

“Equipped for Building”

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¹I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. ⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." ⁹ ...

¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:1-8, 11-16)

What are we doing here? Have you ever asked yourself that? We have all gathered here in this beautiful sanctuary on this Sunday morning and that is not a surprise. But how often do we pause to ask why? What are we really doing here? One quick answer, and a very good answer, is that we are here to worship the God of heaven and earth – the God of creation, salvation, and inspiration. But there are actually a lot of reasons that people come to church... habit... the hope that one might receive fresh insight or wisdom... a sense of duty or obligation... guilt... the desire to belong or to feel some kind of connection, be it human or divine, hopefully both.

These are all reasonable and rational answers to the question. And regardless of our own personal answer – not the answer we think we should say, but the real answer that we might whisper only silently to ourselves -- I do think it is a question that we need to ask every now and then. “What are we doing here?”

I say this because God has asked and does ask this question. “What are you doing here... Elijah?”

Now let's be clear that God already knew the answer. God knew the prophet Elijah was on the run. God knew that Elijah had been pretty bold and brash, that he had gloriously bested and eliminated the priests of Baal, a feat that had proven the power of God but also embarrassed Queen Jezebel. The scorned queen swore that she would get revenge. So, Elijah fled to the wilderness a hunted man, without a friend in the world, and started praying that God would just put him out of his misery. God knew why Elijah was there. But God wanted Elijah to say it. So, God asks the question that I think God wants us all to think about when we come into God's presence. “What are you doing here?”

This question frames my understanding of the letter to the Ephesians, because in many ways this letter proposes some really good answers to this existential question. The book says we have been given an “inheritance” in God... that we have been “destined” to be with



God... that we are “called” by God and drawn to God... and then with a repeated set of two words – “so that” – we are told why. Why are we here with God?

“so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory” (1:11-12) ...

“so that, with the eyes of [our hearts] enlightened, [we] may know ... the hope to which he has called [us](1:18) ...

“so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (3:10) ...

“so that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God” (3:19) ...

“so that it may be well with [us] and [we] may live long on the earth (6:3) ...

“so that [we] may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm” (6:13).

Praise. Enlightenment. Hope. Wisdom. Fullness. Wellness. Fortitude and Endurance. Pretty good reasons to come to church, wouldn't you say? Ephesians reminds the church of these blessings and purposes -- reminds us of why we are here. And one of the best reminders is the one that we read this morning from the 4th chapter. It recalls the powerful Old Testament imagery of God as the potter, the master artist who is constantly shaping us and molding us into something new – something that is not only beautiful, but also useful to the world. Why are we here? Why is the church here? -- *“to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”*

That's a mouthful, but it's pretty simple to break down. We are here to be equipped. We are here to be built up. We are here to be raised to a new level of spiritual maturity and strength and readiness, to be drawn upwards and onwards toward the ultimate example and source of all that is good – built up into nothing short of the full stature of Christ... not just for ourselves, but for each other, and for the world. Now, that should be enough, should it not, to keep us busy for a while.

With the Olympics hitting full stride this weekend, it is easy to find a helpful parallel. For years, the men and women who are competing in Tokyo have been striving toward a singular goal. Every day, every workout, every trip to the gym or the track or the court has had a purpose, has been designed, to equip them, to build them up, and to get them ready. And Simone Biles, in particular, has shown us how these pursuits are not merely physical, but mental, emotional, and spiritual as well. To get where they are, Olympic athletes have had to think about every expenditure of time and energy, and to know at all times exactly why they were doing the things they were doing.

And, because all of them are human, I expect that on certain days they needed a reminder about what they were doing and why they were doing it. Because on a lot of mornings I expect they were tempted to do something else... especially when the training was getting hard... and they were feeling tired... and they were having a tough time seeing progress. Don't you bet that lots of them have sticky notes on their bathroom mirrors... little messages to remind them of their goal -- remind them of the work they needed to do, and why that work was important? When Tiger Woods was growing up, he posted a chart on his wall of Jack Nicklaus' golfing accomplishments. It included benchmarks like the first time Jack broke 80, the first tournament he won, the first time he won the state amateur,

the U.S. Amateur, and the U.S. Open.¹ Every day, that poster reminded Woods of what he was shooting for – that if he wanted to be the best, then these were the marks that needed to be bested. Jackie Joyner-Kersey, one of the all-time great Olympians in track and field, posted her own reminder. It read simply “The only person who can stop you from reaching your goals is you.”²

It is no different for team sports. Before every game, on the way out of the locker room Notre Dame football players all slap a sign that reminds them to “Play Like a Champion Today.”

NBA player Magic Johnson would remind himself on a regular basis, “Ask not what your teammates can do for you; ask what you can do for your teammates.”³

One rowing team, which knew very well that it was not just important to train hard as individuals, but also to be always pulling together in the same direction with the same passion, hung a poster in its locker room that said: “When you feel like you can no longer row with your legs, start rowing with your heart.”⁴

This is what much of Ephesians is all about. Paul had brought the Christian faith to this city, but Paul knew that the passion of young faith would soon be buffeted by all kinds of distractions and confusions. He knew that the life of faith is a marathon, not a sprint. It wasn't just likely that the new Christians there would get tired and weary. It was a certainty. So, this letter is rife with reminders of what the church was about and why it was important. For me it is a note on the mirror – something that we can see on those bleary-eyed mornings when it's tough to get up and get going, and the answers.

These reminders also help us to assess why we might be tired or lagging in spirit. For example, if you are a rower on a team and you feel like the other rowers aren't pulling their weight – it's more like they just want to ride in the boat – asking the question “Why am I here?” helps us remember that we are training for something... that God is preparing us for something that is part of God's plan. I know that some of you are tired right now, because you feel like you have been doing an awfully big percentage of the pulling. So, we all need to grab an oar and pitch in.

That question “Why am I here?” also helps us realize when we might be expending energy in the wrong places, or spending time doing things that aren't really helping. If swimmers, for example, spend all of their time building up their arms and shoulders, and none of their time building up their legs, then they will lose at least half of the power that they need to move through the water. And let's face it, training techniques do not stay the same year after year. Today's track athletes are not out on the beach splashing through the surf of the Firth of Forth like they did in “Chariots of Fire.” That doesn't work anymore. So, if we find ourselves getting fatigued as a church, or lacking in zeal, then perhaps we need to begin by asking ourselves what we are really trying to do.

“Why am I here?” sounds like a dangerous question, and maybe it is, but it is the question every disciple has to ask, and not just once.

¹ <https://www.sportscasting.com/tiger-woods-never-had-poster-jack-nicklaus-18-major-championship-wins-wall-growing-up/>

² <https://quotefancy.com>

³ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/magic_johnson_131375

⁴ East Bay Rowing Club, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/159103799311026091/>

I remember one particular time when I asked that question. It was on a pretty wild and crazy day in our lives. The movers had come and packed up everything we owned. My law partners had all said goodbye in one way or another. Some really admired my decision to leave my practice and go to seminary. Others thought I should wait until later in life. A few clearly thought I was nuts to give up such a great job in such a great place. Our church, which we loved, had promised its support, because they knew what a risk I was taking going back to school at forty. We pulled out of the driveway sometime after lunch, made our way west up I-40, took the right turn onto I-95 North. And it was somewhere in southern Virginia, not too far away from the seminary, when all of it kind of ganged up on me in my spirit. Stephanie was in the passenger seat next to me; Molly and Kate were in the back in their car seats. Molly was 3; Kate was just three months old. I had just quit my job and sold our house. We were looking at three years with no real salary. Tears began to form in the edges of my eyes and I thought to myself, "***What am I doing here?***"

I am not exaggerating when I say that it was at that very moment -- that ***exact*** moment -- that I caught glimpse of something up ahead on the side of the road. As I got closer, I realized that it was a man walking. As I got even closer, I could see it was a man carrying something on his back. And then I got close enough to see that it was a man... who was walking north... and on his shoulder, across his back, was a cross. He had clearly made it himself – ten feet high, painted white, with a little set of wheels at the bottom so the base would not drag the ground.

Now, I don't know what you all think about signs, but that right there, that was a sign. God heard my question, and God knew the answer to my question. But I needed to ask it, and I needed to be reminded of the answer. God had a plan for my life in the same way that God has a plan for your life. And I needed to be equipped for that plan. I needed to be built up for that plan. I needed to learn and to grow, and for what?

"For the work of ministry."

So, what are you doing here? What is your answer today? I don't need to know what it is; that is between you and God. But I will suggest to you that the answer you give today may be a new beginning. It may just point you up a new road, to something God has planned for you – a plan of Praise... Enlightenment... Hope... Wisdom... Fullness... Wellness... Fortitude and Endurance... a plan God has to reshape you, remold you, build you up in love... and equip you for YOUR work of ministry.

That is certainly what the question did for Elijah. As Elijah pondered exactly what it was that he was doing hiding up in that cave, feeling sorry for himself up on the mountain, he sputtered the first answer that came to him. And that is when the Lord spoke clearly. "Get up," God said. "Get on your way. You have work to do."

What are we doing here?

May God give us all the courage to ask that question and heed its answer, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*