

Sabbatical Reflections

September 5, 2021

Intro

One of the amazing benefits of working on the pastoral staff at NHCC is that we receive a sabbatical after 6 years on the job. Recently I came back from my 3rd sabbatical. It's hard for me to believe I've worked here 18 years, after spending 23 years in the corporate world at Hallmark. Even though I have been blessed with two previous sabbaticals, I must say this one was the best ever. I will talk more about that in a minute.

But before I do, I want to explain why we believe strongly in taking extended time off from ministry. Our time off policies as well as our emphasis on volunteer time off are rooted in the Hebrew teaching of "shabbat" or sabbath. The literal meaning of the word sabbath is "rest". This idea of a sabbath rest originates from God and is found in the account of creation in Genesis 1. After God spent 6 days creating the world and everything in it, the Bible says in Gen 2:

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. Genesis 2 1-3

Just in case you were wondering, God didn't get all tuckered out after all his creative work. He wasn't tired. He just simply stopped working. After all his creative work was done, he set aside a day of inactivity as a model for us. That model is simply this: after working, take time off. We don't need to work, nonstop...24/7. We don't need to burn the candle at both ends, do too much, bite-off-more-than-one-can-chew, keep our noses to the grindstone, spread ourselves too thin or constantly stay on the treadmill. We need to set aside periods of rest where we do no work. By setting aside a day of rest, God was modeling for us a very important principle. That principle is this: it's NOT all up to us. We can trust God to provide for us even when we don't work. Even when we do nothing. It's not all up to us. It never was and never will be. We all need to be reminded to "rest". Jesus himself calls us to come to him and rest whenever we get burdened with cares of life.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from

me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest (shabbat) for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Matthew 11:28 - 30

It's in the presence of Christ Jesus we find our rest. He wants us to experience regular times of rest and renewal, not only for our body, soul and spirit, but also as a reminder to ourselves that we aren't the ultimate provider of our needs. God is.

That's why we emphasize rest around here for all of our staff and volunteers. We coach all of our folks at NHCC to maintain a balance between work and rest. After all, we aren't human doings. We are human beings. We need to be regularly reminded that God is our provider. One of the Hebrew names for God is "Jehovah Jireh" which literally means "the God who provides". By giving God this name, the Hebrews were reminded to trust God for all their needs and provisions in life. And every time you or I take time off from our work and rest, we are reinforcing the principle that God is Jehovah Jireh...The God who provides. So, rest is important. Coming to church on Sunday to worship God is a form of rest. Taking time off from work is another form of rest. And I'm blessed to be a part of a church that places a high value on the sabbath principle of rest.

Sabbatical Overview

Before I share with you a couple of the key learnings from my sabbatical, I thought you might be interested in some of the things I did while I was off. So, here's a quick travelogue:

First, I traveled to...

San Diego/LA

Next, I traveled to...

Oregon coast and Columbia River Gorge

Finally I went to:

Summit Co/Silverthorne Colorado

In addition to all my travels: I read books on black history, apologetics, critical social justice and the fine art of BBQ. I listened to several podcasts, visited four churches, took a lot of naps and ate a lot of BBQ! That pretty well sums up the main things I did on my sabbatical.

I can't thank you all enough for giving me this wonderful opportunity to rest, recharge and to learn some new things that will serve me well this year and beyond. This truly was the best sabbatical I've ever had and one I will never forget.

Now with the time we have left, I'd like to share with you two takeaways or key learnings that I picked up during my time off. If I had time, I could share more but these two are the ones I felt God was wanting me to share today. Each of these learnings holds special significance to me but have application to all of you as well. One is intellectual and the other is more personal. Let's start with the intellectual takeaway.

Takeaway #1: How to Share the Gospel in a Postmodern World

One of the goals of my sabbatical was to learn more about sharing the gospel in a world where the Bible and Christianity are no longer prioritized or revered. This type of cultural perspective we find everywhere today is known as "postmodernism" or "secularism". Simply put,

Postmodernism is a philosophy that affirms that there is no objective or absolute truth, especially in matters of religion and spirituality. Postmodernism's viewpoint can be summed up in the statement: *"That may be true for you, but not for me."*

While such a viewpoint may be completely appropriate when it comes to discussing your favorite foods, or your hobby or art

preferences, it is dangerous when applied to everyday reality because it confuses matters of opinion with matters of truth.

To learn more about reaching post moderns with the gospel, I spent time studying the works of one of the leading apologists and pastors of our day, Tim Keller. Tim Keller has lived in New York City for over 30 years and is the former pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church. He has written several books on how to share the gospel with skeptics. One specific book of his that I will be referring to throughout this message is his book,

Making Sense of God book

Over the past several years, Keller has been invited to many universities and corporations, like Google, to share his views on Christianity. Most of the skeptics he encounters at these venue classify themselves as “nones” or people with no religious affiliation. They believe that Christianity “makes no sense in the real, natural world we live in.” and that it has no merit at all. Yet these same skeptics object when you tell them that their secular mindset is just as much a set of beliefs or worldview as is Christianity. Since postmodernism and secularism are considered worldviews, they can be compared

point by point with other religious systems, such as Christianity

Post moderns prefer to say that it's only religious people who have a set of beliefs that they try to impose those beliefs on others. They see themselves simply as people who make their case by presenting the scientific facts and anyone who disagrees with them is close minded. They also say that the only way a person can be a Christian is to believe in the fairy tales of the Bible and to close their eyes to all reason and evidence. Clearly, in their eyes, they stand on the side of objective truth whereas Christianity is more about believing in fables, myths and all kinds of so-called supernatural acts of God found in a flawed bible.

So, with this picture of what postmodern secularism looks like, let me ask you a question. Are those of us who are Christians doomed by the defeater arguments of secularism, science and postmodern philosophy? Or could it be instead that it takes more faith to believe in secularism than it does Christianity?

In order to answer those questions, I want to share with you three assertions about Christianity that go toe to toe with the secular mindset and give Christians ample reasons to have confidence in their faith.

Whether you are a follower of Christ, or someone questioning the plausibility of Christianity, it is my prayer you are able to gain new understanding of the legitimacy of faith in Jesus. The three assertions I'm about to share are not original to me: they can be found in Tim Keller's book, "Making Sense of God". I would encourage any of you who have further questions to read this book.

Whenever he makes presentations about Christianity, Keller provides the emotional, social and rational reasons why Christianity makes sense to a lot of people. In each of his presentations, he makes three assertions. He says that Christianity begins to make sense to us when we see:

- **The faith it takes to doubt it.**
- **The problems we have without it.**
- **The beauty we find within it.**

THE FAITH IT TAKES TO DOUBT IT

Let's begin by looking at the faith it takes to doubt it...Christianity that is. Do you know that it takes more faith to believe in a secular worldview than to believe in Christianity? I

know that's not what we are led to believe by famous atheists like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins. But it's true.

We are often led to believe that secularism is based on science, objective facts and the natural world. We are told, in contrast, that Christianity is subjective, unintellectual and requires faith in the supernatural. But is it possible that postmodernism requires even MORE faith than does Christianity? In this next video, I'll let Tim Keller tell you in his own words why it takes more faith, not less, to believe in secularism. Let's watch.

Tim Keller (4:38 min)

Did you catch what he said? He said if skeptics makes assumption as to why they can't think of a reason God would allow evil and suffering, for them, that settles it...there must not BE a reason. But in saying this, a skeptic is acting as though he or she has total knowledge of everything in the universe, including reasons behind God's actions. Or as Keller says, to claim that, skeptics = have to make the assumption that they have the ULTIMATE perspective on truth or the powers of exhaustive surveillance and if they can't think of any good reason, then there isn't one. There's a problem with that kind of reasoning. Let me show you what I mean.

Let's assume this circle represents "total knowledge".

Total Knowledge

In other words, this circle represents everything there is to know about everything. Let me ask you this: If you were to draw a pie shape within this circle that represents how much knowledge you or I have about everything, how big would that piece of pie be?

My knowledge

Mine would look like this.

Let's assume the smartest person in the world knows 52% of everything there is to know. So if the smartest person in the world knows 52%,

Smartest person knowledge

Is it not entirely feasible that there are answers out there to some hard questions that they know nothing about? Could there be a logical reason, outside the realm of even the smartest person's knowledge, that could explain why a good God allows evil and suffering to exist? A reason that maybe

God alone knows? Just because you or I can't think of a reason doesn't mean a reason doesn't exist. And for that reason alone, it would be foolish for a skeptic to claim total certainty about ANY assertion they make when they don't have total knowledge.

Bottom line: A skeptic or secularist can be no more assured about knowing the answer to questions like the problem of suffering and evil than you or I. They must exercise a tremendous amount of faith in their extremely limited amount of knowledge. Therefore, Christianity makes a lot of sense for no other reason than it takes more faith to doubt it than to accept it.

THE PROBLEMS WE HAVE WITHOUT IT

What we mean by this is there are serious emotional, cultural and rational problems that a secularist must face for not believing in Christianity.

The first problem is the problem of MEANING.

The secularists have a problem with meaning because the meaning they create for themselves will be too thin to handle suffering.

Secular cultures, unlike religious cultures, make you find your meaning in something that is here on this earth, which means suffering can take it away. Every other religion helps you find your meaning in life outside of this life. Suffering as a Christian can actually help us find or accomplish our meaning in life, whereas suffering as a secular person can destroy your meaning in life. The secular culture gives its adherents much fewer resources to deal with suffering than any other religious culture in the history of the world. That is the first big problem with secularism.

The second problem is the problem of IDENTITY.

Secularists have a problem in that their identity is based on themselves which makes it very fragile.

Every other religion says you find who you are by connecting with something more important than yourself, something outside yourself. But secular culture tells you to look inside yourself and whatever you want to do most, that's what you do. That kind of identity makes you incredibly fragile because you need to find some kind of recognition in this life to feel good about yourself. But this kind of need for recognition will actually enslave you. Just think about Facebook and the over emphasis on how many likes you get or or YouTube and how many views you receive affect many people's identity these

days. Christians, on the other hand, find their identity and worth in God and not in the things of this world.

The third problem with secularism, besides meaning and identity, is the problem of FREEDOM. Our postmodern culture defines freedom as the absence of restrictions, which destroys relationships.

In other words, a secularist would say I am ONLY free if no limits are placed on my behavior. Then and only then am I free. Now if that truly is what freedom is, then it's the opposite of what Christianity calls love. Why? Because the more committed you are to a love relationship the less free you are. Yet most Christians would say the more we are committed to a love relationship the happier we are! Sadly, the kind of freedom that postmoderns believe in, where there are no restrictions, tends to eat up and destroy relationships over time, not make them better.

As you can see, there are some serious problems with secularism when compared with Christianity. Now the last distinctive thing about Christianity I want us to see is:

THE BEAUTY WE FIND WITHIN IT

Christianity has a beauty to it. First of all, we have the Christian understanding that God is not one individual but a trinity, three persons who have known and loved each other for all eternity.

As I just said a minute ago, when we are in a love relationship, that's when we are the happiest. So if you have the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, according to the teaching of the bible, having a perfect relationship and are totally happy within that relationship, why would they need to create a world full of other beings, other human beings? The answer is to share their happiness with them! There is no other good reason. They already have everything they need.

So the beauty of this Christian teaching is that God actually created us in order to share his happiness with us.

Also, Christianity has a story that explains both the ruin and the glory of the human race. Any story that just sees human beings as trash or that looks at the human race as basically good and fails to recognize the good and the evil in us, doesn't really account for how things really are.

But the beauty of the story is that God wants to share his love and happiness with us, and though we are all messed

up due to our sin, he comes into the world as Jesus Christ to set us free.

God looked into the world, saw us harming each other, and he sent Jesus into the world where he went to the cross and died for us and paid the penalty for our sins so that we might have life to the full. That story of amazing love is what sets Christianity apart from all other worldviews, secular or otherwise.

So Christianity makes a lot of sense to a lot of people because of three assertions:

- The faith it takes to doubt it. It takes more faith to believe in secularism than Christianity.
- The problems we have without it. There are more problems to overcome with secularism than with Christianity.
- The beauty we find within it. The beauty is that God wants to share his amazing love and happiness with the world he created and has provided redemption for our sin through Jesus's death on the cross.

Takeaway #2: Recognizing and Responding to a Spiritual Attack

Now I could end this message right here and say that's enough sabbatical reflection for one day. But I want to briefly share with you one more thing I personally encountered at the end of my sabbatical. Some of you may be experiencing this same thing right now. What I am referring to is known as "spiritual warfare".

For some of us, the topic of "spiritual warfare" is new or unfamiliar. It's not something we spend a lot of time teaching about on Sunday morning, even though Rick has touched on it from time to time. Basically, spiritual warfare refers to an invisible war that is raging all around us. This war I'm referring to is described for us in the book of Ephesians:

For we^{*} are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. Ephesians 4:12

Every day, 24/7, 365 days of the year, an unseen battle is being waged all around us. This battle isn't your typical kind of combat, like we see on tv in Afghanistan or with ISIS. It occurs most often in our minds and our souls. You see, Satan, the arch enemy of God, is working to destroy all the good things that God is doing in this world along with the people of God who are

doing it. Satan and his demonic army are fighting a war with God and his army of angels and we, the church, the people of God, are sandwiched in the middle. This means that God's people are daily in the very crosshairs of Satan's lethal attacks.

Just so you know, spiritual warfare is nothing new. It's been going on before the beginning of time when Lucifer, the highest of all of God's angelic creations, was cast out of heaven by God for his sin of pride and his desire to be God. Ever since that day, Lucifer, also known as Satan, or the devil, has been waging war against God and his people.

Jesus himself was a target of spiritual warfare. He was attacked by Satan soon after his baptism, which was the beginning of the most powerful three years of ministry of his life. The bible says,

As Jesus came up out of the water (after being baptized), he saw the heavens splitting apart and the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven said, "You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy." The Spirit then compelled Jesus to go into the wilderness, where he was tempted by Satan for forty days.
Mark 1:10 - 13

For forty days, Jesus fought against Satan in a battle for his soul. Unlike us, Jesus may have seen it coming and was aware of what was going on. Most often, we are not. Let me explain from my own life.

It's important for you to know that the sabbatical I returned from about a month ago was probably one of the most uplifting and enlightening sabbaticals of any I've had before now. I came back with a "high" and felt more equipped than ever to carry on with the ministry God has given me at NHCC. The things I learned and the experiences I had seemed to all be exactly what I needed at this point in my career as a pastor. Little did I know that I had a target on my back.

The week I returned from my sabbatical I jumped right into our annual 3-day strategic planning retreat. This retreat is always filled with lively and stimulating discussions about goals and objectives and vision, where we all get to discern and plan for the things God wants us to accomplish in the coming year.

Soon after our retreat started, I began to feel a gradual uneasiness come over me. As we were talking about some of the issues surrounding our response to COVID and other important topics, I felt myself becoming more and more

resistant to everything that was being shared. I felt myself becoming close minded and irritated. And the more resistant I got, the angrier I felt. As we progressed through each day of the retreat, I felt myself becoming hardened to the direction we were heading. Just to be clear, no one had said anything to me to make me mad or to discourage me, but a cloud of despair was slowly settling over my soul, and it was getting darker and darker with each passing hour.

Ironically, there was time during the retreat where someone mentioned that we all needed to be aware of the spiritual warfare going on around us and to be alert to pray against it. I literally said to myself, "That's ridiculous. We are just trying to over-spiritualize everything." So, I poopooed the whole idea of spiritual warfare. Little did I know it was happening to me.

The following week after the retreat was over, I was still feeling emotionally down and depressed, even though I had just come off of an amazing sabbatical. I would wake up in the mornings feeling more discouraged and despondent than the day before. My thoughts starting drifting to crazy things like, "maybe I should just quit my job. They don't appreciate me any more and my services are no longer needed here." But it got even worse to the point where I started to wonder if I should just leave this earth and go to be with Jesus.

Just so you know, I am normally an optimistic, upbeat person. I rarely struggle with dark thoughts or mental health issues. But for the life of me, I couldn't put my finger on the cause of these dark thoughts. There was nothing that I was aware of that was triggering them as far as I could tell. So, I was not only very discouraged, but I had no idea what was causing it.

Let me push pause for a min. As I mentioned earlier, spiritual warfare occurs whenever Satan or his band of demons, seeks to destroy us and he often begins his attack in our minds. We start experiencing what some call "stinkin thinkin". But it's also important for you to know that those of us who are Christians cannot be demon possessed. We can't be inhabited by evil spirits because the all-powerful one, the Holy Spirit, lives within us. He is on the throne of our hearts, and he will not allow any evil or Satanic spirit to take control of us.

So, as I return to my story, this cloud of doubt and evil self-talk and emotional depressing heaviness kept haunting me for a week or more after the retreat. And then one day as I was getting ready for work, a thought entered my mind. It's a biblical truth that I had forgotten about and for some reason, the Holy Spirit brought it to my attention. The truth is this: when you cannot pinpoint the cause of your evil thoughts and

darkness, it could be the result of demonic oppression. And then I said to myself, “I think that’s it. I bet that’s what’s happening!” In case you are wondering, demonic oppression is the opposite of demonic possession.

Demonic oppression occurs whenever Satan attempts to discourage or destroy us by planting evil thoughts or lies into our minds FROM WITHOUT, not from within.

Since Satan can’t possess us as Christians, he will attempt to oppress us by shooting his fiery darts of doubt, discouragement and lies into our minds. The bible warns us about this kind of attack in the book of Ephesians:

Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on all of God’s armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil...In addition to all of these, hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil.

Ephesians 6: 10,16

That morning when I came to work after realizing what was going on, I explained to Mica and Rick that I thought I was experiencing demonic oppression. I asked them to pray against the forces of evil that were attacking me. By that afternoon, the voices in my head were gone and the cloud lifted, and I felt like

a new person all over again. Sometimes it takes more time and prayer to get rid of this type of spiritual oppression, but their prayers really helped me get back on track.

Conclusion

So as I bring this to a close, I want to remind you that Satan is real...just under the surface of our everyday interactions...hiding in the shadows and constantly working to undermine what God is doing in us and through us.

Have you just come off a spiritual high point or a victorious period in life? Beware of the target that's on your back. The bible says, "Be alert and of a sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."

Are you struggling with unexplainable thoughts or temptations? Don't be afraid to call it spiritual warfare and do what the bible says: Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes." Counter the attack by reading with the word of God. Especially Psalm 91 and have someone pray with you and for you.

Are you worried about Satan or your ability to resist him? Remember that the Holy Spirit's power from within is greater than Satan's oppression from without. For the word of God says, "the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one." We have nothing to fear. The God of angel armies is always by our side.

Let's pray.

Let's stand and sing "Whom Shall I fear" as we affirm our faith and trust in God

CLOSING COMMENTS:

Next week Rick will start a new series called, "Apocalypse Now". It's hard not to wonder if we might be living in the biblical "end times."

Some of you, after hearing my message, may wonder if you are struggling with spiritual warfare issues of your own. If that describes you, then come down in front now after the service and Joseph St. George or I will pray over any of you.