

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
April 24, 2016
July 13, 2008 (Overture)

Psalm 111; Matthew 4:18-25; John 8:12
“Postlude – Part I”

I presume you all received my letter last week about my retirement from my current ministry and fulltime ministry at the end of August this year.

Suellen and I have been in “no-man’s land” this week as we anticipate this change in our lives. It was a bigger decision than I had anticipated. Now, with the decision made, we trust that the Holy Spirit will lead you and us into a future better than we can imagine.

In considering this move and sermon, I read my candidating sermon of eight years ago. The title of the sermon was “Overture.” I found another musical symbol for this sermon, “postlude,” defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as,

1 : a closing piece of music; *especially* : an organ voluntary at the end of a church service

2 : a closing phase (as of an epoch or a literary work)

This describes this period of my ministry at Redwoods. It is the end of my service with you and the closing phase of my work. It is good to see my ministry as worship (the overtly sacred dimension) and as literary work (the artistic aspect infused with the spirit). Religion as art or the art of religion might be another way of saying it. All of life is sacred.

It is serendipitous that Nancy is the liturgist today because she was co-chair with Polly Gorder of the Pastor Nominating Committee that called me along with you to be your pastor.

This sermon will be in two parts because my candidating sermon contained two parts. That sermon was longer than I normally preach. I will preach this sermon on two Sundays.

In my earlier sermon, I mentioned that in musicals, an overture consists of segments from the more popular songs in the musical. In light operas, the overture is a *potpourri* of airs based on the tunes of songs that follow. The overture sets the mood for the production. This applied to my sermon back then and it applies today.

I said back then, “The sermon communicates the good news of the Gospel as ways to follow Jesus in ministry and highlights in segments the nature of our partnership in the years come. It will touch on some of the themes that will take place in our ministry together. I hope that we will hear some of what God is already doing in the church and in what God intends to do. Some is prescriptive as per the goals and strategies in your mission vision study and some is yet to be as we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit in our midst.”

We see in today’s sermon how the music brought us to today. The music still plays and will until I leave and will continue with similar and different notes in the future.

“Today’s overture,” I said back then, “is told through the Gospel texts and a story, which has two parts. The first story is this.

“Suellen, Anna, David, and I visited a wild game park in South Africa when the children were about one and three years old. We were in our VW Beetle. The park rules were to remain in the car after we entered the park since wild animals were all around and could pounce upon unsuspecting visitors. In addition, we did not want to be lunch for a lion or leopard. We saw elephants near the gate so we knew that animals were around.

“We traveled along a dusty road and looked for animals. We looked and looked and saw only bush, scrub, trees, and open spaces. Mile after mile we looked and still no animals. We came across a narrow side road and decided to get off the beaten track. Maybe the animals had done the same. We traveled along this road and still no animals. We could not believe it.

“We dipped into a valley and climbed back up when suddenly the car went dead. I tried to restart the car in reverse gear but nothing happened and we landed at the bottom of the valley. We stood still in this bowl under a hot African sun. We could not get out of the car because of the wild animals. We could not call anyone because there were no cell phones. There we sat: mother, father, and two small children for five minutes, ten minutes, and one hour. In the midst of this, we prayed.

“After an hour or so, we heard the sound of a vehicle, then silence, then a door banging shut. I immediately called out, “Hello! Hello!” and within minutes a ranger appeared. He was in the area checking up on some animals. We told him our story and he radioed to base and shortly another ranger arrived with a tractor and rifle slung across his shoulder.

“He tied a towrope to the front of our car and towed us to the exit gate. This took about an hour and an amazing thing happened on the way. We had gone only a few minutes when the ranger pointed to the right. We looked and could not see anything,

then looked again and there was a majestic impala buck standing dead still in surrounding bush and watching us go by.

“We went on, the ranger pointed to the left side, and there disguised besides a tall tree was a giraffe the neck easily mistaken for a tree trunk. This went on and on all the way to the gate with the man before us pointing to this animal and that (rhino, hippo, springbok, zebra, baboon, warthog, and the like) in what turned out to be the best animal-viewing safari ever.

“I got to thinking about this event and saw Jesus in this ranger. We could not see animals on our way in but they were there. It took this man to show them to us. When we follow Jesus, we see things that we do not see under normal circumstances.

“When Jesus begins his ministry, he calls people to follow him and when they do, they witness his amazing ministry. Today’s text tells us that great crowds follow him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. I heard the call to follow Jesus as a young adult and stand before you today. Jesus calls us all to follow him and when we do, we see things we would never see before. For starters, we see what the disciples and crowds see in the text today.

- We see Jesus teaching in synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. We see the proclamation of the good news in our world today in the ways we and the church at large communicate the word (and the ways are many) and in the ways we care for the diseased and sick among us. We see this in the ministries of this church: the special offerings, the Crop Walk, medical visits to Guatemala (formerly with Helen Morita and Nancy Parsons), Bread for the World letter writing and the caring of the Board of Deacons and Session and their committees, to name a few. We see this in the multitude of ministries of the church at large.
- When we follow Jesus, we see repeatedly the grandeur of God symbolized the impala buck standing regal and strong in its surroundings. In a way, the antelope represents the majesty of God, a very Reformed concept. When we follow Jesus, we come into God’s sovereign presence. The denomination’s “A Brief Statement of Faith” refers to God’s majesty as “Sovereign love.” I like that definition. Ministry in the church – the church’s high calling – is living into God’s sovereign love.
- When we follow Jesus, we see a larger world symbolized the giraffe that sees the big picture. In the Gospel according to John, we hear that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” (3:16) Our mission is local and global. This congregation beautifully expresses that.
- When we follow Jesus we see community symbolized by every species of animal living, eating, and playing in community and we appreciate the community we

have in Christ and especially the community of the church where we live, eat, and we play together. For Jesus to accomplish his ministry he calls disciples into community with him. We cannot do it alone. The Gospels are full of communal gatherings for all kinds of reasons.” I said back then, “Two weeks ago, I walked through the fellowship hall and imagined the many communal functions we will share there in the years ahead. I saw family, adult, youth, and children gatherings. How wonderful it is that the church brings us together into community.” How wonderful it has been when I look back.

- “When we follow Jesus, we see the dangers in our world, like that of a leopard chasing a baboon which we saw in another of our visits. We see the physical, emotional, mental, environmental, social, political, religious, and spiritual dangers and Jesus calling us to address them the best we can. Christ calls us to express his values in every avenue of life: our work, home, and social arenas. The Bible is full of dangerous and difficult events and more importantly ways of coping and overcoming them. The Bible would not be worth its weight if it did not show us the way to overcome and cope with our own and other dangers and difficulties.
- When we follow Jesus, we see whatever Jesus wants each of us to see. When our eyes focus on Jesus through prayer, study, community, and service, we see all kinds of things and hopefully share these sightings with each other.”

It is amazing how all this still applies and will continue into your future with new and surprising expressions.

This is where I’ll end this sermon and pick up the next part the Sunday after next because next Sunday is Scout Sunday where I shall tell the scouts and you ocean-related stories in a sermon called, “A Whale of a Time.”

Before, I say “Amen,” a note of care and sensitivity. Suellen and I went to a San Francisco Symphony Concert back in the day. During the intermission, we saw a blind person with a white stick walking up the center aisle speaking appreciatively with a friend about the concert. It occurred to me that when we talk about seeing not all people see in the same way and that all ways are valid in the eyes of God.

Irrespective of how so-called abled, disabled or differently-abled we are, we are called to follow Jesus and we experience what God wants us to experience, just as the blind person did at the concert. This blind person enabled me to see in a new way, which also leads to the second part of the story. Amen.