Calvary United Methodist Church
March 11, 2018

WERE YOU THERE?
Rev. R. Jeffrey Fisher

Children’s Sermon: Joel 2:28

I’d like to invite our children to come forth for the children’s message. Everyone okay after losing an hour’s sleep? But guess what. It’s going to be the light we can play outside longer today. That’s the good news, isn’t it? I’m so happy to see everyone here this morning.

I don’t want to catch anyone like this, snoozing. Do you snooze? Although it might be a great day for a nap.

Actually, I am not talking about snoozing or napping today, but what happens sometimes when I take naps is day-dreaming or having visions. Do any of you have dreams? I dreamed last night that I got a new puppy. That was a happy dream. Then I remembered you have to clean up after them and work so it was just a dream. That’s for sure.

Well, there are sometimes in the Word of God he tells us about having visions and about dreams. You might already be having dreams of the things you want to do as you grow older, right? All of us and some of us are older, still have dreams and visions of things we would still like to do in the rest of our life and throughout God’s Word there are many people, especially called prophets, who were given a vision by God and they share with you that vision that we might go places. People in your family do that. They have visions for you going to school and being successful and finding your own dreams and visions in life that you can be happy adults one day.

When we get vision, like some of you might notice that a few of us around this place have glasses. When our vision isn’t clear we get glasses to help us see what’s called 20/20, to have a perfect vision because it’s real important to see things clearly.

And I didn’t realize that until I had to get my first set of glasses and without glasses things I thought looked good and when I put them on they look even better. Having good vision is an important, to know where we are going.
A vision is like a direction. It’s like a map. If you ever go on vacation or go someplace you have some sort of navigational system, how you are going to get there if it’s by car or boat or plane, but even if it’s a homework assignment you have an idea of what you need to do. You have a pathway to take. And God’s Word is a pathway for us to remind us how we can find the best road for our own life.

And there is a Word found in the Prophet Joel that I would like to read: I will pour my Spirit out on every kind of people; your sons will prophesy, also your daughters.

Your old men will dream and your young men will see visions.

We have a vision around this church; it’s that we not only love God here but we will take God into our community so other people may learn to love God and especially so other people know that God loves them. It’s important for us to know that God loves us, no matter what.

Along my life journey there are a lot of people always saying: you’ve got to stay on this pathway. And yet, I’ve found that life isn’t always a straight path. Sometimes it has some curves.

As we think of our future and a vision, some of you probably already have dreams of things you might want, some of you probably remember things when you were little boys and girls of things you wanted and some of those things have become reality.

When I was real young my mother worked for two surgeons and I thought it would be neat to be a surgeon someday, but I chose not to go down that path. There are a lot of medical professions we can work in and they are all very good.
And then my father was a contractor and I worked with him for like seven or eight summers between college and seminary. I loved going. It’s a great feeling of accomplishment, but that too wasn’t where I thought was where God wanted me.

And my Grandfather Fisher was a farmer. Now I like cows ‘cause they make milk and milk makes ice cream. It’s a good connection. (I really like sprinkles.) I decided farming probably wasn’t for me either.

I had friends and family members who were teachers and we always need great teachers because other people always, all of us, need to learn all the days of our life.

And some people grew crops and it feeds people. All of those are great things and maybe some of those are what you are called to.

But I felt in my heart that there was something else. And I found it when someone started teaching me to help others and it started with my mother and father as they taught me to help other people: my neighbors and my family and my friends. And one time my church went away and we’d do things like this church does here at Calvary.

We would go places like our church camp and some of you might see some people there you recognize. Every May we go up and prepare the camp for the young boys and girls and teens and adults who will use them all summer long and if you are looking for a great day away, May 18th weekend is it. I need thirty people. We go up and spring clean. Isn’t that fun? It is when you do it with a group because we laugh and sing and play together and it’s a great time.

And then I did things with my youth group in church and we did things like this youth group here at Calvary. We would go and help people; maybe build a wheel chair ramp; maybe put in a hand bar; maybe clean up somebody’s yard.
The youth group from here built this ramp a year or so ago,

For this woman who could no longer get out of her house because there were too many steps. For almost two years the only way for her to get down all those steps was to have someone from an ambulance come and carry her so she could get to a hospital. It was a great thing. And you know what? When you help other people you feel great. And the more I did these things I thought, “You know what? I think God wants me to go in this field where I can help other people.”

Last summer some of us when down to Belize, Central America and we went knocking on doors, one after another inviting people to church;

Go come and to worship and to know about God’s love.

People in this church make all kinds of things to help people. They quilt and they sew and they knit. And some of these dresses were given me to take to Africa and you know what?

When I see that smile it was worth my whole trip.

So, you see, I don’t necessarily know every day what you want to do because the road has a lot of curves but one thing I knew was I loved God with my heart and my soul and my mind and that’s what God invites you to do.
And if you love God, God will lead you just where you need to be. And God is still leading us, because what we need to do changes with our age doesn’t it? And yet God needs us every day of our life.

And God has a vision for us too, to be able to find where to use our gifts. It’s not just a dream; it’s a vision of what you can do with your life.

I just came from a place on Africa, a big continent, and like a lot of places in the world, some places here in America, there isn’t always a lot of water, so we need young people like you with brilliant minds… how many of you are good in science and math? Whoosh, because I wasn’t good in either. I loved them both, but I’m not good. Some of you might find ways to make great water and clean water and healthy water for many people of the world who don’t have that. That might be what God wants you to do.

How many of you like to feed people? Some of you might be an agriculturist, again to use science and math and all of your knowledge and wisdom to help feed people.

Other people might learn to do medical things, to solve the problem of some disease that can heal lots of people because you have minds that will allow you to do that.

Some of you care about the environment and want to make the world a better place so there’s no more problems with all the pollution in the world.

Some of you want to care and what I’m saying is: All of you have different gifts, whether it be in language or science or math or any of those other skills, God needs you to make this world a better place. God needs you to make this world a better place too. And as you find the subjects and the interest and the hobbies you have, you have the power as you become adults to really make a big difference. And you can do it even as you are young in your age.
And of all the great things, God wants us to understand that this world is made up of people that look different, act different, eat different foods, dress differently. We sing different, we are all different, but we are all God’s children.

And God loves us, heart, soul and mind and wants us to love other people. So, I am asking you today to remember as you have these visions, think what is it that God wants me to do with my life every day, from the time you are young until you get very very old, God always has a new vision, something for us to do.

Thank you for coming up today and I pray you’ll find what God has for you today.

Message: Matthew 27:32-37

Where you there? We’ve probably heard that a lot of times in our life. Were you there or do you even remember 9/11. Where were you? The moment, the hour.

Sometimes it’s those bad things, it’s the call of death of someone we have lost in a life. Sometimes we remember when we found out that the problems and the issues in our life became, some medical report, whatever. Sometimes it’s good stuff we remember. I remember when at 98 my grandfather got his speeding ticket. His license was still renewed to 102. He did okay. I remember the day you have your 16th birthday party and who was there. Remembering is good, but I think one of the things we’ve done in the church in most recent years, we don’t reflect a lot on the things of Christ, especially in the Lenten season it seems to be like a lot of seasons, we don’t remember the journey to the cross. And a part of the reason we remember, to me anyway, it’s the story of God’s love for us. Jesus’ love was so great that he made this journey and it’s a journey we ought not to forget and it’s a journey that we ought to show that same kind of love in our own life to other people. Becoming Christ-like isn’t a moment. It’s a lifetime journey. There are so many days I look at myself not as a pastor, but as a Christian and say, “God, why can’t I do better? Why do I still give in to old habits? Why do I still get frustrated and angry and sometime espouse myself in ways I ought not to do?” But it’s a journey. It’s a decision; it’s a constant moment saying, “Lord, I have a vision to be more Godly. I’m on a journey. I want to be more like the Son, Jesus Christ that others can see that this would be the way to live.”
I want to share these words from Matthew today: As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross.

They came to the place called Golgotha (Which means The Place of the Skull).

They offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall, but after tasting it, he refused to drink it.

When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. And sitting down, they kept watch over him there.

Above his head they placed the written charge against him: This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.

When I read that story, it takes me immediately back to those scenes if you have ever seen that movie about Jesus, to that horrific scene and that song that comes to me over the Easter season is: Were you there when they what? Nailed him to the tree; pierced him in the side; when the sun refused to shine; when they laid him in the tomb? You see, when I think of this song, it takes me back to think: This man did this for me. And I remember that today. God loved me so much that he went to the cross for me.
When I look at that, I think do I really catch what’s happening? So many times, like my Grandpop, I’ve been stopped a few times by the police and one of the lines is: Do you know why I stopped you? Oh, yes, officer, I do. Do you really catch what was happening with these events? It was a cruel time; it was a power time. It was a time where God was speaking loudly but not everyone was listening. The people who had loved God’s Son, Jesus Christ, so much were afraid for their own very lives. What I catch was happening was they didn’t like this, but weeks later they became empowered and the reason we are in Calvary today is they chose to be strong for the faith, to witness to their faith, to be light in the darkness to the world, to take a stand where there was injustice, to take a stand to let the people of the world know that God is love and in love there is no darkness at all. That’s what we are called to today. Have you caught what was happening at the cross? It was God’s love for us.

Our news bombards us, media from every aspect today and most of it is negative. We don’t see the positive.

But we need to remember in the midst of negative or positive, what do we learn from the losses in life and what do we learn in the memories of the good things. What are you learning from the mistakes and the errors and let’s call it sin, a word that we don’t say much anymore. What are we learning about the sinning in life, the problems that have pulled us back?

We can go down Memory Lane all we want, but if I’m not learning something, then I’m not really growing in Christ.

When I look at the cross, I think: here’s the man who is saying “Jeff, you have to make a decision to follow me and this follow me might incur some cost.” It’s not just about, and you know I think the church is confused today, we want to be comfortable. We want…I’m looking forward to retirement like everyone else and we always say things like: I just want to be sure I have enough to be comfortable. I traveled the world enough to see people who have never been comfortable a day in their life. So, at what point are we comfortable enough to say the call to Christ isn’t just for our comfort; the call of Christ, the words he used dealt a lot with words like giving, denying, sacrifice, that those who aren’t comfortable might find life and find it abundantly.
Last week on the History channel one day I saw this colosseum, the Roman Colosseum. I thought how wonderful, and I read a little bit about it. They spent about 100 million dollars refurbishing it. It held like 50,000 people. That was a big stadium.

But what they did there wasn’t just sports. They did all kinds of terrible things there. Things like putting people in the middle with some live animals that saw people as meat. They did things like have gladiators kill one another and I’m thinking what is wrong with a culture that wants to watch each other kill each other and then I’m thinking, “Oh, that’s us now days too, all the little games that we teach our children.” You see, that culture was horrific and Christ was a part of the culture when people suffered so greatly from the errors, from the sin of the people around them.

I can’t imagine going home after being one of those people who were crucified, “So, Honey, how was your day?” “Well, I had to kill too people today.” What a horrific job. What a horrific time to live in. God calls us to more. God calls us to be life givers, that we are positive, that we are light, that we push out darkness at every opportunity we have.

There are words that we use today about being disconnected from something, but there is a lot of things in our lives we need to disconnect from: the evil; the darkness.

And we need to connect to the positive; we need to connect to the light, that our life can’t be switched on and off on every little thing.

Years ago when I would watch television, especially if you would watch on Sundays, I used to watch some of the television pastors, you would often see photos and movies of Compassion International, helping children who need a family. You would see pictures from Ethiopia and Bangladesh and the starving of the world. If you are like me, you notice that they have disappeared. What you see now is dogs and cats. Now, folks, I don’t believe there is ever an appropriate time to ever injure any animal or to be cruel to any creature. But we’ve lost our focus. People are over animals and critters and we have stopped caring the way we ought to care. We just can’t turn off the pain of the world
and simply say, “I don’t care about all those other issues. I’ve got my problems here at home.” I’m going to tell you, whatever we have at home, we’re living comfortable. We are cozy in our faith to the point where we don’t serve as much as we can serve, we don’t give as much as we can give. We don’t commit as much as we should commit because Christ hasn’t remained number 1 in our life. We are called to make Christ first.

Growing up in a family, I know there are times when parents and children, especially in those teenage years when we don’t always get along, sometimes, I only ever heard it once or twice from my parents, “I don’t even know him.” Ever have that? Hopefully it didn’t happen too often. Most of the time I think it was joking. Sometimes teens get embarrassed by parents saying, “They aren’t my parents. Don’t come to school. I don’t want to be seen with you. Can you drop me off a block away from the school?” We need to learn to identify with one another, to support one another, to care for one another the way that God would have us; to love even in our differences and we in the Body of Christ don’t always do that as well as we ought…to care for one another even in our differences.

When I started reading those thing: were you there when they nailed him to the cross, and I saw the crucifixion scene again with the whipping, I cannot imagine the pain and I can’t imagine the suffering and I couldn’t imagine what went through Christ’s mind other than, “I will do this because I love you.”

And you say how could that be? Well, every time I see a man or woman in a military outfit I know they sign up; they may go to war and they may not return. Go to Washington and look at war memorials. Hundreds of thousands who have never returned because they love you and me and our freedom.

Every time I see a new birth I’m reminded how difficult that is for most women and the question through the years is why in the world would they have another child after so much difficulty, nine months of carrying the child and then the delivery time that can be very difficult. It’s because of what? Love. They do it because mothers will do it again and again because “I love and I want to give new life.”
Jesus saw his time on that cross, his sacrifice as new life and just like when a mother gives life to a child and someone goes in the military, Christ is hoping that we gain something from it and that we will be life-givers to others that his life was not given in vain; that we will pass on that life to others.

And he tells us this is how we do:   If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us of our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.   Christ says:  if you want to be like me, then live unto me, pray to me, study my word, get to know what I was like that you might be an imitator of Christ in all the things we do.  We are called to be the little Christ for others who are looking.

It moves on down to when they pierced him in the side and I’m thinking: Oh, my gosh! How did he do that? He looked out upon the crowd and at one point he even asked Brother John to take his mother home that she would not have to watch this scene any longer. And he did it because he loved us.

My parents, very humble people, didn’t have the opportunities for education, didn’t have the opportunities for big money, didn’t have all that. They sacrificed that I might be able to go to school. A lot of you know parents like that because you either were them or also had them. God gave me wonderful parents and because of that do I owe them anything? I would not want to love my parents out of obligation; I love them because they were so wonderful that I feel that I owe them something. They have invested in me, so why not use what they’ve invested in me wisely, to make a difference in this world and my difference is different than the children up here. I hope some of the have all those cures for the heating of the world and the environment and for pure water and for new health and disease. You and I have all those gifts, but we’ve got to choose to use them for God’s glory, to find our place in the kingdom.

When I think of this: Were you there? Oh, yes, I was there.

Scripture tells us, as much as we don’t like to hear it, that my sin nailed him to the cross. My errors. God is calling me because I know what is right, to do what is right, not having life always my way.
When I hear these words:  my way or the highway, and people say those things with joy anymore.

We often think, I’ve had people even tell me, “Well, I know this is what God wants, but I am an adult and I’m going to do what I’m going to do.”  Boy, is that like flipping off God.  You know what’s right, but you are still going to do what’s wrong.  I do enough wrong by accident.  God calls us to be better.

God calls us to be who we know we ought to be, to do the Godly thing, to move away from comfort.  To know our gifts can make a difference.  I got a note two days before I returned from Africa last Friday that my nephew had died from a heroin overdose.  Heartbreaking.  Didn’t even know he did drugs.  I remember a county coroner coming to speak to our class this spring here at the church, Stephen Ministry.  Told us that week he had six young people on the tables at his office.  Talk about wasted gifts.  And a part of what I think is wrong is that we’ve lost God, we’ve lost our purpose.  We don’t fill the children with the love and the knowledge and the wisdom of God and the fact that they have gifts for God’s kingdom.  When I see young people moving home with parents and they don’t have a purpose and don’t have a job and don’t want to work, a part of this falls back on us for wanting to be comfortable, rather than be forceful.  A part of this comes from us for not teaching that God has something for us to do.  When someone says, “Well, he was lost, he didn’t find a purpose.”  When I look at the world I can find a purpose for a lot of us.  We are needed.  We are necessary.

We are gifted.  I don’t have the gifts of science and mathematics and all the skills of medicine and all the language gifts that are needed, but between all of us, we have most of those gifts.  And when we join together, there is nothing that we can’t accomplish in the name of Jesus Christ, for in Christ all things are possible.  We can put an end to this foolishness of losing lives and of lives that feel there is not purpose.

There is a purpose for everyone under the sun, but we need to encourage, we need to love, we need to teach.  When I look at that next verse:  Were you there when the sun refused to shine.  I’ve seen those sunless days.
You’ve been there too, right? You work for a company for 40 years or almost 40 and it closes. Now what? You’ve been in a relationship for 30 or 40 years and the partner leaves. Now what? You wonder what’s going to happen when you get the bad health report. Now what? When you see them lay him in the tomb, all those things. We’re heartbroken and God says, “Now what? I’ll tell you what. I’m with you. You will not be in the storm alone. You will not be in the dark alone. I am light and I will surround you if you will allow me to find healing.”

Try something new for God is there to take us forward.

When I have laid my loved ones in the tomb and I have unfortunately laid hundreds of loved ones from my churches into tombs, it is a dark day. But the sun will come up tomorrow morning as sure as anything. When Christ said that we might have sorrow now, but joy will return, it’s not instant, but God does return our joy and we find purpose.

What is the “what now”? The day before I left for Africa I got a call from the minister of my first parish to tell me my dear friend Betty fell and broke her hip. Betty turned 89 last week. Betty is the chair of a work camp that happens every summer yet in Clearfield. Betty is all of 4 foot, might have been 4-6 at one time, she’s way down now. I called her this week. She asked them to bring her materials into the rehab so she could get this stuff together for June. What now? I’ll tell you what now. I buried Betty’s husband when she was probably 52. What now for her was finding a new life. She’s the one I said when out to Chicago and worked with AIDS patients. Little Betty, driving at midnight until 3 or 4 a.m. across the city of Chicago much to the fear of her children. She said, “I have the best time of my life.” She’s the same Betty when I got a call at this parish when I was working as conference mission leader, “Could I find a nurse from one of my churches that would go to Alaska for the church camp?” For five years Betty flew up to Alaska and became the church camp nurse. Betty’s the same one who does all these things, has led many teams to Africa with me and other places. Why? Because instead of giving up to the darkness and the loss and the pain of losing her husband and the thought that there is no tomorrow, she chose to find something new.
What she chose isn’t what everyone else would choose, but I’m telling you no matter where we’ve been, in my losses in life, God is present if we will allow God, if we will humble ourselves before God and say, “God what do you have now for me” and God will say, “I have a new vision.” Take off your glasses and look to God. He will give you 20/20. You will know where you are going, you will know what you are to do and you will find joy and you will find peace and you will find contentment and you will find blessings for as we give ourselves away, we find new life. The more we hold on, the less we have. It’s that way about everything in life. The more we give, we cannot out give God’s blessings. God’s calling us all to have a new vision, not just today, but every morning we wake up, thank God you have that moment and find what it is today that God will have me do. Living a Christian life is not just about our comfort. It’s about our calling. Pastors aren’t the only ones who are called. Everyone who wears the name of Christ is called to find your place in the kingdom and what it is that God will have you do with all the gifts you have been given. God has a plan for you as much as God has a plan for me and we can praise God that we are found in His love and care that He has something important for us to do.

Let us pray: Almighty and Everlasting Father, we thank you that you trust us with your kingdom, to bring its love to the world, to shower upon the world the love that we have found in you. Bless us; let us see our gifts; let us find our path. And as it changes through our days, may it be strong, Lord. May we always be your light to others. We ask in your Holy Name. Amen.

The ushers will wait upon you to receive your gifts and your offerings.

**Benediction:**

God has gifted us. He has granted us a purpose for being. He has given us the ability to be light and given us abundant life. Let us go into this world and scatter the light, expelling all darkness and bring His peace to all we meet, in Jesus’ name. Amen.