



Comings and Goings

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Vienna Presbyterian Church
Matthew 11:28-30; 28:18-20

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The title of this sermon is “Comings and Goings.” The phrase is actually defined in the dictionary as the “busy, active movements of many people, especially in and out of a place.” It recently came to my mind because there has been a lot of that lately!

I’m coming back to church after going on pastoral leave for three months. After retiring and moving away, Pastor Stan has come back to our church to provide leadership as we eagerly anticipate the coming of our new lead pastor, Hope Lee, in October. Other staff have departed, going to new ministry opportunities.

Children and students are coming back to five days of in-person classes after going online for over a year. Some families have celebrated the coming of new babies, while others are adjusting to children going away to college.

Daily we hear news of comings and goings in our country and the world related to hurricanes, earthquakes, fires, and especially the evacuation of people from Afghanistan.

There is a lot happening in our lives, in the church, and in the world that can leave us physically, emotionally, and spiritually drained. Jesus extends a beautiful invitation to us: Listen to God’s word to you from Matthew 11: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens 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 for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

The context of this passage is that Jesus is beginning to encounter controversy and conflict in his ministry, especially with religious leaders. As he looks out at the crowd he understands that many are weighed down by obligations and demands imposed by the scribes and Pharisees. Many felt there was no way they could know enough, do enough, or be good enough for God. They would never measure up. They were tired, worn out, and burned out on religion.

This passage speaks to me because in my youth I was following the path of religion focusing on what I could do to be good enough for God. I was trying hard to do the right things so I could meet what I thought God and others expected of me, but I was I was exhausted. Maybe you have felt the same.

Jesus invites us to come to him. He’s not talking about religion but relationship. It’s not about trying harder but trusting Jesus and his grace to accomplish for us what we can never accomplish on our own.

I was a freshman in college when I finally understood and fully embraced this good news to come to Jesus. I remember well the relief I felt as I let go of my fear, drive, need for approval, and control. My life began to change in ways that I had wanted and tried to make happen but never could through all my self-effort.

Some of you here may be in that place, and I hope you can hear and heed Jesus' invitation to "come to me." But even those of us who have been living in a relationship with Jesus for some time can become weary from the daily responsibilities of family and work. Let me see your hands. Anyone feel stressed or weighed down by the ongoing demands of life? Has anyone encountered unexpected crises in the last year? We all have, dealing with life in a pandemic. And some of us have been dealing with additional personal challenges.

Here is the really good news: Jesus' invitation is not only for the beginning of the faith journey; it's for all the steps along the way. Jesus invites us to come to him, to live in an interactive, growing, and vibrant relationship with him day by day, in the midst of whatever circumstances we may face.

And Jesus promises to give us rest. Our idea of rest may be a quiet evening at home, a day off doing what we want, or even a vacation. These are good things to be enjoyed, but Jesus' promise refers to the ultimate rest for which Israel had long hoped: the realization of a deep existential peace, shalom, an overriding sense of well-being.

In the Old Testament, the word *rest* meant salvation. Salvation is life with God—the eternal abundant life we were made for. It's the life we always wanted.

Jesus not only gives an invitation and a promise, he gives us a word picture to help us understand what it looks like to come to him and experience this rest. A "yoke" was the wooden frame joining two animals for pulling heavy loads. A younger, less experienced ox was yoked to an older, more experienced one who leads, bears the majority of the load, and trains the younger one in what to do.

This metaphor of a yoke helps us understand what discipleship means. A disciple is simply a learner, student, or follower. Today we might use the term apprentice. As Dallas Willard explained, "We are learning from Jesus how to live our lives as he would live it if he were us."

Unlike religious leaders of his day, Jesus' character is different; he is "gentle and humble of heart." His yoke is easy and light because his teaching equips us to live God's will in our everyday lives the way God intended.

Now this doesn't mean we will have a carefree or problem-free life. Challenges and even suffering come to all just as they did to Jesus in his earthly life. But Jesus invites us to live in relationship, learning to follow him as we rely on his grace. We are not left alone. The Holy Spirit is the helper and teacher who indwells and fills us so we can experience the easy and light yoke of Jesus—a life of love, joy, and peace.

So what does it actually look like to take up Jesus' yoke and experience this rest? Let's look again at our passage, this time from *The Message*:

“Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly” (Matthew 11:28-30).

How do we “get away with” and “keep company with” Jesus? How do we “learn the unforced rhythms of grace”? Spiritual disciplines are the way that we learn, grow, and become like Jesus. They can be perceived and are often utilized as religious obligations. Spiritual disciplines have no power to change us. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. But spiritual disciplines are a means of grace—ways we can choose that put us in the place where the Holy Spirit can do what needs to be done. Spiritual disciplines are “the unforced rhythms of grace” that the Holy Spirit uses to teach, train, and transform us. I want to talk about a few of the classic disciplines.

First, we learn the unforced rhythms of grace as we read, reflect on, and respond to Jesus’ voice in Scripture. I suggest having a plan. Some read through the Bible in a year. Stan has shared that he reads a chapter from the Old and New Testament and a Psalm each day. This summer I’ve been exploring and enjoying devotions on the You Version Bible app. This fall, I’m looking forward to reflecting on the Gospel of Mark in the VPC devotions that will resume after Labor Day. We all need God’s guidance and support in the midst of our real life, and so listening to Jesus’ voice in Scripture is imperative.

Second, we learn the unforced rhythms of grace as we pray. Prayer is simply having a conversation with God. It’s not just talking to God but listening as well. Each day, I pray for family and friends, others in need, the church, and the world, confident God hears and answers. I know God answers prayer because so many of you have said you are praying for Stuart, me, and our family in this season of challenge. I can assure you God is using your prayers to carry us.

It is beneficial to set aside time daily to listen to and talk with God, but it’s important to remember the goal is *not* to have a devotional time. The goal is to cultivate our interactive friendship with Jesus so we can trust him more in all the moments of our days. Scripture and prayer are the unforced rhythms of grace that help us. We may think we don’t have time, but we do. We can listen to God’s word and pray as we walk, mow the lawn, wash dishes, or commute to work.

Another way we learn the unforced rhythms of grace is by keeping the Sabbath. This is one of the Ten Commandments, but the least understood and most disobeyed. It is not an obligation to fulfill, but a gift to be received. Sabbath is an invitation from God that frees us from being defined by our *doing* so we can enjoy *being* a child of God.

I started this practice in college because I began to burn out. I wasn’t sure if I had studied enough or prepared enough to know what I needed to know. I finally realized that I was relying

on my self-effort to get good grades. While I continued to work hard Monday through Saturday, I stopped studying or even thinking about school on Sundays.

All of us have more to do than we have time to do. Sabbath frees us from our belief that it's all up to us and counters our compulsion to prove ourselves or earn our way in this world. Sabbath helps us to live freely and lightly in the unforced rhythms of grace. Here is a question for us to consider: Can we dare to let go of our unending to-do lists and obligations, that are a necessary part of our lives, to trust God and his grace to continue to accomplish what needs to be done in us and in the world?

I think we can. Sabbath makes it possible to enjoy time and space for our relationships with God, family, and friends. I can tell you from experience, Sabbath is not a burden; it's a blessing.

Just this week in a devotional, I read this quote from Tim Keller: "To use the word 'rest' conveys mainly inactivity, but the main way the biblical Sabbath day renews strength and joy is through worship." Rest is not inactivity but living into a different kind of renewing, life-giving activity. That is why worship has always been the center of Sabbath for God's people. We live the unforced rhythms of grace as we worship.

Sunday has always been my favorite day of the week. I think gathering in community for worship is what I missed most this year of the pandemic and these last three months away while on leave. I am glad and grateful to be back with you.

Finally, we learn the unforced rhythms of grace as we share life together in community. We are created for relationships—with God and with others. I have experienced the joy of being a part of weekly small group and/or Bible study for over four decades—not because I'm a pastor but because I'm a follower of Jesus. I know that I can only experience the joy of being fully known and loved by God as I am fully known and loved by others in community. We need each other.

These are just some of the unforced rhythms of grace or spiritual disciplines every follower of Jesus needs to practice. But knowing about them isn't enough. Dallas Willard writes, "You must arrange your life so that you are experiencing deep contentment, joy, and confidence in your everyday life with God." No one else can do this for you or me. So the question is, "How will you arrange your life so that you are experiencing deep contentment, joy, and confidence in your everyday life with God?"

That is probably enough for a sermon, but I'm not finished because this sermon is about "Comings *and* Goings." Jesus invites us to come to him, to take up his yoke to *follow* him. But in his Great Commission he also commands us to *go*: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I

have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).

This is not a suggestion; it’s a command given by our leader and Lord. We are called to be disciples or followers, but also called to make disciples of others. Jesus tells us how to do it.

We make disciples as we go. All of life is sacred—every moment, every encounter, every circumstance. So it’s in the midst of our everyday life and interactions that we are to make disciples as we share the good news about Jesus—who he is, what he did for us, and how he has changed our lives.

Before moving to the DC area, I knew nothing about the way our military and government agencies recognize those who retire from a lifetime of public service. I have since been privileged to attend a number of these celebrations and have been amazed to hear of the scope of responsibilities, challenges, and remarkable accomplishments of these individuals’ faithful service to our country.

But even more inspiring to me was hearing work colleagues lift up how these individuals lived out their faith in Jesus. Not only did they do their work with excellence, they genuinely loved and cared for the people around them. Their words and actions testified to their commitment to Jesus and his mission in the world. We make disciples as we share the good news with others in all the places we go—workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods.

We also make disciples by baptizing people. When we read this, we often think of the sacrament of baptism celebrated in worship. But to *baptize* actually means to immerse or submerge, and it’s not referring to water at all. It’s about being submerged in the Trinitarian Presence. As I said earlier, this is experienced primarily through community. Baptism marks the transition from outside the community of faith to apprenticeship or discipleship within it.

For my mother’s 90th birthday party in July, my sister brought photographs. Among them were pictures taken when she and I were baptized. I was reminded that my mother drove us 30 miles every Sunday so that we could worship with others and learn about the Bible in Sunday school. Every summer, she made sure we could go to Vacation Bible School.

While I didn’t understand or embrace salvation until I was in college, I know God’s grace was at work even in my childhood as I was immersed in the Trinity through these means of grace in my family and church. I thank God for my mother’s faithfulness in fulfilling the promises she made at my baptism.

Each of us as parents is called to fulfill the promises we make at baptism as we pray for our children, teach them to obey God’s word, show them how to worship, help them to recognize God’s hand at work in the ups and downs of their lives, and connect them to others in the body of Christ. This is our responsibility.

But it's not only parents who make promises at baptism. Each of us as a member of the congregation promises to guide and nurture God's children by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging them to know and follow Christ and to be faithful members of his church. Each of us is an important and needed part of the body of Christ. How are we using our time, talent, and treasure to help others experience the reality of the Trinity in our midst?

Finally, we are called not only to *be* disciples; we must also accept the truth that we are also called to *make* disciples by teaching others all that Jesus commanded.

As a freshman in college, I became a part of a small group where I grew a lot in my relationship with Jesus and others. The next year, my mentor asked me to help lead a Bible study with her. I didn't feel ready because I still had a so much to learn. But she used an acronym to help me understand the kind of people God is looking to use in ministry. He wants FAT people—those who are **f**aithful, **a**vailable, and **t**eachable. I stepped out in faith, and was deeply blessed.

Some of us have been following Jesus for a long time. We may even be in several groups with others who are at the same age and stage of faith that we are. This is good because we need that. But I want to challenge you to consider whether Jesus is nudging you to take a step of faith not just to come to Jesus but also to go and make disciples by teaching others.

We have had many staff transitions in our NextGen ministry, and we need faithful, available, teachable people who are willing to help lead and teach children and students. In October, we want to start some new adult small groups to help more people experience the blessing of being in community. We will need leaders for that to happen. You don't need to know everything. We as staff will coach and equip you in what to do.

I've said a lot of words, but here's the bottom line. Jesus is here, and he is calling you to grow as a disciple and to make disciples. What does that look like for you? This is a critical juncture in the world, our church, and our lives. It's a come-to-Jesus moment. Our upcoming VPC communications will have a lot of information about opportunities to learn in community with others as well as opportunities to serve and lead. While it may be easy to get overwhelmed by all of the opportunities, I want to encourage you to take time to carefully read and prayerfully consider how Jesus is speaking to you.

Fall is a wonderful time to reset, and that is more true this year than ever given what we are facing. Each of us has to consider our own comings and goings this fall by answering these questions: How am I *coming* to Jesus to learn the unforced rhythms of grace? How am I *going* and making disciples in his love, grace, and power?