying through them. I surrender my plans for Your plans.
2. God, these problems of mine are real... and way heavier than I can bear. **Because You fight for me... because You're my helper...** I recognize my problems are really Your problems.
3. God, I know that question is the most important question we'll ever have to answer in our lives: "Who do you say that I am?" Well, God, **I say that YOU are the Lord God Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth...** You are my deliverer, my Redeemer, my Savior, the King of kings.