

Message: “Preview of What’s to Come”

When we follow in Jesus’ footsteps, surprising things happen.

Michelle knows what this is like. She and her husband recently visited their son and daughter-in-law, who live near the beach.

And they enjoyed their time. Visits mean lazy days at the beach, enjoying God’s handiwork in the form of powder white sand and turquoise and green water that’s so clear you can see to the bottom. It looks like a postcard as colorful sailboats drift past.

Michelle says, “I don’t know what it is about going to the beach, but even sandwiches taste better when sitting in a comfy chair with your toes in the sand. But the best part is spending time with our family, playing with our grandson and watching his joy as he digs in the sand.”

The family looks like the beach version of the Beverly Hillbillies as they make their way, cart piled high with a canvas beach awning, chairs, a cooler, beach towels, and all the assorted stuff they take.

Michelle says, “I’m glad I’m not the one who has to push the cart through the sand! I say that because just walking across the beach can sometimes be difficult for me.”

Years ago, Michelle broke her hip and pelvic bone and fractured an ankle in a car wreck. The other ankle was messed up during her sports days, so walking through loose sand pulls on all those weak places. Hiking across the sand can be difficult at times.

One of those moments occurred on an evening. Michelle plodded behind her husband through the loose sand, when she noticed something: When Paul took a step, it packed the sand down. And if she walked in his footsteps, it made her trip across the beach so much easier.

Then it was as if God whispered in her ear, “Your life is just like that. If you’ll walk in my footsteps, I’ll guide you. And as long as you keep following in my footsteps, your journey will be much easier.”¹

Psalm 37:23 says, “*The steps of a good person are ordered by the Lord.*”

What great advice for all of us. Sometimes small things, like habits, can give us a glimpse of how life can be greater and easier.

¹ <https://guideposts.org/articles/angels-and-miracles/miracles/gods-grace/when-god-shows-up-unexpectedly/>

Five weeks ago, we began this series based on Michael Frost's book *Surprise the World*. We've been learning a few simple ways people have found to renew their enthusiasm for life. These are practical, everyday tools for cultivating good, spiritual habits in our lives.

In short, we've learned to play the handbells. Let's practice now. Hold your hand up. As we name a habit, wiggle one finger. Five habits, five fingers.

Ready? Here we go... blessing, eating, listening, learning and, for this week, sending.

What does this spell? Bells. Congratulations. Maybe some of you might like to try actual handbells. Our choir starts rehearsing this week and no experience is required.

We also began the series with an excerpt from one of Paul's letters. He wrote, "*Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 3:14).

Then he continues, "*So all of us who are spiritually mature should think this way, and if anyone thinks differently, God will reveal it to them. Only let's live in a way that is consistent with whatever level we have reached*" (vv15-16).

God gives us glimpses of what is to come in our lives. But that's not all. Our lives, and the lives of the people we encounter, also give us glimpses of what God has done, is doing and will do.

Our lives are a preview of what's to come. Sort of like a preview of an upcoming feature film.

Previews are tasters, short versions of the soon-to-released feature, and they usually include the best special effects or the funniest scenes or the most romantic moments of the upcoming feature.

I invite you to watch those around you at the end of a preview. If it's met its purpose, usually one person will turn to another and say, "I want to see that movie."²

² Michael Frost, *Surprise the World*, NavPress, 2016, p.

This is a great metaphor for the local church. If we are faithful and live well, people will see and say, “I want to see where they come from.”

This leads to some interesting questions, of course. For example, what does God’s kin-dom look like? And if we’re telling people about Jesus, what exactly are we pointing them toward?

Michael Frost points to few things: reconciliation, social justice and beauty. We are sent to seek them as they connect us to God, each other and our neighbors. Let’s reflect on each one for a moment.

Reconciliation is at the heart of Christ’s work. Jesus came to save us and reconcile us to God, making a new covenant relationship with God. And this changes everything. So, it makes sense that reconciliation, between God and humanity, between faith groups, between races, between genders, and so on, is a core expression of faith. We are to announce reconciliation and demonstrate it.

How? Announcing means championing, describing, explaining or advocating for reconciliation. Demonstrating means making up with someone or helping people reconcile. We can be creative. And we’ll most likely have a particular way we are effective.

You may have done this in your workplace by mediating between colleagues in conflict. Or maybe you reconciled with a friend or relative who is distant. Maybe you shared the hope you have in Jesus with someone who was down, telling them about the love you know.

Next, social justice isn’t just a recent interest. Since the beginning of our movement, Christians recognized a call to defend and uphold the dignity and well-being of all persons, especially the poor and powerless. John Wesley and Charles Spurgeon did. Martin Luther King, Jr., Desmond Tutu and Mother Theresa did.

There are all kinds of ways we can demonstrate social justice, whether it be eliminating sex trafficking, campaigning for clean water, promoting fair-trade products, or some specific cause. There are new movements to encourage Christians to restore the homeless and care for disadvantaged children. Whether you’re simply donating to a cause, signing an online petition, or opening your home to the poor, you can be involved in the work of social justice.

Were you surprised to hear beauty as a focus? Reconciliation and social justice make sense. The Bible is full of references to them.

But beauty as an expression of God? The more you reflect on it, the more sense it makes. I think it's the difference between doing and being. And we need both.

We often feel closest to God on a mountaintop or at a beach or in the presence of natural beauty. And who isn't moved by a beautiful performer or a piece of music? They have the power to move us to tears.

Have you ever wondered why music, art, craft and food exist?

What better way to get a preview of what is to come, moving us toward the Creator of all beauty? And we can invite our friends to encounter it with us in creative ways. Take them hiking. Walk along beaches. Go to a show. Have progressive dinners. There are many ways to encounter the beauty of God.

Rudolph Otto, a German theologian, listed some responses normally associated with an encounter with God. They include a sense of majesty, unapproachability, and a feeling of fascination, including both fear and attraction.

He speaks of a feeling that can never be adequately described, only experienced. The feeling we are important enough to be invited to encounter the Holy, but in its presence, we are overwhelmed and made aware of our smallness. Such experiences of the transcendent are not only frightening; they are also strangely comforting. We need them.

And we seek to be comforted. John the Baptist did. While in prison, John sent his followers to double-check that Jesus really is the Messiah. The question of identity is interesting, since John knew Jesus longer than anyone else of his age. Yet he had doubts, so it's okay when we do and our friends do. You see, Jesus gives us hope. We read about it earlier.

Jesus said, *“Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor”* (Luke 7:22).

This is a preview of what is to come. Jesus' credentials, the verification of who and what he is, are the restoration of people. Jesus healed the blind, deaf, disabled, ill and even raised the dead, to show the glory of God's kin-dom. It's reasonable to believe wholeness, the healing of the world, is a primary way of showing what God's kin-dom looks like.

It's important for us to recognize, participate in, and share these expressions of God's love, grace and mercy. When we provide relief to victims of natural disasters, we're showing what God's kin-dom looks like. When we help repair a broken relationship, we do the same. When we treat people with dignity, bringing healing to their bodies, minds and souls we can clearly see it as mirroring the work of God.

We're giving them a preview of what is to come.

Michael Frost recommends journaling to help us make sense of what God is doing, capture insights, ask questions and discover our identity. Theological reflection is a helpful part of our spiritual journey.

These are the keys to the five habits of living. It's about reshaping our identities around our calling as the ones God sends to offer love, grace and mercy. By fostering the habits of generously blessing, eating together with hospitality, listening for the Spirit's voice, learning Christ and embracing wholeness, you will see yourself as Jesus' follower, God's child. And, more and more often, your words and deeds will give life, helping heal the world.

In our being and doing, let us embrace our family chores. Let's be God's child acting in loving ways. This is the heart of ubuntu, the heart of faith.

Let us joyfully sow seeds of faith so lives are drawn to God. Amen.

Let us pray ...

Group Practice

Are your new spiritual habits growing? How patient are you being? Together, we've learned the habits of blessing, eating, listening, learning and sending.

This week's practice is about how to stick with good habits.

It's called the "paper clip" strategy. Here's a version of it. Let's say you want to show kindness each day. You could put a small object, like a coin, in your pocket. Each time you do a good deed, you move the coin from one pocket to another.

This reminds you to do the habit with more consistency. Sound easy? It is. This is a tried-and-true way to help you stay with good habits.

This week's practice: Bless 3 people. Eat with 3 more people. Spend time listening for the Spirit's voice. Learn something about Jesus. Journal or reflect on how you might reconcile with someone, be involved in social justice or share beauty.

Let's practice. Close your eyes or soften them. Take a couple of deep breaths. Imagine yourself sitting at a table with Jesus. Enjoy it. [pause]

Center yourself on him. You may say a word or phrase like Abba, love, peace, Savior, healer, teacher. Let love fill your heart. [pause]

Ask Jesus to guide you and show you someone you can connect with to share God's love. [pause]

Jesus is with you always. Let this be oxygen to your soul. May it draw you inward as you reflect on your life in Christ, draw you outward to care for your neighbors, and draw you upward to our Holy God in prayer and thanksgiving. [pause]

Open your eyes and return to this moment.

Gracious God, thank you for life and the many ways you bless our lives. Thank you for Jesus, who showed us by example how to walk with you and love as you do. Guide and direct our steps as we learn new habits. Walk with us as we seek to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. In his name we pray, amen

1 Peter 3:3-4 (CEB)

Don't try to make yourselves beautiful on the outside, with stylish hair or by wearing gold jewelry or fine clothes. Instead, make yourselves beautiful on the inside, in your hearts, with the enduring quality of a gentle, peaceful spirit. This type of beauty is very precious in God's eyes.

Luke 7:17-23 (CEB)

This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding region.

John's disciples informed him about all these things. John called two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord. They were to ask him, "Are you the one who is coming, or should we look for someone else?"

When they reached Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you. He asks, 'Are you the one who is coming, or should we look for someone else?'"

Right then, Jesus healed many of their diseases, illnesses, and evil spirits, and he gave sight to a number of blind people. Then he replied to John's disciples, "Go, report to John what you have seen and heard. Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled now walk. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. And good news is preached to the poor. Happy is anyone who doesn't stumble along the way because of me."