

What Matters Most
Acts 20:22-24; Colossians 3:17
June 5, 2022
Pastor Steve Richards

[final scene from the movie *Castaway*] If you were in worship last September when I announced my retirement, you may remember this scene. The movie is *Castaway*. Tom Hanks plays the role of Chuck Noland a troubleshooter for FedEx. One Christmas Eve, he is called into service to fix something in Malaysia. The cargo plane he gets on is caught in a severe storm and crashes into the Pacific. He's the only one to survive and ends up marooned on a deserted island. For most of the movie, we see his desperate attempts to survive and return home. For four years he's alone, his only companion a volleyball named Wilson. When materials wash up on the beach that enable him to build a raft, he takes the risk, leaves the island, and is eventually picked up by a passing ship. He returns to a world that has moved on. Everyone thought he was dead. There was a funeral, an empty casket was buried, his girlfriend married someone else and has a child. He's greeted by his employer as if he's a hero, but he's lost. He can't stay where he is. He's got to move forward, but where? The movie ends without an answer. He's at a crossroads.

We've all found ourselves standing at a crossroads. Sometimes of our own choosing, but more often we're at the crossroad because we don't know. The good news is that it is a crossroad – not a dead end, not a cul-de-sac but a crossroad, because there is hope. My friends, there is always hope – even when we are facing the worst thing imaginable, it is not a dead end. As I say every Easter, even death is not the end. There is always hope. But it can be hard to be at this place of uncertainty.

I remember my first crossroad was at my college graduation. I enjoyed college, and I didn't want to leave. But I had a degree. They'd given me a diploma, and everyone I knew was leaving. Almost everyone I knew either had a job lined up or a plan to go to graduate school, but I didn't know what to do next. There were options. I had a teaching degree in music, but I didn't have a great experience in student teaching. I could do it. I interviewed for a few jobs as an elementary music teacher, but I think the persons who interviewed me could tell that my heart wasn't in it. Finally, I went to the state employment office in Hopkins, and I found a six month contract job with the Minnesota Orchestra, working in their music library, and I enjoyed it at first but by the third month, I knew this was not the right direction for me. There was a moment in my sophomore year when I experienced the presence of God. I literally heard God call my name, and in that moment, I knew God was real – that God cared about me, and I could have a personal relationship with God. So, standing at this crossroad of uncertainty, I decided to lean into this relationship with God. Maybe God had a plan for me. I'd known for years that ministry was not an option for me. I was not going to be the fifth generation in our family to be a pastor. The part about ministry that terrified me most was preaching – a lifetime of writing a paper every week and then standing in front of people to deliver the message. That seemed like the worst possible destination for me. But I enjoyed music and music in the church didn't seem like being a pastor, so without much of a plan, two days before the start of classes, I drove to Southern Methodist University in Dallas Texas which had a master's degree program in sacred music in partnership with the seminary. I arrived without a plan, without money, and without a place to stay, but I stepped out in faith, and my life came into focus in a way that I could not predict. I took a job in a suburban Fort Worth church. Parttime as the organist and children's choir director and it eventually became a full-time position with responsibility for the entire music and children's ministry. And to this day, I believe it was the children in that church who called me into ministry. I've kept this photo in my office. It was taken during a children's musical. I was the

director, but I wrote myself into the musical. It would be the first of many children's musicals that I experienced in the first twenty years of ministry. I never completed the music degree, but I graduated from seminary. And I never looked back.

The week before my first Sunday serving two churches in Duluth, I stopped at the home of the church organist – not to see what she needed for Sunday, but to see what I needed. I'll admit to being nervous every Sunday as I walk into the sanctuary, but that first Sunday 40 years ago, I was terrified – and I told her so. She gave me a keychain that I've kept ever since on my desk at home. It says: "Eat a live toad in the morning and nothing worse will happen to you the rest of the day." I've had some tough days, even tough years, but never so tough that I decided to test that statement. Maybe you've seen the photos that have been taken when the President leaves office. The photo shows how much he has aged in just four years or eight years. Here's what's happened in the past 22 years. [photo] There's still a 44-year-old man inside of me as long as I don't look in the mirror. Coming to Messiah was another crossroad for me. I loved children's ministry which had been my primary focus for the 14 years prior to being sent here. Remember, my primary reason for not wanting to be a pastor was the preaching, but that would be my primary responsibility at Messiah. Once again I leaned into my faith. If this is the right direction, then God help me. I can't do this on my own.

In Acts 20, the apostle Paul offered a farewell to the church in Ephesus. Three times, Paul had traveled the Mediterranean basin from Jerusalem to Corinth. He'd spent more time in Ephesus than any other place he traveled. He says: **I served the Lord with great humility and with tears in the midst of trials that came upon me... I held back nothing that would be helpful so that I could proclaim to you and teach you both publicly and privately.** In other words, he was not with them for his own benefit, but his whole life has been about this Christ-shaped love that he attempted to model at every level. A love that bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things. **Now, compelled by the Spirit, I'm going to Jerusalem. I don't know what will happen to me there.** He is standing at a crossroad – he could have remained in Ephesus. He had friends there. Maybe even retire there. But he is compelled by Spirit to go – and it won't be easy. In Jerusalem, he will be arrested, falsely accused, wrongly imprisoned, then sent to Rome, shipwrecked along the way, and ultimately beheaded. We know that's what will happen, but Paul doesn't know where the road will take him which is why he is leaning on the Holy Spirit, God's presence and power will never let go of him and will guide him even through the toughest circumstances. In no way am I comparing myself to Paul, but I'm ready to do as Paul did – to lean on the Holy Spirit for the rest of the way that is before me. At this moment in time, I can say, God has never failed me yet – and never will.

A few years ago, I could see another crossroad approaching. After working with Tami for a few years, it was clear to me that she could be the senior pastor this church needs. It was not my decision to make, but how fortunate that our Servant Steering Team and Bishop Bard would come to the same conclusion.

Today, I stand here grateful. From the first summer that I arrived here, I believed that if we would grow inwardly, the fruits of that growth would be seen outwardly. I've seen that in countless ways in the people of Messiah Church. How you've been strengthened, able to face challenges, how you've come alongside others, how you discovered gifts you never knew you had. I'm tempted to tell stories, but they are your stories to tell. I've been changed by you, people of faith who let God guide them into new paths. There's a song from the Broadway musical *Wicked* that Joy Ann has used in worship a few times: "Because I knew you, I have been changed for good." We are at a crossroad today, but it's why I'm so grateful.

Consider the impact this church has had in the past 22 years. I arrived days before Kid's Care Connection opened. Robin Blair was the center director, and in our first conversation we decided on the Virtues Project as the basis for teaching values to children. God created each child with virtues within inside, and our job is to help the children see what God has planted within them. To nourish that and bring it to full Bloom. And 22 years later, you have made it possible for 434 children to transition to kindergarten while serving many more than that. You have given more than \$1 million in scholarship assistance. You built a school in Jamaica, an orphanage in Bolivia, expanded the possibilities at Light of Hope in Kenya, commissioned Carol Erickson to be your missionary, launching Imara International. You built homes with Habitat for Humanity, come alongside the emerging ministry of Iglesia Piedra Viva, supplied food shelves, and so much more. You have been the hands and feet of Jesus. 25% of what you give each year no longer stays here but impacts people beyond these walls. None of this has been accidental. It has come as persons have grown inwardly in ways that have produced fruits beyond these walls and around the world. And if I had the rest of the day, it would not be enough time to recount all of the ways I have seen God working through the people of Messiah Church. So many lives changed for good.

Before I end this message, I want to share my guiding scripture with you. It has served me well in the past, and it is what I will take with me into wherever I'm compelled by the Spirit to go. It is the words of Paul found in his letter to the Colossians. **As God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. The peace of Christ must control your hearts—a peace into which you were called in one body. And be thankful people. The word of Christ must live in you richly. Teach and warn each other with all wisdom by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing to God with gratitude in your hearts. Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus** I've spent by whole life trying to stay close to Jesus – to learn all I can about his life and the impact his life has had on others. There is a question that guides me whenever I face a decision, whenever I'm at a crossroad in a relationship or a challenge before me. I've counseled many of you to ask the question when you wrestled with a tough decision. Here's the question: what is the most loving thing I can do? And when Paul says, whatever you do, whether in speech or action, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus – I think that's the question – what is the most loving thing **and give thanks to God the Father through him.**

So, here we are – at another crossroad – for me and for you. When this service has ended – maybe as you gather in Heritage Hall or around the table for lunch, you may talk about this service. Maybe you will think the music was wonderful or maybe you won't. Maybe the sermon was one of Steve's better moments or maybe it wasn't. Maybe communion was not served as you hoped or maybe the service took longer than you wanted.

In the months and years to come, you may think back on this time when Pastor Steve was at this church. Maybe you'll remember how he sure had a loud voice, and how he loved to tell stories. Maybe you'll remember when he first arrived and how you thought he looked like Superman but realized he acted more like Clark Kent. When you remember, please remember what mattered most – It's the question that guided his ministry here – it was love, God's love for all people. Let it be said: He loved God and the people, and he sought to serve them both. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of June 5, 2022

Weekly Prayer: O great God, be near. With you beside us, we can face any foe. With you behind us, we do not need to fear. With you before us, we will never be lost. Show us today your power, your goodness, your love. Thank you for never leaving us or forsaking us. O great God, be near. Amen.

Monday, June 6

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Look here! Today I've set before you life and what's good versus death and what's wrong. If you obey the LORD your God's commandments that I'm commanding you right now by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments, his regulations, and his case laws, then you will live and thrive, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you refuse to listen, and so are misled, worshipping other gods and serving them, I'm telling you right now that you will definitely die. You will not prolong your life on the fertile land that you are crossing the Jordan River to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth as my witnesses against you right now: I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you. Now choose life—so that you and your descendants will live— by loving the LORD your God, by obeying his voice, and by clinging to him. That's how you will survive and live long on the fertile land the LORD swore to give to your ancestors: to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Observation: After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, Moses brought the Israelites to a crossroads. They had been through a long and arduous journey from slavery to freedom, but they had reached the point where the Promised Land was before them. The road ahead would not be easy, which was why they also faced another kind of crossroads. Moses was aware that his own death was approaching. Who and what would lead them forward? They had a choice. Would they choose life or death?

Application: You and I frequently stand at a crossroads. It may not be as consequential as the one that Moses presented to the Israelites. But then again, we often do not know how consequential the decision will be at the moment we needed to make it. Think back to one of your life decisions and the impact that decision has had on your life. Did you choose wisely? What will guide you when you stand at the crossroads? Here's what Moses commanded: "by loving the LORD your God, by obeying his voice, and by clinging to him."

Prayer: Thank you, God, that you stand with us at the crossroads of life and provide a way for us through the intersections. May I be humble enough to listen and ready enough to follow each day. Amen.

Tuesday, June 7

Scripture: Acts 9:1-9

Meanwhile, Saul was still spewing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest, seeking letters to the synagogues in Damascus. If he found persons who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, these letters would authorize him to take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. During the journey, as he approached Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven encircled him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice asking him, "Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?" Saul asked, "Who are you, Lord?" "I am Jesus, whom you are harassing," came the reply. "Now get up and enter the city. You will be told what you must do." Those traveling with him stood there speechless; they heard the voice but saw no one. After they

picked Saul up from the ground, he opened his eyes but he couldn't see. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind and neither ate nor drank anything.

Observation: This is one of the most dramatic crossroad experiences in scripture. Saul (who would later be named Paul) who was hostile to the early Christians is confronted by the risen Jesus; three days later he becomes a disciple and begins preaching the good news about Jesus. What makes this dramatic is that Saul did not know he was standing at a crossroads. All indications were that he was content with his life and his mission to terrorize Christians. Yet, God chose the Damascus Road as Saul's crossroad moment, and Saul would choose wisely.

Application: You are not likely to be struck down, blinded, and called out by the risen Jesus. But have you experienced a time when you knew you could not continue in a direction you were living? Saul's change in direction was such that people who knew him could not believe he had changed. But God never failed to give Saul/Paul the strength to continue in the path that God placed before him. How can you maintain your connection with God so that you are strengthened?

Prayer: God, as you were present and provided strength to Paul, so strength me in all that I face. Let me be a witness to your unfailing presence in my life. Amen.

Wednesday, June 8

Scripture: Acts 16:6-10

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the regions of Phrygia and Galatia because the Holy Spirit kept them from speaking the word in the province of Asia. When they approached the province of Mysia, they tried to enter the province of Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus wouldn't let them. Passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas instead. A vision of a man from Macedonia came to Paul during the night. He stood urging Paul, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" Immediately after he saw the vision, we prepared to leave for the province of Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

Observation: Paul had a plan, but God had another plan for Paul. If Paul had pursued his original plan, surely he would have spread the message of the risen Jesus into Asia. But God would send Paul ever closer to the power center of the Roman Empire. Paul would ultimately be martyred in Rome, but 2000 years later, Rome is filled with Christian cathedrals and all that remains of the Roman Empire is ruins. Paul arrived at a crossroads, and he took the direction that God placed before him.

Application: Paul had a plan, but God had another plan for Paul. When have you felt God was close to you, nudging you in a certain direction or toward a certain decision? How can you tell if it is God or just a "dream?" Not every dream/vision that Paul had would also be a message from God.

Prayer: Lord, lead me in the way that you know is best. When I am ready to speak or to act in a way that is not consistent with your purpose, let your Spirit block the way as you did with Paul. Give me the courage to follow you. Amen.

Thursday, June 9

Scripture: Luke 9:51-56

As the time approached when Jesus was to be taken up into heaven, he determined to go to Jerusalem. He sent messengers on ahead of him. Along the way, they entered a Samaritan village to prepare for his arrival, but the Samaritan villagers refused to welcome him because he was determined to go to Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to consume them?" But Jesus turned and spoke sternly to them, and they went on to another village.

Observation: This scripture marks a turning point in the Gospel of Luke. The NRSV translation put it this way: "[Jesus] set his face to go to Jerusalem." It was time to turn toward Jerusalem and all that would await Jesus – ultimately the crucifixion and resurrection. Today's reading indicates Jesus was "determined to go." Nothing would distract him from the destination and those who would follow him must not hesitate. It was time. When villagers did not welcome them, Jesus told them to keep moving.

Application: When have you been certain about an important decision, so certain that nothing would distract you or interrupt you? Maybe it was when your child experienced a crisis, and nothing would keep you from running to their aid. Or maybe it was the sudden awareness of a need and the someone who should help was you.

Prayer: God, thank you for those times when it was clear that I should be the one to help. When I come face-to-face with human need, help me to turn toward that need and be your hands and feet to respond. Amen.

Friday, June 10

Scripture: John 13:36-38; John 21:15-19

Simon Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going, you can't follow me now, but you will follow later." Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I'll give up my life for you." Jesus replied, "Will you give up your life for me? I assure you that you will deny me three times before the rooster crows.

When they finished eating, Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" Simon replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." Jesus asked a second time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Simon replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Take care of my sheep." He asked a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was sad that Jesus asked him a third time, "Do you love me?" He replied, "Lord, you know everything; you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. I assure you that when you were younger you tied your own belt and walked around wherever you wanted. When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and another will tie your belt and lead you where you don't want to go." He said this to show the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. After saying this, Jesus said to Peter, "Follow me."

Observation: Peter had an epic fail. With absolute confidence, he promised to follow Jesus, even if it meant sacrificing his own life. But when he stood at the crossroads, facing the moment when it might very well require his life, he failed not once but three times. Yet later the risen Jesus welcomed Peter back into relationship. "Peter, do you love me?" Grace prevailed. And Peter would eventually be martyred for his faith.

Application: Our God is a God of second chances, third chances, and umpteen chances. Not that we should not take seriously what choices we make. We are not meant to take advantage of God's generosity, but thankfully, we *can* take advantage of God's generosity. And when we fail, let's fail forward into the arms of Christ who waits to lead us onward. Let go of the past and walk on!

Prayer: God of the second chances, be near me when I fall so that I can see your grace and receive your encouragement to try again. And help me to be as generous to others as you continue to be to me. Amen.

Saturday, June 11

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Don't you know that all the runners in the stadium run, but only one gets the prize? So run to win. Everyone who competes practices self-discipline in everything. The runners do this to get a crown of leaves that shrivel up and die, but we do it to receive a crown that never dies. So now this is how I run—not without a clear goal in sight. I fight like a boxer in the ring, not like someone who is shadowboxing. Rather, I'm landing punches on my own body and subduing it like a slave. I do this to be sure that I myself won't be disqualified after preaching to others.

Observation: Paul spoke of his own journey and referred to his life and ours as a race. The race he was thinking of may have been the marathon of Greek tradition. What Paul has learned is that to win a race, five things must happen: We must run in such a way as to get the prize, we must undergo strict training (or self-discipline), we must run with purpose (with "a clear goal in sight"), we must run efficiently (not "like someone who is shadowboxing"), and we must avoid disqualification.

Application: We may be standing at a crossroads uncertain which way to go. We may be running a race we don't quite understand. But we have a compass: Jesus Christ. He is the one who sets our direction. When we line up with him, our lives have purpose and meaning. Lose the compass, and we lose our way. In what ways do you check your compass each day?

Prayer: Merciful Savior, you have called me to run the race of faith with joy, trust, commitment and love. When I stand at a crossroads, uncertain, lost, or confused, thank you that I am never alone, for you are always with me to guide, support, comfort, and love. Amen.