

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Making the World New: A New Purpose  
April 26, 2020  
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Genesis 1:26-31; 1 Peter 1:10-16

She was twenty-two years old and she had lost her purpose for living. For some of us who are a bit older, this might seem like an exaggeration, yet it wasn't. Kelsea had been a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Dominican Republic. She had been working in a school improvement program and was just about to help them install their first hand washing station. The station was intended to help improve the hygiene of the children in the school and in the local community. Then came the email, followed almost immediately by a phone call, telling her that she needed to pack up immediately and make her way to the capital for a flight home. The U.S. government, for the first time in history, was bringing home all of the more than 7,000 volunteers from 60 countries. The coronavirus was spreading and the last thing that the leadership wanted was for some of its volunteers to become infected overseas, or to get caught in-country when all travel was shut down. For someone like Kelsea, it was as if everything she had ever dreamed of being and doing had been taken away from her. She had lost her purpose. And she is not alone.

I say this because in times of disruption, people often lose their purpose. In fact, the question, what is my purpose is probably the question I have been asked more times than any other question. It is asked of me when people retire, when the children leave home, when a loved one dies, when someone loses a job, when a marriage comes apart; or when people are stuck at home disconnected from family, friends, jobs, volunteer opportunities or simply our regular routine. It is asked in those moments when everything we thought was secure turns out not to be so. It may be that many of you watching this morning, caught in the covid-19 shelter in place world, are finding yourselves asking about your purpose. If this is where you are, or if you have asked this question, then Peter is here to help. He is here to help because in this part of his letter, Peter is offering new believers a crash course in discovering their purpose, because they too were feeling disconnected and disoriented. I say this because the early Christians to whom Peter is writing are Gentiles, whose purpose had been clearly defined for them from birth. It was to obey the Emperor and sacrifice to the gods. Those two actions bound all Romans together and gave their lives purpose. But when they became followers of Jesus, they were disconnected from those purposes and were struggling to find a new one. And Peter tells them that their purpose is to be holy even as God is holy.

According to Peter the purpose of every Jesus follower is to be holy as God is holy. For many of us, this is a very disquieting purpose statement. It is disquieting because over the years, being holy has gotten some bad press. Holiness has been portrayed as a legalistic, fundamentalist, intolerant, rigid manner of life. Composed of all sorts of rules that stifle human flourishing and restrict one's enjoyment of life. This understanding of holiness, which is one I once leaned toward, is, in my opinion, misguided and simply wrong. So what is holiness? I believe holiness is nothing more and nothing less than reflecting the character of God out into the world. My understanding is based on the opening chapter of Genesis where human beings are created in the image of God. In Hebrew, the image of God is the person who represents the king in a foreign land. These persons are to act just like the king would act. So we are to reflect God's character out into the world. And so if God is loving, gracious, forgiving, compassionate, long suffering and desirous of healing the world, then that is what we are to reflect. Holiness then, is representing God to the world around us. Realizing that this purpose can be an overwhelming task, Peter offers us a process for living our purpose.

Peter begins by calling us to passionately prepare for our purpose. Peter writes, "Therefore prepare your minds for action." The image he offers us is of an athlete preparing for a race. What a Jewish athlete would do in the first century was to take the bottom of the long robe, pull it up and tuck it between their legs and then tie

it with their rope belt. This would allow them to run freely. A more modern image would be of a sprinter preparing for a race. They set their blocks, crouch into position and tense their muscles. They are ready to launch. What these images imply is that we need to be intentional about preparing for our purpose. Peter wants us to understand that this purpose is not something we wander into, or take lightly. Being holy is in fact a great responsibility; to be those who reflect God's love, grace and forgiveness into the world. We must prepare because our response will define who we are and shape our future as those who have the potential to change the world by reflecting God's character into the world.

Peter continues by calling us to passionately pursue our purpose. Peter puts it this way, "discipline yourselves." The image is of someone staying the course; of a runner on a track staying centered in their lane, as they run, not veering one way or the other. I say this because the Greek word for discipline means to be sober, not inebriated. In other words someone who is sober is capable of walking a straight line rather than wandering off course. The implication is that of a laser like focus on reflecting God's character into the world. This is critical to us living our purpose because along the route of our "race" there will be those who call out to us, offering us other purposes which they claim are more important than holiness. Perhaps it will be wealth, power or fame or something else. But voices will call to us, hoping we will leave the lane and join them. This is why we are to be passionate about pursuing our purpose...so we can continue to show God's character to the world.

Finally Peter calls us to passionately persevere in our purpose. Peter puts it this way, "Set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed." Peter is showing us the finish line; our ultimate encounter with the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ. What this image tells us is that the race is not going to be a sprint, but a marathon. Peter understands that practicing our purpose of reflecting God into the world is difficult. As a less than perfect people, we easily forget our purpose and wander away. These lapses can be discouraging; yet Peter reminds us that we are not to give up or be discouraged. Last week we talked about Jesus as the living hope; the one who reveals himself in his ongoing presence of life and love within us. As such we get to experience God's presence and power. Peter wants us to understand that even if we fall short, even if we are less than perfect in living our purpose, it is ok because what awaits us is the grace of God in Jesus Christ; what awaits us is the love and life of Jesus fully revealed. So we persevere.

The day my mother dreaded had arrived. My father was going to retire. He had spent 35 years working for Chevron Oil Company and he loved almost every minute of it, which my mother said was a great gift. Her fear, and my fear, was that my father would be lost without work; that he would have no purpose in life. What we discovered was that he had no trouble finding things to do. He took up being the family genealogist, even writing his own software. Then he became my mother's caretaker through some difficult health issues. Then after her death he became a faithful choir member and money counter at the church, as well as a math tutor at the local elementary school. It seemed as if he continued to find purpose. But it was only after his death this past week that I realized that he had fooled us all, that he had always had purpose and it was not his work, or family or hobbies. His purpose had always been reflecting God into the world. When dad retired, people talked about how he had been the best boss; fair, supportive and encouraging. My cousins surprised my brothers and I when they said that he was their favorite uncle, because he deeply cared about them and their families. Church friends and choir buddies emailed to tell us of the acts of kindness and friendship he had shown. My dad got it. He knew his purpose, practiced his purpose, and persevered in his purpose with hope throughout his life. No, my father was not perfect, but he knew his purpose.

My prayer this morning is that we will do the same. That we will live into this amazing purpose of reflecting God into the world, so that when each of our days are over, and the grace of Jesus is revealed to us, we will know that the world is better because we knew and lived our purpose of being holy even as God is holy.