

VBS Sunday Sermon

Good morning! I'm so glad to be with you this morning to continue an exciting summer of ministry in our church. Yes, the music was a little different, the stage looks a lot different, I'm excited to share with you about the focus of Vacation Bible School this week, but I have to say this sermon is about a lot more than VBS; this truly is an exciting time of MINISTRY in the life of our church!

This past week Pastor Jason led over 70 students and adults at "Beach Week" where the theme was **RELENTLESS**, teaching on how God relentlessly pursues us, and how we can learn to relentlessly pursue God.

The Bridge hosted a Volleyball camp last week with 20 participants. Of the 20 girls in attendance, 17 did not indicate having a church home. And in July we will have Boys and Girls basketball camps to continue reaching our community.

Our lunch-bunch ministry to feed school age students who need meals when school is out during the summer started last week, preparing and delivering nearly 300 lunches on Wednesday, and looking to expand to even more next week.

And of course, as you can tell by now, tomorrow morning at 9:00AM our Worship Center will be filled with hundreds of kids who are here for Vacation Bible School. This being my first year helping lead VBS, there has been an outstanding team working so hard these last few weeks to plan our week, I've also been blown away by your response church, as over 100 of you have already signed up to lead and serve our community at VBS this week! Thank you thank you thank you!

Our theme for the week of VBS is Seek Truth, Find Jesus! As Pastor Joey has been preaching on during his "Canceled" series over the last several weeks, we know that TRUTH is desperately needed in our culture today. And as our kids go on an archeological, apologetics-based adventure this week, we'll be focusing on the theme verse from **Jeremiah 29:13 – When you seek me, you will find me, when you search for me with all your heart.**

What an amazing promise! And we'll look deeper into this promise in a minute, but this verse really hits at the heart of a ministry question I have every summer. The question that drives me and keeps me up at night the most, whether it's a Vacation Bible School, a sports camp, a mission trip, a kid's camp or youth camp... the question is: **How do we take this ministry opportunity and turn it into a spiritual catalyst event for our kids and families?** How will the event that took so much time, prayer, preparation, communication, effort, truly propel these kids, these teenagers and these **families to commit to God with ALL their hearts?**

You see, all of the events are great! And it feels like they are even more of a blessing coming out of a year where all of that was taken away... but if our kids and families TRULY seek truth, and find Jesus at VBS; if they truly SEEK GOD with ALL their hearts and experience the

promise of finding HIM, then VBS doesn't end on JUNE 18... **VBS will have become a catalyst to put our families on a path to deeper fellowship in their walk with Christ.** That's my goal... and I know that Pastor Jason, Pastor Mark, Pastor Jacob, Miss Kim Hamilton with lunch bunch, and all of us who are leading these ministry events this summer... we don't intend for the effects of our weeks to end when all the kids go home on the last day. **We have a real treasure in God's promise: If you seek Him, you will find Him, when you search for him, with all your heart. And our mission is to share that treasure.**

This sounds too easy though, doesn't it? In all the camps and mission trips and events I've been a part of, the goal has never been to see the effects end at the end of the week. It just kind of happens. Everyone goes home. Routines happen. Priorities change. Life gets busy. We celebrate and feel good about our efforts that week, but then we're quickly on to the next thing. So, how can this summer be any different?

A few weeks ago, Pastor Cedric's family moved down from Ohio. They drove down on Memorial Day, and since Cedric had been staying with me, Jessica, Boston, and their friend Josh stopped at my house for the chance to eat and rest and let their 2 beautiful dogs run and play in my backyard.

As the dogs were out in my yard playing, we began to notice something that really struck me. As Kingston and Chance were playing, they would take off running from my house to the back of the property, but suddenly they would stop dead in their tracks in the middle of my yard, with plenty of yard in front of them. They would walk an invisible line, they would get down on all fours, they would come back to us, then run out there again only to stop in that exact same spot, but they never went any further than this **imaginary fence.**

What Pastor Cedric realized, was at their home in Ohio, the dogs were kept in their yard by an **invisible electric fence.** And Kingston and Chance were so well trained to stay in that fence, that when taken to a new place, with tons of room to run and play and explore, they stayed within their trained boundaries.

The dogs could see how much land there was ahead of them. They could see the bamboo hedge that could be explored. They could see my chickens back there clucking at them from their coop (yes, I have chickens, but that's another story) And even when Cedric, whom they know and trust completely, would walk beyond this invisible line and call them trying to lead them and show them that it's safe, they still put up a fight and would not go beyond that line.

I feel like as Christians we often live our lives like how Cedric's dogs must have felt. The dogs were in a new place, but because they only knew their past and were unfamiliar with their present, they did not yet know the freedom and opportunity they now had. **I wonder how often we as Christians are kept in place by an invisible spiritual electric fence because we are still trapped by the past or confused about our present, instead of seeking God' with all our hearts trusting His plans for our hope and future.**

As a church, we are in a new place too... and most of you know this truth in far greater detail than I do. As a church, we are still celebrating God's Goodness as we became Unleashed and are debt free. We are already well into a summer that looks far different than last summer, both for our church, and for our culture. We're beginning to look at what the vision for our church can be 3, 5, 7, 10 years from now. And the question we have to ask ourselves, both at the micro level of looking at something like VBS, or from the macro level of a long-term church vision, is, **Are we going to let our hearts be held captive by an invisible, spiritual electric fence, or are we willing to trust our Savior to take us beyond what we have ever known.**

This is where we find the power of God's Promise in Jeremiah 29:13 - If we seek him, we will find him, when we search for Him, with ALL our hearts.

I hope you'll open your Bibles to Jeremiah chapter 29 with me as we look deeper at verse 13 this morning, which I have already mentioned is the theme verse for VBS week. To give us context, we are going to read together Jeremiah 29:10-14. Verses 11-13 are likely super familiar to you because they contain some of God's awesome, unailing promises. As we read these verses together, I encourage you to read the whole passage as ONE promise, not individual promises, and you'll see what I mean by that in a second. I've also often said that these "Promise" verses like Jeremiah 29:11 need to come with a warning attached to them because they can so easily be taken out of context. Well, they actually do, and both the promise and the warnings are found in verse 10-14, so let's read the entire passage together and look for both the **PROMISE**, and the **WARNING** attached to it. Jeremiah 29:10-14...

This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

Now, I said to be on the lookout for the **promise**, as well as the **warning**. In case you missed it, I want to go back and read the first part of vs. 10, and skip ahead to verse 14 to make sure we understand the warning: **When the seventy years are completed... I will bring you back from captivity, I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you, and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.**

Make sure that we catch the warning: **before we get to the great promise, we cannot forget about the past and present.** The past and present for God's people in these verses, was captivity and exile. God's people, the nation of Judah, had been scattered and taken into captivity because of their repeated failure to obey God. They continually disobeyed, chose their own path, went their own way, and eventually had to pay the punishment for their sins. The

book of Jeremiah was most likely read to the people of Judah while they were still living in exile and awaiting the arrival of God's promises. Of course, Jeremiah and the captives were living in exile, so they couldn't escape their past, and this promise we find surely created great excitement and motivation, even as the people finished their time in exile.

We have to start here when it comes to Jeremiah 29 because we also have a tendency, don't we, too often, to try to skip beyond our past and our present and to try to reach the promise more quickly. This is understandable I suppose. Our past is often filled with brokenness and disappointment. Our present is often messy as we try to find direction or fulfillment from things that can never truly satisfy our hearts. And many times, we are left asking ourselves, where is God's promise in the midst of my situation?

But to me, that's what makes God's promise here in Jeremiah even more exciting! God's promises were not made to His people at the height of their kingdom. This wasn't King Saul or King David or King Solomon's kingdoms of power and renown. These weren't the glory days. These weren't the "good old days". God's promise was made to His people, when they were at their lowest. They didn't have to clean themselves up. They didn't have to rise to power on their own. At their lowest, God had a plan for their future, and when they were willing to humble themselves and seek Him with ALL their hearts, HE WOULD BE FOUND.

This should be a great hope and a great comfort to all of us. One of the greatest lies that Satan tells us is to minimize the power of God's promise in our lives. Our past, and our present, don't live up to a made-up standard, so surely God cannot use us to accomplish the greatest things for His Kingdom. But in reality, it's not our past hurt or present brokenness that keep us from being used by God. **The only thing that can limit our impact on His kingdom, is when our pride, our stubbornness, our choosing our own way, causes us to only search for Him with only part of our hearts.**

Now that we've seen the context of God's promise in Jeremiah, let's look at the promise itself... "I will fulfill my promise to bring you back to this place...I have plans to give you hope and a future... but keep reading, 12, 13 and 14.... This promise is about more than giving God's people prosperity, hope, and success. This is more than about a plan and a future. **This promise is about restoring their relationship with God.** You will call on me and I will listen to you. You will seek me, and find me when you search for me with all your heart. AND I will be found by you!

There are benefits and blessings that come from walking with the Lord. But we don't walk with him for the sake of our bank account or our health or our status. We seek Him with all of our hearts, because God loves us. Because he wants to be found by us. And because He is worthy of everything our heart, soul, mind and strength can give.

And, I would also say that this is the answer of how we as a church can use the events this summer to be catalyst events to reach our community and the world with the Gospel... How do we go as a church beyond the spiritual electric fences to make a greater impact for His

Kingdom than we could ever think possible? We learn what it means to make everything we do about seeking Jesus and finding Him when we search for him with all our hearts.

As a church, Unleashed, key renovation projects and strategizing for the future are all important, but they must only take place when we as individuals and corporately as a church prioritize calling on Him, praying to Him, and make the future about His plans, not our own.

VBS, Beach Week, Sports Camp, Summer Missions, they are all amazing fun in the moment, but the events will fade in a few days if those who are participating are not intentional about seeking God and searching for Him with all our hearts.

And as individuals, maybe we're comfortable in our own spiritual electric fences, even as God has promised us more. Maybe it's because we're still dealing with the pain and disappointment from the past. Or maybe it's because we've reached a level of comfort with the present that we aren't yet ready to give up. I challenge each of us, and myself included; examine today what it means to seek God with ALL your heart.

Here is maybe a little test to know what "ALL" means for us...

We cannot say we want God's WILL for our lives if we don't also want His WORD for our lives.
We cannot say we want God's PROMISE on our lives if we don't also want His PRESENCE in our lives.

We cannot say we want God's HOPE for our Future, if we're not also willing to be brought to a place of desperation, even a place of exile, to seek and find Him

Do you want to know God's Will??? Live in His Word!

Do you want God's Promises for you and your family? Live in His Presence!

Do you want HOPE and a future??? Seek Him. Desperately. He promises He Will be found.

This is the message of the Gospel. This is purpose of each of our events. This is the message that needs to be proclaimed through everything we do. Our past may be messy. Our present may be confusing. But Jesus came to rescue us from our sin. **Romans 5:8: "but God demonstrates His love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"**. On our own, we are lost and in the exile of our sin. But Jesus has provided the rescue, taking our punishment and providing forgiveness which we could never accomplish on our own, as He restores our relationship with God.

So, maybe you're in a place this morning where you feel you're walking the line of your spiritual electric fence. You know Jesus is leading beyond where you are, but you can't get any further on your own. Maybe it's because of comfort. Maybe it's because of sin. Maybe it's because of fear. Maybe you've never truly committed to walking with Jesus. My encouragement, is don't leave here today without letting God deal with your heart and finding him fully in his rest, his love, his forgiveness and his restoration. And this only happens when we seek him, and search for him, with all our hearts.