

Installation of the Rev. Jim Truesdell,  
Associate Pastor, South Highland  
“The Church God Is Building For Such a Time as This”

Presbyterian Church

Esther 4:9-14

Romans 12:1-2

Luke 10:1-9

October 17, 2010

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Some of you remember the light-hearted movie, “The Blues Brothers,” starring John Belushi and Dan Ackroyd. They played a couple of ex-convict, wanna-be musicians trying to raise money for an orphanage where they grew up. Anytime someone asked them what they were doing they had a standard reply, “We’re on a mission from God.”<sup>i</sup> The incongruity of these two unlikely, unpolished, marked failures serving on a divine mission is the central joke of the movie. Thanks to Jim Truesdell’s creative leadership, our own version of the Blues Brothers arrived at South Highland on Easter Eve to help announce the greatest joke of all time – the defeat of death through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But that joke is the pointed truth of our lives. We are all unlikely witnesses. We are all unworthy recipients. We are all, Paul said, “Fools for Christ.” But we are all called to be on a divine mission. Either we are on a Divine Mission from God, seeking to attune ourselves to and live out that noble first answer to the catechism about the chief end of human life, “To glorify God and enjoy Him forever,” and so going forth as Jesus commanded, to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them”<sup>ii</sup>, and “healing the sick and clothing the naked.” Or else we are wandering around this old planet for a finite number of years with no grand purpose, hope or destiny, seeking only to get our little share of the pie, and feeling life has been one cruel meaning less void.

On this great day of the installation of our friend Jim Truesdell as our Associate Pastor, in answer we certainly believe to our heartfelt prayers, we are convinced, the search committee and the staff, an overwhelming voice from you the congregation, that God has sent Jim to us, as we have often said, “for such a time as this,” so we can be on a divine mission from God. As Shakespeare’s Richard III put it well, “Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this son of York; and all the clouds that lowered upon our house in the deep bosom of the ocean buried.”<sup>iii</sup> We certainly feel and believe that God has brought us the right person to share in leadership with us at the right time, as this great old congregation grows ever young again, as we move into a new level of committed discipleship and authentic evangelism - all this at a pivotal time for Christ’s followers and the Christian witness in the United States and around the world.

These are challenging times. But the question for us is not, will Jim be up to the task? With God’s help, he will. The question is, will we engage with him and with this community within the Church and beyond the Church in **seeking prayerfully, serving wholeheartedly, and celebrating joyously the Kingdom of God that is near us here and now?**

The passage from Luke's Gospel comes from the great central section as Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem, moving steadily, relentlessly toward his destiny on a cross. In this section Jesus is constantly going beyond established boundaries and extending his love and compassion to the least and the lost. As Harvard's Harvey Cox notes, "(Jesus) engaged them not with arguments but with something new – an enlarged moral universe that included both (the Jews and the Gentiles)", the insiders and the outsiders.

This section of Luke contains some of the most memorable of Jesus teachings, the Parables of the Good Samaritan, the lost sheep, the lost coin, the two lost sons, (one prodigal, and one home-but-not-home), the Rich man and Lazarus. Along the way to Jerusalem, in Chapters 9 through 18, Jesus teaches powerful lessons about what this new Kingdom he embodies will look like. It will be a grand new perception of reality, hidden from the wise, revealed to infants and children. It will have its source in prayer. It will emerge from the scriptures. It will be about real relationships. It will bring a tangible physical and material difference to the lives of people and will be costly and demanding. "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded."<sup>iv</sup>

In this particular passage we read from Chapter 10 Jesus is calling his disciples to go out ahead of him and prepare the way. Spread the news, heal the sick, stay in strangers' homes and accept what they give you to eat and drink. Get things ready for him, not by putting up billboards but by doing the very works he does. They are called to make the Kingdom of God visible in little towns, villages, and great cities; show humble fishermen, unappreciated farmers, weary housewives, diligent shop-keepers, astute merchants, and high Roman and Jewish officials the new world order of God's Kingdom that is coming and, through them, in fact begins.

I thought of focusing today's message solely on the Esther story, since that has risen so pointedly to the surface throughout the whole Associate Pastor Search process. Esther is such a fun little story in the Hebrew Scriptures, read in the Jewish calendar for the festival of Purim, as one particular example of how God preserved the Jewish people from destruction time and time again. Esther is the story of a Jewish woman who rises to become wife of a Persian King after the folly of the King's earlier dismissal of his Queen. No one in the royal court knows Esther is a Jew. An evil official named Haman plots to have the Jews of the land wiped out by getting the King to set forth a new law that requires all in the land to bow down at a given time and show homage to the King, knowing full well that the Jews will not bow to any but the Lord.

Esther's uncle Mordecai sends word to her that since she has become Queen and has access to the King, she must step forward on behalf of her people and reveal this evil plot. But Esther, whose Jewish identity is under-cover, knows full well the risks. If one approaches the king's throne unbidden they are put to death unless the King extends the royal scepter. So Mordecai sends Esther this message to help her over her hesitancy.

"Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews

from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?"<sup>v</sup>

We have had among us, in the Kingdom, one God has been using and preparing. His name is James, a brother of Jesus, James or Jim our brother. "Who knows Jim perhaps you have come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?" Jim, congregation, it is a pivotal time, a decisive time. A kairos God moment time. And we are here for such a time.

I thought of focusing this message solely on this Esther story, but in thinking what all of us need to be about through South Highland, I was drawn beyond it to the now. What instructions of Jesus for sending out his 70 messengers. That number 70 itself is remarkable. Mostly we hear of the 12. But here is an enlarged group, 70 who are being taught and trained to go out and multiply the work of Jesus in towns and villages across Galilee and Judea. Think what it would look like for South Highland to send 70 of you out? What would we need to do to prepare you? Well we've done it before. We did it a few years ago on a Sunday afternoon to visit with everyone in the membership. 70 went out. It was an exhilarating experience, an immense organizational challenge, but as always you rose to the challenge. When we think of our calling as a Church, a community of Jesus today, and what we are called to do and be, and what we are up against, it can feel overwhelming.

But listen to Jesus' strategy and adopt it. If we have in fact come to the Kingdom for such a time as this and I believe Jim has and I believe you and I have, then we need to:

## I

**Seek God through Prayer.** Jesus' strategy is prayer focused. Before he called his 12 disciples to follow him he spent the night in the mountains in prayer. Before he entered into his passion on Good Friday in Jerusalem, he was on the Mount of Olives in prayer. Before this passage where he instructs the 70 he went to the mountain to pray, along with Peter and John and James (Jim), and what happened was the moment of Transfiguration where Moses and Elijah appeared to them and God spoke to them. Powerful things happen when we pray. Now having gathered his team of seventy, the first instruction Jesus gives them is pray. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."<sup>vi</sup> Pray for God to send the right people to do his work.

Prayer is conversation with God. Prayer is communication with God, for praise, for forgiveness, for direction, for requests, for relationship. Jesus' strategy for transforming the world is centered in prayer. A vast throng of people are in need of the new life the Kingdom of God will bring. But there is an immense gap between the needs of people and the resources available. Pray to the Lord of the harvest about this and ask him to bring in a great harvest. Ask God to raise up the leaders and variously gifted persons to meet that need.

We need to pray. Jim has been a major catalyst in modeling prayer, and in reminding us of our need to pray, really pray. In worship surely. But also on our own and in small groups. What is God calling South Highland to in the season ahead? We need to pray about that, and seek God's answer. This amazing group, the Session has appointed those called out to "Discover God's Horizons" what we are being called to in future ministries, has felt the need for

your prayers, asked for them, and spent the month of September inviting you to join in praying. And you have. I have said it before, and I sincerely believe, we are still here because of prayer.

The reason God in his providence has preserved a vital metropolitan Christian community here in the heart of Birmingham's educational healthcare and entertainment district, beneath the shadows of Vulcan, with people coming here from all over this vast City and region testifying to and seeking help from One altogether greater than Vulcan, Jesus Christ the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, is due to the prayers of faithful people. Little clusters praying fervently over the years have been the secret weapon of this congregation. I am convinced God has heard and answered our prayers. We must seek the Lord through prayer.

## II

**Then if we have come to the Kingdom for such a time as this, we must serve people wholeheartedly.** We are after all committed to "serving with the passion of Christ." We must go out to the highways and byways, our schools and offices and neighborhoods, and show those we meet the difference this Good News of Jesus is making in our lives. We must go, along our ordinary daily route with eyes wide open to the hurts and hopes of people. Life in Christ is not about in here primarily. It is about out there. And many out there need to see and hear and feel the authentic love of Jesus through us.

I have a friend, no longer in the professional ministry, who owns and runs a top flight restaurant. He told me he is doing more counseling than ever. People in the restaurant know he was a pastor and they pull him aside at the bar and ask, "Have you got a few minutes?" They go off to a quiet corner and 45 minutes later this person who would probably never darken a church door has unburdened his soul because one took their time to listen. Go and serve, out there - where people may only have known some stereotype of an angry vindictive God out to get them. Go out as representatives of the God of grace and show them the God, who as Calvin said, "out of his own kindness, still finds something to love."<sup>vii</sup>

And do not wait to get a degree from seminary or graduate school or some full time permanent call to start. Did Jim Truesdell wait for this permanent call to begin serving? Live a life right now of continually praying and continually going.

Did you notice the instructions do not even call for good American style Boy Scout "always be prepared" planning? It's just the opposite. Jesus said, look, I am sending you out there, as lambs in the midst of wolves. You are liable to get eaten up. But you just go trusting. No purse, no bag, no sandals, no hotel reservations. Go and I will show you what you need to do, and doors will open. History is filled with unusual people like Francis of Assisi, John Calvin, Mother Teresa who trusted God in the midst of seemingly immovable obstacles and went, gave everything, including the shirt off their back, and followed Jesus, and doors to help others opened.

Maybe you feel a long long way from such a level of faith. I know I often do. But I also know that as I start where I am, as I trust God and go, amazing things begin to happen. It has been my experience that when I have stepped out God has been faithful. God has put the right

people and circumstances before me to make possible God's next step in my life as part of this unfolding of God's providential work in our world.

Go, but notice Jim, Jesus says "Do not move about from house to house." That means settle in Jim, buy a house, and put your roots down. God has you, God has us here together for a full cycle of seasons!

In one of his last sermons, delivered in 1968 back home at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta just two months before his assassination, Martin Luther King, Jr. preached prophetically,

"If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize, that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards, that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.

I'd like somebody to mention that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day, that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try, in my life, to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say, on that day, that I did try, in my life, to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity."

### III

**If we have come to the Kingdom for such a time as this – we need to wholeheartedly seek the Lord in Prayer. Serve people whole heartedly as we Go. And Celebrate God Joyously.** "As you go say, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'<sup>viii</sup> We are, as Jesus' people sent "to exhibit the kingdom of Heaven to the world." This is something to celebrate! God is here! The Kingdom of God is among us, not waiting on predictable things that can be observed, not calculating the exact moment of His Second Coming. Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is among you now." "So, let's throw a great banquet. Let's have a party. I love the image in the story of "Babbit's Feast" where the little French cook spends all she has in preparing this lavish dinner for a stiff uptight puritanical group of Norwegian village fishermen. She spends all she has, offers the very best she can to people who seem altogether unappreciative and unreceptive. But through her gift, they are changed.

All of us, along with Jim Truesdell, are invited to enter upon a Divine Mission from God! Seek! Serve! Celebrate! - because the Kingdom of God is bursting forth all around. Do you see it, and we have opportunity to be about God's great healing, restoring work. Glory! Glory! Glory! Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> John Ortberg, If You Want To Walk On Water You've Got To Get Out Of The Boat, p.59.

<sup>ii</sup> Mt. 28:19-20.

<sup>iii</sup> William Shakespeare, "Richard III, I.i.1-4.

<sup>iv</sup> Luke 12:48.

<sup>v</sup> Esther 4:13-14.

<sup>vi</sup> Luke 10:2.

<sup>vii</sup> John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion II.XVI.2, p. 505

<sup>viii</sup> Luke 10:9.