

The Story: A New Beginning

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[0 : 0 0] My name is Pastor Kent Dixon. I'm the lead pastor of Bramard Baptist Church in Edmonton, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. So for everyone who's tuning in from our church this morning, welcome to you. God bless each one of you. And for those of you who are watching or listening from elsewhere, welcome this morning as well. It's a pleasure to be here this morning with you in a virtual way. And as we reflect on God's word together this morning, spend some time in God's word. And just hopefully this is a source of encouragement for you this morning. So I need to share with you this morning that it gives a real sense of power to be a pastor working from home, doing live streaming from home, and to have the opportunity to control the environment in my house, essentially. So before I go live, I have to tell everyone, okay, everybody be quiet. Everybody stay in your rooms, come downstairs, whatever you're going to do. So it's a lot of fun to do that.

So it's funny as well that I've mentioned to a few people that since I've been doing this, I find it I've spoken in front of groups as large as 300 people in over the course of my career in marketing and communications, and even done live interviews on TV and radio and so on over the years. But for some reason, talking directly to my laptop alone in my kitchen is the most nerve wracking experience that you can possibly imagine. I don't know why that is. But here we are. So bear with me as we explore this strange new world together. You know, I was reflecting as I was listening to people talking this morning, good morning to people who are saying good morning, by the way, on the comments. I've been reflecting this past week, I think we're all in a rush to return to normal. We're in a rush to return to what is familiar, what we had before. But my challenge for each of us, for myself as well as each one of you is don't be in a hurry to return to things that maybe weren't that important. So this is a great time for you to be able to reflect on what are you rushing back to? What are you missing the most? What are the things that you are missing the most? And maybe also during this time, what are the things that you have realized that you had perhaps neglected? And this is not a pastor trying to make you feel guilty that you've neglected your relationship with God, perhaps, but that could be something that God is saying to you as well. But what about relationships and friendships and other things that you've possibly neglected?

You know, we spend so much time working and spend so much time engaged in other pursuits. And we often say to one another, you know, I just want to spend time with my family. I'm looking forward to the weekend. I'm looking forward to having some free time, we often say. But really, we have as much time as everyone else. So it's really how we want to commit our time, how we want to use our time, how we want to the expression we often hear is how we want to spend our time. So how are you spending your time these days? And as we begin over the next hopefully few months, or even four to six months, as we have time to reflect as we have time to be with only the people that are closest to us, or even by ourselves, a lot of the time. Take this time, I encourage each of us to take this time to reflect on what is truly valuable, so that when normal becomes our reality again, that new normal is something different for you, is something that can be more enriching and encouraging for you. And I hope that your relationship with God benefits from this time. So as I said, good morning, you'll recognize my friend Fern here.

Fern is my new addition. So we wanted to spruce up the environment a little bit. So hopefully spruce, but Fern isn't from the spruce family. Never mind. I want to start by talking to you about a book.

And it's a book that no parent ever wants to read. The title of this book is When Your Child Is Missing. If you're a parent watching this morning, have you ever had a child go missing?

[4 : 27] I'm going to tell you a story. When our daughter Emily was very small, we're in a big store in a shopping center, and she was walking around. She was a toddler. And so it was my job to watch her.

Now, I was in a busy corporate job at the time. And so my mind was elsewhere. I was distracted. So it was my job to watch her. And I was distracted. In a matter of seconds, Emily disappeared.

It was a big clothing store that we were in with tall racks. And Michelle and I can both remember hiding from our own parents under a rack of clothing in a department store. So we began by looking there.

The store staff helped us. And we scoured that entire store. It was a big store. And we couldn't find her. So as you can imagine, that sense of panic, that sense of worry, and franticness began to escalate for us. And so when we realized we couldn't see her in the store, our worst fears came to reality because we realized she must have left that store and gone out into the shopping center, out into the mall. And so this was a big downtown shopping center. So if you're from a larger city and you're familiar with shopping centers, they have large common areas with usually two or three levels and railings and many, many stores. So we began to panic that we wouldn't find her again.

That was what was going through my head. So immediately we went out into the shopping center. And I began, I was frantic and I began to worry more and more and more. And I walked down that shopping center, the main concourse area. And fortunately, I just didn't go very far. And I came around a corner and there she was. So in hindsight, she hadn't really gone that far. And yet that sense of panic was very real. And so in a moment like that, if that's happened to you, like it happened to me, you recognize immediately that you would do anything for your child.

[6 : 33] You do anything to get your child back. And so the parent authors, the book that I mentioned, When a Child is Missing, was written by parents. And these parents had personally experienced the terror of their child going missing. And unfortunately, their stories hadn't had the same kind of happy ending that ours had. One of these families has been searching for their child since 1989.

And they're committed to keeping searching. So the immediate thing that might pop into your head is, well, 1989, there's no chance. But as long as there is a chance, I think we can recognize as parents that we would be committed to that. And so these two sets of parents wrote this book in collaboration with other experts and people who are knowledgeable on various topics. They wrote the book out of a desire to protect families from experiencing the trauma that they personally experience.

And we recognize that as parents, we're fiercely committed to our children. And we'll do anything we can to find them if they become lost. And the same is true. I'm going to tell you this morning, the same is true of God. God has children who have gone the wrong direction, lost their bearings, lost their place in their life, and their vision for the next life.

And this morning, we're going to look at the fact that God launched a massive three-phase search and rescue operation to find his lost children. And we're going to look at that this morning. I'm a fan of action movies.

So I love it when a group of Navy SEALs, a squadron is planes, by the way, when a group of Navy SEALs or special operatives go in on a mission to rescue someone. It's exciting. It's engaging.

[8 : 43] So we recognize in this search and rescue operation of God that the first phase was Israel. God wanted a nation that would demonstrate his character to the world, and through which he could draw his people back to him.

And again, as we're talking in the story, our sermon series, it's about God reaching out to his children, reaching out to his people to draw them back to him. The second phase, you won't be surprised by this at all, the second phase in God's search and rescue operation was Jesus Christ. Jesus declared to the world, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the Father but by me. You see, we're lost, and Jesus became our way home.

By his death and resurrection, which we recognized and reflected on last weekend with Good Friday and Easter, we can be reunited with our Heavenly Father, both in relationship now and in our ultimate destiny, our ultimate eternity.

We're going to focus particularly on the third phase this morning of that search and rescue operation with our sermon titled New Beginnings. So the third phase of God's search and rescue operation to find his children and draw them back to him is the church.

[10 : 19] We're going to be looking at, not surprisingly, the book of Acts, beginning with Acts chapter 1, verse 8. And I think it's helpful for us to start with a bit of background in the book of Acts.

It's the second in a two-part set of books written by Luke, one of Jesus' disciples. Tradition tells us that Luke, the author of the book that bears his name, as well as the book of Acts, was a doctor.

In the book of Luke, we learn about the second phase of God's plan. God finding his lost children through Jesus Christ. And then when considered along with the other gospel accounts, we gain a very full and multifaceted understanding of the person and ministry of Jesus Christ.

And as we've said, the book of Acts was written by Luke, and it's addressed to the same person as his gospel, a man named Theophilus. Theophilus.

So in many ways, the book of Acts reads like an action movie. It's got earthquakes and shipwrecks and avenging angels. It's got harrowing escapes and riots and murder plots, political intrigue and courtroom drama, and so much more.

[11 : 44] But the main purpose of the book is that it describes the third phase of God's search and rescue plan for his children. God will find his lost children through the church.

As I mentioned, Acts 1 verse 8 is the theme verse for the book. And the Bible says in Acts 1 verse 8, Now this was a powerful message that Jesus gave his disciples at that time.

And it's also a powerful message for us as well. No matter where we live, as Christians, our witness should begin at home and extend from there into all the earth.

As a Canadian pastor, author, and missions advocate, Dr. Oswald J. Smith once said, The light that shines the farthest will shine the brightest at home.

Like ripples in a pond when a pebble is thrown in, our witness for God, our impact on others, should begin at home and radiate outwards from there.

[13 : 11] And we read in the book of Acts that the early group of believers, that early group of Christ followers, was about 120 people. And that Jesus had commanded them to wait in Jerusalem.

But why wait? And why, of all places, Jerusalem? Well, the early church waited for what Jesus had promised before he returned to be with the Father.

They waited for the Holy Spirit to come and be with them, the Comforter. So why Jerusalem? Well, because the day of Pentecost was approaching.

And in Jerusalem, there would be about a million people during the time of that celebration. One million people. So what was the day of Pentecost?

Well, I think as Christians, a lot of times, we associate that term, Pentecost, with the coming of the Holy Spirit. And that's not wrong. But it had context before that.

[14 : 20] Held 50 days after Passover, Pentecost was also called the Feast of Weeks. And it's mentioned in the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 16, verse 16.

Pentecost was one of three major annual feasts. And it was a feast of Thanksgiving for harvested crops. Jesus was crucified at Passover, and he ascended 40 days after his resurrection.

Then the Holy Spirit came 50 days after the resurrection, 40 days after the ascension of Jesus. If I've lost you there, it's okay.

Jews of many nations gathered in Jerusalem for this festival. So that speech that Peter gave to a gathered crowd in the book of Acts, Peter gave a speech about the Holy Spirit, and that speech would have been given not only to a huge crowd, but an international crowd.

The arrival of the Holy Spirit is one of the most amazing events recorded in Scripture. So if you have your Bible handy, you can look up Acts, chapter 2, verses 1 to 4, but I'll read that for us as well.

[15 : 41] When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

God made his presence known to this group of believers in a spectacular way. Violent wind, fire, and the Holy Spirit.

Would you like God to reveal himself to you in ways like that? I bet you would. I've often wondered that myself. Wouldn't that be great? Wouldn't that be exciting? Wouldn't that truly be miraculous and remarkable?

So we can recognize that God may do that as God wills. God may reveal himself to you, reveal his direction for you in a way that is that dramatic and miraculous.

[16 : 54] But I also want to encourage you to be very careful about what you wish for. And also be very careful about imposing your expectations or your desires on God.

Wait patiently for God. Wait patiently for God and listen. During this time of isolation, when we're, we probably have, there's probably no such thing as this phrase, but it's a phrase we use anyway.

Too much time on our hands. Do you feel like you have too much time on your hands? Nonsense. Nonsense. Use this time to reach out to God, to connect with God, to seek God, to bring you comfort, to bring you encouragement, to open your eyes to things that you may not have seen that are all around you in the busyness of life while you have this stillness.

Take the opportunity to be still and listen for the voice of God in your life. So let's continue with the story as the Bible tells us in Acts chapter 2 now, verses 5 to 12.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem, God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment. Because no one heard, because each one, I'm sorry, heard their own language being spoken.

[18 : 28] Utterly amazed, they asked, aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his native language? Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia.

Egypt, and the parts of Libya near Cyrene. Visitors from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism. Cretans, and Arabs.

We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own language. That would be amazing. Amazed and perplexed, they said to each other, what does this mean?

And that's the question. So these 120 followers of Jesus, under the power of the Holy Spirit, became cross-cultural missionaries.

Soak that in for a second. These people became cross-cultural missionaries under the power of the Holy Spirit, speaking the wonderful works of God in the languages of the world.

[19 : 41] And as we learn from our passage, others who experienced this event were amazed and clearly saw this as something miraculous. And so as he always does, God demonstrates his power and acts through his people to draw others back to him.

But the burning question, pun intended, is what does this mean? This fire, these languages.

And so I love God's sense of irony here. Peter, the disciple who denied Jesus three times, becomes one of the primary agents of God's plan.

Jesus had forgiven and redeemed Peter through the power of the Holy Spirit. God made him the humble but dynamic herald of his plan for humanity.

I have a question for you this morning. Have you ever felt as if you've made such bad mistakes, such bad decisions, that God could never forgive you and never use you?

[20 : 57] My friends, I want to encourage you this morning that no matter what sins you've committed, God promises to forgive you. And he will make you useful for his kingdom.

Whoever you are, wherever you are, no matter your challenges or circumstances, God will use you because he does see you.

Allow God to forgive you. Don't hold on to your expectations of yourself, your own sense of failure, your own sense of inadequacy.

Let go of that and allow God to free you from it. Because God will use you just as he used Peter. And just as throughout the course of scripture, he used so many people who others would have deemed to be not good enough, too old, too young, too tall, too short, too poor, too rich.

God sees none of that. As we read in Acts 2 now, 37 to 41, 3,000 people responded to Peter's explanation of God's plan that day.

[22 : 09] 3,000 people in one day. They repented of their selfish and short-sighted choices. And they were baptized.

These people, these 3,000, became the new members of God's family, the members of that first church. Now the Bible says in Acts 2, 42 to 47, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.

And the Lord added to their number daily those who were saved. That massive, diverse, multicultural crowd of 3,000 people became a unified community, the church.

[23 : 28] We see through these events that God was finding his lost children and creating a thriving family. A people who, though they had many different backgrounds, many different cultural, ethnic origins, or even social standing.

People who came together united in common belief, under a common calling and vision, and under one God. The unifying factor in all of this is the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Because unity in the Spirit is what drew that family together. And unity under the same Spirit is what draws us together as Christians today.

There are no singular pronouns for the account of the early church. There's no he, she, they, him. This was not just a gathering of a bunch of individuals, saved individuals, but a community living in the Spirit of God.

Those accounts of the early church in the book of Acts talked about community and unity and shared vision and shared commitment. It makes us sad in some ways, I think, that when we reflect on the intentional community that the church is intended to reflect, we read in Acts 2, 46 and 47, those early followers of Jesus met together in one another's homes.

[25 : 07] They shared meals together. And so we may be sad that that's obviously something that we can't really do right now. We can't have that direct fellowship, that person-to-person contact as much.

But my hope is that as we reflect on the things that we can't do right now, as we reflect on the in-person communities that we are missing so much right now, I miss my church.

I miss the people that are watching online. I miss interactions one-on-one and conversations. As a group of elders from our church, we're each calling a group of people regularly from our church weekly to stay connected and see how people are doing, see how we can be praying for them and so on.

And those conversations are our absolute goal to me because I'm connecting with people the best way that we can. But it's intentional and it's real. And so that's valuable.

My hope is that as we reflect on the things that we cannot do right now, we'll begin to realize, as I talked about at the beginning, even more just how valuable those things are to us and how important they are in our lives.

[26 : 24] And while we still may be physically apart in the days and weeks ahead for now, let's recognize that we are still united by the Spirit of God who is at work in each of us as individuals, as we experience a relationship with God more deeply in these days.

That's my hope. And also as he continues to be at work in the greater family of God, in our cities, in our provinces, in our country, in our nations, around the world, God is still in control.

And God, my friends, is very much at work. Very much at work. Did you know that a military general's command remains in effect until he or she issues a new command?

Did you know that? Jesus' last command to his followers came in Acts 1, verse 8. And that same command applies to us today.

We are to share the truth of God's search and rescue mission for his children. Share the truth that that is at work.

[27 : 39] And my friends, we are his agents in that mission. And even though we're divided in many physical ways right now, we are still the church.

And we have a job to do. For our closing reflection this morning, I want to share the lyrics as I did last week. The lyrics to a well-known hymn.

This is a new one for this Sunday. See if you can figure it out before I get to the end. I bet you will. My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ.

My righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name. When darkness veils his lovely face, I rest on his unchanging grace.

In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil. His oath, his covenant, his blood, support me in the whelming flood.

[28 : 46] When all around my soul gives way, he then is all my hope and stay. When he shall come with trumpet sound, oh, may I then in him be found.

In him, my righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne. On Christ, the solid rock, I stand.

All other ground is sinking sand. All other ground is sinking sand. Friends, the God of the early church is still our God today.

Trust in him amid the storms of life. Trust in him amid the uncertainty of these times. And I encourage you to reach out to others when you struggle.

Reach out for help. Reach out for conversation and connection. Those things are valuable. But the light of God's truth, the light of his word, will guide your way and will guide us through the unknown as we give our lives fully to him.

[30 : 02] Have confidence that God is still in control and his church and his people will prevail. Amen.

Well, you'll notice at the bottom of the comments, the bottom of the summary for this week's sermon, I have listed some information, some email addresses and other things.

So I'm going to try that this week rather than read out announcements. So I encourage you to have a read there. But go in the peace of God. Go in the encouragement and comfort that God sees you in these uncertain times.

And your future is not uncertain to him. We will get through this as a family of God together. Go in peace and have a great week.

Amen. Amen.