

We've Only Just Begun

1. Warm-up Question: On Sunday we celebrated the 30th Anniversary of the founding of our church and awarded pins to those celebrating their 5th, 10th, 15th, 20th, 25th, and 30th membership anniversaries. How long have you been at LifeJourney and what prompted you to begin attending?

2. Our church was birthed in 1991 out of a home Bible study for LGBTQ Christians at a time when there were no affirming churches. But that was a long time ago and things have sure changed, raising the question: Are the pioneering days of our church over or does God still have something groundbreaking and important for us to do? Jeff suggested the answer to that question can be found in three great stories of Jesus. The first story comes from the very beginning of Jesus' earthly life. Read Luke 2:8-14, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. In the Old Testament, shepherds were held in high esteem. But by the 1st century AD, there were a lot more people in Palestine, it was a lot more crowded, there were a lot more farmers raising crops yet still no extensive fences. As a result, shepherds moving around with their flocks, trampling crops and disregarding property lines, fell into disregard. Theologian Joaquim Jeremias tells us that by the 1st century shepherds were commonly viewed as "sinners" engaged in a dishonest occupation. So, how do you suppose the shepherds felt when an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to them in the dead of night?
 - b. In verse 10, the angel says, "Fear not; for, behold, I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." Given that shepherds were commonly viewed as "sinners," identify the words in verse 10 that would have had special meaning for them.
 - c. Why do you suppose God choose shepherds to be the first to be told about the birth of Jesus? What's the strategic significance of that?
 - d. Jeff said, "There are all kinds of 'shepherds' in our world today, by which I mean, people who are considered spiritually 'less than.' Shepherds come in all shapes and sizes." If Jesus were born into our culture today, who might the angels first appear to? In other words, what are some categories of people in our culture who are considered spiritually "less than"?
 - e. In your own life, have you ever felt spiritually "less than"? Why? What did that feel like?
 - f. God is raising up churches like ours to bring the movement Jesus launched (i.e., the church) back to its roots in Jesus and his radical welcome to all. LifeJourney Church has been raised up to extend the radical welcome of Jesus to shepherds of all kinds. Unfortunately, churches like ours are rare. Why is that? Why do so many churches struggle to replicate Jesus' radical welcome?

3. Saying that churches should be places of radical welcome begs the question: What is it that we're supposed to be welcoming people into? For guidance, we looked to a second story of Jesus that occurred right in the middle of his earthly ministry. Read Luke 14:1, and 15-24, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. The story Jesus tells in this passage is supposed to help us better understand what the kingdom of God is like. Who do the people on the master's original guest list represent?
 - b. Who do the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame represent?
 - c. Imagine yourself as a crippled 1st century homeless person who's suddenly approached by someone saying his wealthy master requests the honor of your presence at his sumptuous feast. What would you feel in that moment? What point is Jesus trying to make?
 - d. Jeff said, "The movement Jesus was leading wasn't about merit, but grace. It wasn't about memorizing and meeting a whole bunch of rules so you can earn a seat at the table; it was about believing that even spiritual cripples are welcome and simply accepting the invitation." Do you see yourself as a "spiritual cripple"? Is it important to see ourselves that way? Why or why not?
 - e. As best you understand, what does it mean to say that we are "saved by grace"?
 - f. Jeff said, "In the Old Testament, rules were at the center and grace on the periphery. In the New Testament, grace is at the center and rules on the periphery. Unfortunately, most churches give the impression we're still living in the Old Testament." Why do so many churches struggle to put grace at the center?
4. The last story of Jesus we explored came at the very end on the cross, where we're told, "Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." Matthew 27:50.
 - a. The curtain of the temple was there to protect people from the danger of entering the direct presence of God. The symbolism was clear: God's presence is dangerous and to be feared. What message should we get from the ripping open of that curtain?
 - b. Read the Mike Yaconellie quote on p. 3, then share your thoughts/feelings.
 - c. Read the love letter from Jesus on p. 4, then share your thoughts/feelings.
5. Throughout Sunday's sermon, Jeff shared several stories of people who could only find spiritual life in a church like ours. Why is that? What's so rare about our church? How important do you think churches like ours are to the future of Jesus' work on earth?
6. What do you think God's vision for the future of our church is?

Luke 2:8-14

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, good will toward all."

Luke 14:1, and 15-24

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely. ¹⁵One of the dinner guests . . . said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" ¹⁶Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. ¹⁷At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' ¹⁸But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies.' ¹⁹Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies.' ²⁰Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' ²¹So the slave returned and reported this to his master.

Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' ²²And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' ²³Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. ²⁴For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

Mike Yaconelli, "Messy Spirituality"

"Spirituality is not a formula; it is not a test. It is a relationship. Spirituality is not about competency; it is about intimacy. Spirituality is not about perfection; it is about connection. The way of the spiritual life begins where we are *now* in the mess of our lives. Accepting the reality of our broken, flawed lives is the beginning of spirituality, not because the spiritual life will remove our flaws, but because we *let go* of seeking perfection and instead seek God, the one who is present in the tangledness of our lives. Spirituality is not about being fixed; it is about God's being present in the mess of our unfixeness."

Love Letter from Jesus

“Dear _____ [fill in your name]: How are you? I just had to send you this letter to tell you how much I love you. I saw you yesterday as you were walking with your friends. I waited all day, hoping you would walk and talk with me like you do them. As evening approached, I gave a sunset to close your day, and a cool breeze to refresh you. Then I waited, but you never came.

I saw you fall asleep last night, and I longed to touch your brow, so I spilled moonlight on your face. Again I waited, but you feel asleep before we could talk.

You awakened late this morning and rushed off for the day. My tears were the rain. You looked so sad and alone. It makes my heart ache because I understand. I love you. I whisper it in the breeze that passes through the leaves and trees, and breathe it in the color of the flowers. I shout it to you in the mountain streams and the songs birds sing. I clothe you with warm sunshine and perfume the air. My love for you is deeper than the oceans.

We will spend eternity in together in heaven. I know how hard it is on earth. I want to help you. Just call on me, ask me, talk to me. It’s your decision. I have chosen you, and because of this I will wait. Because I love you. Your friend, Jesus.”