

My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. God of our Epiphany realities, hopes, and dreams, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, Our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Over the last four weeks of our sermon series on God's Plan For Building Community, we have prepared our hearts. We have prepared our minds. Now we need to prepare our Spirits for the point of all this. That the point of our lives, both individually and communally, in the sight of God, is to be a witness to the world.

Our witness is needed more than ever. But what is that witness? What is, in this upside down world of our culture and politics where lies and bluster trump facts and measured response, an effective witness? Our witness reminds the world that we are in the world but not of it, and that we are stewards of hope for God's plans but that the paths are not yet laid straight, the mountains are not yet made low, the valleys are indeed where we are doing the work that fewer in the world seek to do as celebrities urge us to focus on ourselves as individuals, not our collective future as a People of God.

The biggest thing that we can teach the world right now, as a peculiar people, a royal priesthood, inheritors of God's gracious promise...is that suffering is real, it was here yesterday, it is here today, and it will be here tomorrow. Relationships are mended and broken, friends and family members get well and get sick, and our helplessness feels magnified as our lives move on. It may seem antithetical to us that we welcome suffering, but we need to acknowledge that we can't fix everything. But in that acknowledgement, that empathy, that real trauma that awakens our hearts, we begin to acknowledge the true power of God's grace.

God is with us, at all times, we say that often. But when we acknowledge our helplessness, when we seek to heal that heart-rending rift that we think will make us break—well, then, now we're talkin'. When we're at that low point in our blessed lives that will make us understand that one greater than us, who connects our hearts to a larger reality than our own lives, who lets us know that we can't solve everything alone but we can give hope if... we can share our authentic story of hurt

and healing, of vulnerability and failure, of heartache and seeking the truth...

Then the truth shines through our faces. In our hearts. The Light of the World begins to illuminate. For the one thing we can teach our kids and teach the world and witness to others and shout from the valleys to those who are on the mountaintops about to fall off is that God is here. God is near. That suffering is not the last thing we will experience, and that renewal is what we have learned is possible. We...that peculiar people of TCC, that royal priesthood that is right here, right now, we know that in the suffering of the Cross that death will not win, but that Resurrection always follows, and it is that sure confidence that together, as we tell each other what we face individually, we heal each our hearts and souls collectively, and we find a new way, a new path, a new hope that puts our energies and our resources into spreading that Good News. That suffering happens, but that's not the end. Life is hard, but that's not the point. The Kingdom is near, the Kingdom is here, our work is to renew the world as it was intended to be lived and loved in the first place. Not with separation from God, but with

nearness of soul to God's people. When we do God's work in and with and through the place that teaches us to Pray and Worship, to See Christ in Others, to emphasize Function over Form, and fully become a Place to Serve, when we acknowledge that we can bring suffering here and place it at the altar, and have it transformed into energy of God's people healing it through Christ's resurrection and new life...

We show the world that indeed, the church is NOT dead. That world wars cannot defeat us. That disease and famine cannot derail us. That politics and hate will not divide us. We are witnesses to a different story. We are inheritors of a different blessing that is promised by God from long ago...we are peculiar, people. We are anointed to spread this Good News.

This is hard stuff. So I've done enough talking. I'd like to invite my faith partner and good friend here, Dr. Bradley Bauer, to share some of his thoughts on witness in his work and that of his family in the world.

(Brad talks for about 6 minutes on tangible witness storie(s) he's experienced or seen in his work with Green Lake, etc emphasizing God's transformational grace).

I'll leave us with these final thoughts.

Kids and parents and BFF's and life partners are annoying but our witness in knowing and loving God is important, vital work that spreads beyond those strong bonds to reach out and create more strong bonds. Our bridge to the world is the Good News and the work that we do shows God's light and new life is real. We need all hands on deck for our journey together. We need to begin the transition from following to servant and start with One New Thing. And then we can do Trything something new each month with our talent, time, and treasure. And I know that if we are faithful to our vision...that we love one another as Christ has loved us...we can journey into discipleship, into living the Good News, and we will not just be the church we want to be, but the People of God that was always intended.

People of the Covenant. Peculiar, yes, but blessed.
And for that blessed inheritance,

Thanks Be To God, Amen.