

The Next Big Thing

Eastern Shore District Conference

14 January 2018

When Scott Davis chose the title for the sermon he was supposed to deliver last week when we were supposed to have District Conference, he chose “The Next Big Thing.” I’m not sure what he meant by that.

Last week was the Sunday closest to Epiphany, the day when we celebrate the visit of the Magi to see the baby Jesus. Scott was going to use that text. So I imagine that he was going to talk about how the Magi traveled across the deserts to see Jesus because what God was doing in Jesus was “the next big thing.”

Then I can imagine how Scott would go on to talk about how we should be expecting for God to do the next big thing, too. How the signs are there, maybe not in a star in the heavens but even in small congregations in out of the way places like South Chesconessex and Saxis and Capeville and Lee Mont and Assawoman—even in these places we should expect for God to do the next big thing.

Or maybe Scott was just going to talk about a new conference program. I don’t know. He’s not here to tell us.

I could have changed the title. I could have gone a different direction. I did move to a different Bible text, but I kept the title. Because I do believe God calls us to be on the lookout for the next big thing, even when the next big thing may look very small.

Our Bishop Sharma D. Lewis, has told us that we should look forward to God doing a new thing. She started her tenure her in the Virginia Conference by saying that she was going to stir things up! When the Cabinet met in Cape Charles last month, we got Kristin Willis down at Eastern Shore Coastal Roasting to do a special ‘Stir it Up’ Bishop’s Blend of coffee to give to folks.

Bishop Lewis says that she has the gift of faith and I believe it. When she preaches you can feel the room shake. She might stand on a chair or dance in the aisle but she does it because she believes that God is not through with the Virginia Conference or the United Methodist Church. I think she's the kind of leader we need for such a time as this. When there are questions about the unity of the church, when the country around us is divided and despairing, when the culture around us is looking away from the church for guidance, we need someone who is going to remind us what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

That's why you're going to hear us talk a lot about the vision she unveiled at last year's Annual Conference - a disciple is a lifelong learner who influences others to serve. Learn, influence, serve - there are a lot of verbs in that vision. All I can say is 'get ready.' If you came to last year's Annual Conference you know it was like none we'd had before. And this year's will be different again. Bishop Lewis is going to have us out on the streets of Hampton and Newport News to serve.

But I want to go back to Philippians and the passage that we read this afternoon. Because Paul is writing to a church in Philippi that needs to know what hope looks like. Because things are not looking good.

Paul is writing the letter from a prison cell. You might think that's not a good sign when your founding pastor is in a prison cell instead of broadcasting live from the pulpit of a megachurch. But that's kind of how Paul's ministry went. He went into places, stirred them up, and usually got run out of town before he was through.

Paul was not gone when he was gone, though. He wrote letters. He sent messengers. He answered questions. And he grieved for his churches. He loved his churches. He wanted them to see what he saw. To know what he knew.

So Paul writes back to Philippi—a prominent city on the Roman road across the top of Greece. He knows he has important work to do. He knows he can be useful to the church if he is allowed to go back to them. But he is also sold out in love with Jesus and that trumps everything. He wants to be with Jesus. And if the suffering he is going through is going to lead to death, he's ready for that, too.

Verse 21 of chapter 1, where we began the reading, says, "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain." It sounds better in the Greek. "Living is *Christos*, dying is *kerdos*." Almost sounds like he can't decide between the two. He longs to be united with Christ, but he also knows his church needs him. He has fruit yet to offer. And in the end, it's not his choice.

It's not our choice either. Disciples are called to be witnesses where we are. And in the end it's not about us. It's about what we have to give as we love Christ. I think it's significant that Paul says that living *is* Christ. It's not the dying that will bring him close to Christ. It's in living also that he will meet Christ. That he will *be* Christ for others.

If Paul can be Christ, he knows the Philippians can, too. His concern for them is that they have the same mind in them that was in Christ Jesus. He says that over in Chapter 2. He wants them to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel.

That's what he says in in verse 27. Only that translation doesn't get at the full depth of meaning here. It's not just that they should read the Bible and do it. There's a question of citizenship to that "manner worthy of the gospel." As disciples of Jesus they are citizens of a different land now. They are supposed to be aware, at all times, that they are ambassadors of this different country.

If they do this...if you do this...they/you will face difficulties. It isn't easy being a disciple in a world that does not have the priorities of the kingdom. It isn't easy seeing people as God sees them when everybody

around you wants to run them down, denigrate them, abuse them. It isn't easy putting limits on your behavior when everyone around you doesn't see what the big deal is. Why would you stick it out in a marriage that has become difficult? Why would you give up time to help somebody who's down and out? Why would you give money you have earned to a church? Why would you rein in your sexual desires? Why would you stand up for justice? Why would you love your enemies? Why would you come to church...to District Conference?!

Why, indeed, unless being a citizen of the gospel kingdom actually makes a difference.

Sometimes, as Shane Claiborne likes to say, the gospel of Jesus is going to mess your life up. There are no guarantees that faithfulness and obedience (two very unpopular words) are going to lead you to a happier, healthier, wealthier life. Sometimes you are obedient and the strong prevail. Sometimes you follow the rules and evil wins the day (if not the victory). Sometimes you walk the whole journey of faithfulness and the reward is shaped like a cross.

But we do it, because we're not alone. There are ancestors in the faith before us and there are children and grandchildren after us. And we do it because the most important work has already been done by God in Jesus. And there will be joy. That's all over Paul's letter to the Philippians. There is joy—even in the suffering.

Paul suffers in chains. "God has graciously granted you," he tells the Philippians in verse 29, "the privilege not only of believing in Christ—but of suffering for him as well." The privilege of suffering. It sounds like Paul has his tongue in his cheek, doesn't it? But he really means it. To live a Christ-like life means to share in suffering as well. But the victory has been won.

Last summer I had the bittersweet opportunity to preach at the closing service of Berea Church in New Church. The congregation had gone

through a period of discernment and made the difficult decision to disband. But all such decisions come with grief.

I acknowledged that such a decision could also come with a lot of questions. Were we...not enough? Could we have have done more? Could we have held on longer? Could we have tried some new program? Could we have believed harder? Could we have worked harder? Could we have loved better? Could the District Superintendent have sent us the right pastor? Could we have been...more? Could we have been...enough?

Yet in its own way, Berea was enough because God is sufficient. Kirk Mariner grew up in that church and he died just a few weeks before that service. In his history of the church he wrote, “Nothing will redound quite so much to its credit as our being able to say, ‘Berea and New Church lived every moment of their lives together.’”

There is something about a church giving testimony to God and accompanying the people of the place where it is located to the hope that is truly hope.

This is ultimately what we have to offer the world—not that *we* can save the world, but that God *is* reconciling all things to Godself in Jesus Christ. As Karl Barth, the great theologian, put it, “the relation of Christians to others is that they can hope for them...[and] what does it mean to hope?...The coming alive or taking root of the promise in the world of [human beings] is the work of the Holy Spirit which makes [a person] a Christian.” To hope is to see what God has done and give witness even when it seems that what we have to give is so insufficient.

We know from the story of the Incarnation that God’s next big thing comes in small packages. We know from the parables that mustard seeds and yeast are capable of the most incredible things. We know from the disciples that worn-out watermen and tree-climbing tax collectors are capable of redemption. We know from the resurrection

that the most thrilling sight to the women at the garden tomb was the sight of nothing there.

And we can be confident that whatever God's next big thing will be, the content of it will be the same as God's last big thing—it is the love of God in Jesus Christ.

I know it is fashionable these days to be disillusioned. I know we turn on the news every day and we wonder how much worse it can get. If we needed a cure for our belief that politics or the economy were going to lead us out of the wilderness, this ought to be it. We should see our ultimate dependence is not in anything we can build for ourselves, but only in God.

But we will forget. And Paul will still write us from jail and ask what we expected. And ask what we're living for. And if the answer is not Jesus, then what's the point?

Because living is Christ and dying is gain. The pearl of great price is buried in this land. Or settled in the shell of some oyster. Let's not settle for anything less. It's not only the next big thing...it's the only thing.

Thanks be to God.