

Joining Jesus and Paul in the Desert of Prayer based on Gal. 1:11-24, David Jahnke, 6/12/16

This summer I decided to do a sermon series on Paul's letter to the Galatians. And I will start with a reminder of Paul's conversion; his joining the church. The first thing to note is this did not primarily happen through Paul's own will. Jesus revealed himself to Paul with blinding light and a powerful Word.

In the same way, today's profession of faith by our new members (and yours as well through the Apostles' Creed) only happens by way of a revelation from God just as Paul's did. I draw this from a couple of Bible passages: 1. When Jesus asked the disciples who they thought he was and Peter said that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus told him that flesh and blood had not revealed this to him this but rather your Father in heaven. A couple decades later, Paul said that no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by way of the Spirit of God...

So what you have come to believe; and what you were bold enough to publicly say today—this is primarily the work of God. And I am guessing this profession was not easy for some of you since religious speech is not particularly welcome for our generation and younger in this growingly secular world.

I remember the first time I got up to answer some questions about Jesus at a Presbytery meeting, I was shaking in my boots. I might have had some nerves but it was more about the awe-invoking presence of the Spirit which is what Jesus' name does. It brings awe and gets us in touch with the deep things of life. So you made a courageous leap of faith today and I commend you for it.

It was a very difficult leap of faith for Paul as well. Because the revelation of Jesus meant revolution for him. He had been persecuting his Jewish brothers and sisters who had different religious ideas than him and thus were his enemies. And now he was supposed to join them and lead them in bringing God's love to the godless Gentiles?

Not surprisingly, he had to give quite a bit of thought to this complete change in worldview and lifestyle. He gave 3 years to it, in fact. He went into the desert of Arabia.

So the first thing I am asking all of you to do is give serious and prayerful consideration to what it means that Jesus has come to and revealed himself to each of you personally. Because if this is true, then the same revolutionary life change is calling us just as it did Paul.

Here are some of the aspects of that new life: 1. Making enemies friends. 2. No more hidden, behind-the-scenes judging and murmuring and gossiping. 3. Seeking instead to embrace and directly communicate with and be reconciled to those with whom we have had disagreements. 4. Making a large part of our life's mission reaching out to troubled people lost in sin; and engaging, accepting and loving people who are from different cultures and worldviews.

That's serious stuff! But I think our hearts know this is right. Our minds and spirits need to catch up to our hearts. And that is why we need to return to prayer which takes our minds or our thoughts deep into the truths which our heart already knows and prayer makes this a pattern which is how our spirits and our wills are transformed according to those truths.

Paul was surely comfortable with traditional prayer. But there was a change here as well. Paul said that for years he conferred with no one while in the desert for years after his conversion. So prayer became more personal for him.

He also could not rely on traditions handed down to him to figure his new life out. Religion would no longer just be an exterior set of principles by which he could make judgments. That, in fact, is what Paul was so mad at the Galatians about. They were turning religion back into a set of principles to be followed; in particular circumcision and other aspects of the Law.

That was the religion Paul had been very comfortable with. But Jesus picked Paul up and placed him in a completely new world and Paul needed to personally explore that world with Jesus.

And that is what I am asking all of us to do. Because if the spiritual giants Jesus and Paul both needed to go into the desert of personal prayer, we need to as well.

So what happened to Jesus and Paul in the desert? Their callings from God were confirmed and clarified. And they learned that all they needed in life was God; they did not need worldly power or pleasures to know joy and peace.

So the way your calling from God will be confirmed and clarified; the way you will experience the joy of knowing God with your Spirit as well as your mind; and the only way you will find the strength to 1. love everyone and 2. Forgive time and again and 3. share whenever called upon; the only way these things happen is by exploring the internal world of the Spirit. They will not come through religion as morality or religion as mere agreement with traditional doctrine. Something needs to happen inside and keep happening.

During a prayer time of Thursday, a dear servant of the church spoke of God's finally coming over her while in the solitude of living in a foreign country. Clarity about God finally came to her through forced solitude and prayer and study.

Now of course you do not have to actually go to a desert or to a foreign country. You just need away time and away space where you mind naturally considers God and your spirit thus opens up to him

My desert spot as of late happens to be my bed. Whether it happens to be when I am up in the middle of the night, or as soon as I wake up, or during a post-lunch siesta or at bedtime, that spot is one where my mind immediately goes to God.

Some of you have a favorite corner in your house for reading and reflection. A walk in a park or around the neighborhood; time in the garden or on the porch also open us up to God.

And if you are an extrovert, the desert may be the wrong metaphor altogether. You may encounter instead the Spirit in noisy spaces; in small group Bible studies or through fellowship and service with others.

Whether it's through rest or work, whether alone or with others— whatever leads you to big and deep questions about yourself and the world and the Creator of all things; commit to that place and activity. And then add one more thing-- love; when you add love, you are praying.

John the evangelist said that God is love and anyone who abides in love, abides in God. So whenever you are loving something good-- a book, a walk, a flower, a person, music-- you are praying and you will be transformed. If you add your longing or peace or hope or joy to any activity, that makes it prayer as well. But the more you consciously acknowledge God with your thoughts in these activities, the more tangible will be the results.

On Friday, I was led to a book that I loved and which had a transformative impact on me a year or so before I returned to the church. It is called, Prayer, Finding the Heart's True Home. I think that you all will be able locate yourself somewhere in these various places regarding prayer— perhaps even multiple places.

So I conclude with a charge to the new members but it applies to all of you as well. Today the Spirit spoke through you. And God has a wonderful new calling for you. Both of these are great mysteries which you will enter into and find clarity about through spiritual disciplines. One thing you can be certain about, however, is God's unstoppable love for you and his desire for you to be a part of his unstoppable love for the world. You are an incredibly talented group of young people and I look forward to what God will do for and through you in the years ahead. And God's people say...

