Vision 2018: How We Got Here (at the Gates of Jericho)

Joshua 5:13-6:5

For the next five weeks I will be delivering a Vision Series here at Colonial. If you are visiting with us for the first time, I hope you will join us, because what we will be looking at together as a church family is applicable and relevant to all who love Jesus and seek to follow Him. I also think that what we have learned and what we will share is applicable and useful to every organization, so if you are a leader of an organization, I think you will find this series to be quite interesting and even useful to your role as a leader. So…let me start by giving you the roadmap for this series.

This morning I will attempt to define where we are, how we got here, and the process we engaged in to discern where God is leading us in the days ahead. Toward the end of this message, I will share with you our newly defined Mission Statement, and I’ll share a few thoughts about that before we close.

Next week I, along with members of our Vision Team, will unpack the Mission Statement and what it means in regards to our future as a church.

For the third, fourth, and fifth weeks of this series, we will be presenting the six core values that will guide how we go about accomplishing our mission. Each value will embody the unique DNA of our congregation as we have sought to follow Christ over the past 65 years. Our values will serve as the river banks to help us prioritize both what we do and how we go about it.

Each week of this series is significant, and I believe each message will be of great encouragement to you as we anticipate God’s plans for this body of believers called Colonial. So…let’s get started.

One of my role-models in Christian leadership is the founding Pastor at Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, IL…Pastor Bill Hybels. Like many pastors around the world, Bill’s axioms for leaders have played a major role in my development as a Lead Pastor. One of Bill’s favorite phrases about leadership goes as follows: “Clarity is the burden of the leader. The number one job of the leader is to clearly define reality.”

So…what is our current reality? Where are we as a congregation?

If you have been part of Colonial over the past ten years, you might recall that I regularly compare our journey as a congregation with the Israelite’s journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Like the Israelites, we are a group of people who have been called to follow God, to live according to His statutes, to accomplish the mission that He has given us, and to trust His providential leadership to get us where we need to go. I believe the Israelites are the original archetype for organizational and congregational leadership. Just about everything there is to learn about organizational dynamics and leadership can be found in the narrative of the Israelites. Their journey as a people can be summarized by a simple diagram…out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, through the wilderness (twice), across the Jordan River, and into the Promised Land where...
they begin to conquer cities, the first being the city of Jericho. So…does our journey somehow mirror the journey of Israelites? I think it does.

On March 24th, 2008…when I began my first day on the job as your Lead Pastor…we were here…in Egypt (use white board). We were stuck in a place that we did not want to be. We were stuck in a denomination that was progressively moving away from orthodoxy, and we were stuck under the burden of tremendous debt. We were also stuck in terms of our systems. For example: the Care Ministry rested on the shoulders of a few people who were tasked to care for thousands. The Groups Ministry had plateaued and was in decline. Each of our two sites heard a different message every Sunday. Our ministries were siloed, and our leadership was overly centralized and thus somewhat bureaucratic in nature. Please know that in my opinion, Colonial was still a wonderful church in 2008, but it was a very unhappy church because the overall consensus was…we’re stuck.

As your new 37 year old Lead Pastor, I understood that my first priority was to seek the Lord, work with the leadership, and find a way to get unstuck…to help lead the congregation “out of Egypt” if you will. In August of 2010, we made our exodus from our former denomination which literally felt like an exodus from Egypt. However, not unlike the Egyptians, our former denomination came after us…seeking to claim all of our property and to send us packing with no buildings or assets. That led to a long, two-year battle for our property. For two years we didn’t know what would become of our congregation. We were no longer in Egypt, but we were hard pressed against a sea of uncertainty. Thanks be to God, the sea of uncertainty parted on June 9th, 2011…the day my daughter was born, when we won our case in the local court. By the end of 2013 the appeals were exhausted, and the “Egyptians” were no longer a threat.

Not unlike the Israelites, our escape from Egypt did not automatically mean we were in the Promised Land. Not at all. Getting out of our former denomination led us into the wilderness for a couple of years. It was in the wilderness of transition that we learned to trust God and to follow God, even though we didn’t know where we were or where we would end up. During our wilderness season, we worked on forming new systems, we drank deeply of the Gospel, and we lived sacrificially in order to keep moving as God’s people on the way to the place He was leading us, even though the destination was nowhere in sight. Then, just like the Israelites, our journey through the desert led to one final “river” to cross, and that was the $11 million dollars of debt and obligations that weighed us down. If you recall, in the fall of 2011, we identified ourselves as being right here, in Joshua 3, standing next to the Jordan River that was in flood stage. Through prayer the leadership understood that God was calling us to cross that river…to get out of debt…to trust Him for a miracle. So, we set out to eliminate our debt with the “Called to Cross” campaign. Miraculously, by the end of 2016…just five years later, by the grace of God and the generosity of this congregation…we made our last and final payment to the bank…and Colonial was debt-free for the first time in 15 years. In my estimation…that puts us…here, west of the Jordan River…in Canaan…just outside the gates of Jericho.

Let’s turn to Joshua 5:13-15 and pick up the story there to see what happens next. As you can see, the first thing that we read here is that Joshua has an encounter with One who refers to
Himself as “the Commander of the army of the Lord.” This Commander appears to be a man, and yet Joshua falls down and worships the Commander. Now note…if this was an angel of God, or simply a man of God, we would expect the Commander to say, “Get up…don’t worship me…I’m not to be worshipped.” But the Commander of the Lord’s army does not tell Joshua to get up…he receives the worship without correction. Now…who do we know in scripture that looks like a man, speaks like God and is worshipped as God? There is only one…his name is Jesus. I think it’s likely that Jesus Himself, prior to His incarnation, appears to Joshua at this critical moment.

So why has The Commander come? We learn in the first 5 verses of Joshua 6 that He has come to instruct Joshua how to mobilize the people of God to take the city.

You see, God was not content that His people should simply get out of Egypt. God was not content that His people simply survive the desert. God was not content for His people to simply cross over into the Promised Land. God’s intent from the beginning was that His people would advance the Kingdom of God in His name in the land where He led them to. Church…in my opinion and that of our leadership…this is where we are. We are just outside the gates of Jericho. We are not where we were…we’re not in Egypt. We are not where we were…we’re not in the desert of transition. We’re not where we were…we are no longer trying to cross over a river of debt. We are now in a new place…we are in the place that God has been leading us to all the while: we are healthy, we are debt-free, we are well staffed, we are grounded in the Gospel, and we are positioned to “take the city…”.

Now…let’s zoom in on the Israelite leader, Joshua, to see this situation from his perspective. Keep in mind that all Joshua has ever known up to this point was life in Egypt and life in the desert. He has refined his leadership skills in the season of exodus and the season of wilderness survival. But now his challenge as a leader is huge: he must now lead the Israelites to play offense instead of defense. He must now lead the Israelites to take the city of Jericho, but he has never led such a battle. They have never tried to take a city with such high and impenetrable walls. This is all new…not only for the Israelites, but also for Joshua.

I so relate with Joshua, because like Joshua, I have never been where we are now in two respects: 1) I have never led a healthy church that was ready to take new ground, and 2) I have never faced a “Jericho” with such high walls. First, I have never led a healthy, unencumbered church that had the capacity to play offense and truly advance the Kingdom of God. No offense to my former churches, but literally every church I’ve ever served prior to Colonial was either stuck in Egypt or resigned to make their home in the desert because they were unwilling to follow God into taking new ground. In other words, after 30 years of ministry, I get how to lead a church out of being stuck. I have experience leading a church through the desert of transition. But I have no experience leading a healthy church to take new ground…which means, like Joshua, I have a lot of learning to do.

I’ve also never faced a “Jericho” before with such high walls. So what is the “Jericho” that we are currently facing?
Our “Jericho” is the culture in which we now live. Our culture is like a daunting city with towering walls. Why? Because our culture has changed so much and so quickly, that we are now in unfamiliar, uncharted territory. To be perfectly frank, I have never led a church in a culture where Sundays are not sacred. I have never led a church in a culture that is saturated by consumerism. I have never led a church in a culture that is being transformed by technology at a blinding rate of speed. I have never led a church in a culture that is increasingly hostile toward Christianity, the church, and pastors. I have never led a church in a culture where attending a service once every 5 weeks is considered “active participation” by church members. So, in terms of the changing culture, I have never been here before…I don’t think any pastor has.

Such is why I stood before you last summer and said with complete humiliation and transparency: “I don’t know. I don’t know where we are going. I don’t know what to do.” I was simply being honest, because the truth is, I’ve never been here before. In many ways I feel like Lewis and Clark when they got to the top of the continental divide…expecting to see a river that led down to the Pacific Ocean, only to discover the Rocky Mountains for as far as their eyes could see. The canoes they were carrying and depending upon for transportation were immediately rendered useless. Though their mission remained the same, their tactics and strategies were going to have to change if they were to survive and accomplish their mission. That’s what our culture looks like to me—it is uncharted, unfamiliar territory, and I’m pretty convinced that the tactics we learned to rely upon in our season of Exodus and our season of desert survival will not help us navigate the Rocky Mountains that now lie before us.

Now…let me shift gears for a minute. I am a pastor, so I’ve spoken to you in biblical language in an attempt to identify…biblically…where we are as a group of people on a mission to follow God. I want you to hold that thought, but now I want to address you as a leader of this organization.

As the Leader of an organization, nothing is more embarrassing and humiliating than saying publicly, “I don’t know.” I’m the guy who is supposed to know…and if I don’t know…it’s my job to go find out. So that’s what we’ve been doing over the past year…we’ve been learning. Our process of learning began by asking the church to pray and listening to what you were hearing from God. If you recall, we had two different calls to prayer last spring, including time devoted to focused prayer in every worship service during the month of May. I’m very appreciative of all those who prayed, and I’m grateful for the thoughts and insights you shared with us. I want you to know that God heard your prayers, and God moved to help us in our learning and discerning of what to do next. After two seasons of prayer, our next step was to form a strategic planning team, that I will call our “Vision Team.” The Vision team consisted of the following people (show slide)…Brian Mack, Steve Aliber, Meda Green, Ken Kurz, Jim Cannon, Kevin Nunnally, Molly Pitkin, Jim West, and Ken Blume. This team has done a tremendous amount of learning together, and you’ll be hearing from them throughout the rest of this series.

Now, when Joshua found himself in the position of not knowing, God sent the Commander of the Lord’s Army to give him encouragement and direction. When Lewis and Clark found
themselves in uncharted territory, God sent them Sacajawea who helped them navigate their way through the Rockies. In our case, God heard our prayers and sent two men to help me, and to help our leadership, sort through where we are as an organization and then form a plan for how to move forward.

The first man God sent to help me and to help us as the leadership team is a man who I have come to love, trust, and appreciate more than words can express. His name is Ted Vaughn. Ken Blume met Ted a few years ago at a conference regarding church communications, and so we initially enlisted Ted to help us reorganize and re-staff our Communications Dept. However, as we got to know Ted and he got to know us, we realized that Ted was just the guy to help facilitate our re-visioning process. Ted works with churches all over the country, and he is very good at what he does. He led us through a three-step process that included 1) hearing from the congregation; 2) facilitating a Session appointed team to discover and articulate our mission and our core values; and 3) developing action plans and teams to tackle the five most important challenges that we are currently facing. You’ll be hearing more about all of that over the next few weeks, but I want to take a moment to introduce Ted Vaughn so that we can express our appreciation for his gifts and his leadership over the past year. I can tell you with all honesty that we would not be where we are today had God not sent Ted Vaughn to help us in this process. (Introduce Ted—five minute interview).

The second person that God sent into my life is a man by the name of Abraham Gin (show picture). Abraham is a fully devoted follower of Jesus, and he is also an executive coach who serves with an organization called Giant Worldwide. Abraham was “randomly” introduced to me by a mutual friend just about a year ago when I was desperate for some encouragement and clarity. Abraham met with me for several weeks about a year ago, and recently I have employed his services to formally serve as my leadership coach. Abraham has been instrumental in helping me to understand how God has shaped me as a leader, and he has supplied me with some tools to understand where we are as an organization.

Let me show you one of those tools, because this is really cool! (show slide of Pass the Baton). Abraham showed me that all organizations typically find themselves in one of three seasons: the season of start-up, the season of establishment, or the season of expansion. The season of start-up is pretty self-explanatory right? It’s a season when there are a lot of things just getting started. There’s lots of energy, lots of creativity, it’s very exciting and generally chaotic! The next season is the season of establishment, and that’s a time when systems are needed to manage what has been grown during the start-up season. These systems are essential to bring order out of chaos, and the systems also protect the people and the core values of the organization. Then there is the season of expansion…where new ground is being taken, new products are launched, new markets are being explored, etc. If you look at the Israelites, they kind of fit these three seasons…right? Start up was getting out of Egypt (that’s the book of Exodus), their desert journey was a season of establishment (rules, systems, tabernacle worship), and then they arrive in the Promised Land, and it’s a season of expansion…go take the city. Every group of people who organize around a common mission will experience these different seasons…including us.
So one day not long ago Abraham showed me this picture, and he asked me to point to where we are as an organization. Now, before I tell you how I answered that question, let me ask you as the church: where do you think we are? Are we in the season of start-up, the season of establishment, or the season of expansion? Right…we have been and are currently in the season of establishment. But where in that season are we? Right…we are towards the end of that season. And notice…there’s a dip here at the end of the establishment season. Let me show you something: when you look at our attendance numbers, this rise in the early part of the establishment season is 2010-2015, and this slow decline is 2015-2018. Now…keep in mind…this whole season of establishment is forward progress, and that’s how it feels here at Colonial. Upon studying the results of the “state of the church survey” we took last year, the results revealed that we are generally a healthy church. We are debt-free and we are in a wonderful denomination that is a perfect fit for us. Our systems of care, groups, student ministries, communications, administration, and so on are at an all-time high in terms of effectiveness and management. In other words, we’ve fixed a lot of things that needed fixing, and when you ask people how things are going here at Colonial, the general feedback that we saw in the survey is, “It’s good!” We are not an “unhappy” church; we are not an “unhealthy” church…things are generally good. We’ve worked hard to establish a strong, Gospel-centered, caring congregation with healthy staff, healthy systems, and healthy leaders. There are a ton of very good things that happen in this church and through this church every month, both here in KC and throughout the world. However, during this establishment season, there has not been a lot of “new ground” that has been taken, at least not locally, and so consequently, as good as things feel to those of us in the organization, we can expect to see a slow decline…that’s normal…and that is, in fact, what we can observe in our attendance over the past 3 years. Now, as organizations go, when the organization is here…at this point in the establishment season…the leaders of the organization must reevaluate the mission, the current strategies, the “market” if you will, and then retool for the next season…which should be the season of expansion.

According to Abraham, this is a normal pathway for healthy organizations, but it is certainly not an inevitable pathway. Here’s why: when any organization finds itself here…at the low cycle of the “establishment season,” there is always a hard, defining choice to make. Do we keep on doing what we’ve been doing because it feels good, because we are good at it, and because those inside the organization are pretty content, even though there is an undeniable decline going on? Or, do we risk changing our tactics and learning new things in order to launch into a new season of expansion? Again…I think that is where we are right now…so the decisions we make right now are incredibly important for the future of our church.

How many of you recognize the name, “Kodak?” Right…when I was growing up, Kodak was a household name when it came to cameras and film. Everyone had something named “Kodak” in their house. In fact, in the 80’s we would celebrate an occasion and refer to it as a “Kodak moment”, right? Kodak was a multi-billion-dollar industry that found themselves right here several years ago in the mid 1990’s. They were super successful in the 35mm film industry, but the industry was changing due to digital technology, and they had a tough decision to make: jettison what they were good at in order to retool for the digital age, or stick with what they did.
best—35 mm film. At this moment in their establishment season, the loudest, most respected voices in Kodak’s leadership were the people most competent in the 35mm business, and they influenced the organization to remain “as is.” You can almost hear some very influential board member say, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it! Other organizations can go digital if they want to, but we do 35mm film…it’s always worked in the past, and that’s just how we roll.” As you probably guessed, Kodak made a poor decision, and by 2012, Kodak was filing for bankruptcy. You see…an organization does not inevitably move into the “expansion” season. There is a time…right here at the end of the establishment season, when new learning, new ventures, and adaptation to the changing culture must take place in order to fuel the expansion season. In Kodak’s case, they convinced themselves that their “business” was 35mm film, when in fact “their business” was helping people capture memories…35mm film was an outdated tactic for accomplishing that mission…and that’s why they tanked. Look, if the organizational leaders at Kodak….or Colonial for that matter…choose status quo at this point, the organization will simply slide into a slow and extended decline. In the case of the Israelites, those who chose status quo rather than risking the adventure of taking new ground were those who God sent back into the wilderness for 40 years, and they all died without ever seeing the promised land. That’s not the kind of “Kodak moment” that we want associated with our church, right?

Now…check this out. Compare the journey of the Israelites, the journey of our church, and the three seasons of an organization (show slide). I think it is safe to say we are HERE, just outside the gates of Jericho, at the end of our “establishment season,” and a new season lies before us with new challenges and opportunities…and I believe our charge is to take the city!

I hope you find this “learning” to be as helpful as I have, because knowing where you are is half the battle when it comes to discerning where to go next.

So…now we know where we are. I’ve shared with you how we got here. I’ve shared with you the process we went through and who God sent to help us. So now we’re ready to see the first fruit that came from our visioning process, and that is our newly defined mission statement that will guide our decision making as we move into our next season as a church.

As we look to the future, here is the mission that we have discerned from the Lord:

Colonial’s mission is to be the light of Christ in a hurting culture so that the lost are found, the broken are made whole, the fatherless find hope, and our city is blessed.

Each and every word of that mission statement matters…each and every word has been prayed over, poured over, debated, and now fully accepted and embraced by our elders and our staff. Next week I will unpack this mission statement and what it means for us moving forward, but in closing I want to simply point you to the first six words, “To be the light of Christ.” Jesus said very directly to his disciples in Matthew 5:14, “Now you are the light of the world.” Wherever you are, wherever you go, whoever you are with…here is the mission of those of us who are followers of Jesus: we are to be the light of Christ. We are to bring light of Jesus into the darkest room, the darkest part of the neighborhood, the darkest circumstances of a person’s life…we have been tasked to let HIS light shine through us. We touched on this concept of light in our
recent Advent series, and we’ll talk about it for many years to come in many different ways, but church: in short, here it is: Are you willing to commit to this mission…to be the Light of Christ? Make no mistake…from this point forward, I will be asking you to make a commitment to pursue this mission, not just as an organization, but as individuals and families. We’ll unpack our mission in greater detail next week, but as we close, I would ask that you begin praying about this Mission: to be the light of Christ in a hurting culture, so that the lost are found, the broken are made whole, the fatherless find hope, and our city is blessed. That’s where we’re going. Let’s pray.