

How We Get Out of Our Slump

Over the past 6 months I have shared with a number of fellow pastors for whom I have great respect, that our attendance here at Fourth Street has been in a slump. That's also an excellent word to describe how that I've been feeling. I feel like the batter in baseball who knows he has had more hits in the past and believes he will have more hits in the future; but, for the moment, he is in a slump. He knows he is a good hitter but for some reason, he just can't get a hit right now.

When I have shared this information with my fellow pastors, I've received the same response maybe 5 different times. They tell me what I've already observed over the years: Churches have seasons. There are Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter seasons in churches. There are crests and valleys, ebbs and flows, the Tide comes in and the Tide goes out. Sometimes we are walking through dark valleys and sometimes we are enjoying the view from the mountain top. Sometimes we are characterized by great activity; at other times we are taking a rest. Lately, at least for me, it's been winter, a valley, tides out, resting kind of season here at Fourth Street. And, I must confess, I don't like it one bit. It brings back my worst nightmare in which I am up here preaching and people start getting up and walking out one after another until I am left all alone preaching to empty pews. But that's the trouble with slumps; if they go on too long, you begin to imagine the worst, and in your depressed state, you help to fulfill your worst fears. You begin to think that you will never get a hit again, and because you think that way it becomes all that much harder to succeed.

Yet, when I step back a little bit and put on my more objective spectacles, I have to admit that what has happened was entirely predictable and to be expected. Last year's push toward the celebration of our 100th Anniversary required a great deal of energy. That, coupled with our 40 Days of Purpose campaign, brought us to a mountaintop, but by the time we made the climb, we were spent. We took a needed a rest. God allowed us, maybe even forced us to rest. It's a natural part of the rhythm of ministry, the changing of the seasons within the life of our church.

But now it seems to me that we are at the beginning of another cycle. This past Thursday, Joe Stotler placed the time capsule back in the cornerstone and bricked it up; the open wound on the corner of our building has been closed; and with it

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that chapter of our history has also been closed. The Fourth Street Church of God has completed and duly celebrated it's first 100 years of ministry and we have taken a breather. But, now we begin again, now we ask God to come and lead us again. And, when--as we wait upon Him--the breath of the Holy Spirit begins to blow, hopefully we will move in the direction that breath impels us. Of course, this will require a choice. God will set before us a road that leads to life and another that leads to death and He will ask us to choose. We can be certain that the road to life will offer the harder journey but also the more exciting and the only productive one. Hopefully, we will choose life.

One thing we can know for certain and that is that Jesus, if we will follow Him, will always lead us toward renewed life. He is, after all, the resurrection and the life. He came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. The one and most important thing we need to do right now is to make sure we are in touch with Jesus and that we are committed to follow Jesus. **Jesus is the One Who will lead us into new life.**

There is a promise I take my stand upon this morning. Jesus said, "where two or three are gathered in My Name, there I will be in the midst of them." Is that what we are here for this morning? Have we gathered in His Name to honor Him? Have we poured out our hearts in worship? Have we prayed until we have become aware of His presence? Then He is with us, and if He is with us, we will soon see the evidence of His presence once again.

But what is the evidence of His presence? What can we expect? What will we be doing under His leadership? Turn with me again to Mark 3:7-10:

"Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. When they heard all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon. Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him. For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him."

You will notice first of all, that wherever Jesus was present, He caused a stir; and, wherever He caused a stir, it served as a magnet for people. People are always drawn to wherever Jesus

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is present. I am especially impressed with the phrase found in verse 8 that says, "When they heard all he was doing, many people came." The description of where these people came from indicate that they came from the countryside and from the city; they came from the south and from the east and from the north, and since Galilee is bounded by the Mediterranean Sea on the west, it means that the people came from everywhere.

They came because they heard what Jesus was doing. It seems to me that if we are paying attention to Jesus among us, we will also be doing; we will be doing what He would be doing through us. Signs of new life will be seen among us when we are seen doing, being doers of the word and not hearers only. When we are seen visiting and praying for the sick, caring for the grieving and for the dying, feeding the hungry, teaching the children, reaching out to the lost, speaking that prophetic word that leads to justice, caring for the real needs of real people, then others will come and they will stick around to take part in the ministry. Jesus said, "when I be lifted up from the earth I will draw all men unto me."

When visitors come looking for Jesus because they have heard about something we have done in His name, then we can be sure we are following Him and have chosen the path of life. **When we obey Him, they will come.**

A second evidence of Jesus' presence among us and something else we can expect is opposition. Mark 3:11 & 12 say, "Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." But he gave them strict orders not to tell who he was."

When we read these verses, it may tend to confuse us. For one thing, evil spirits are mentioned without identifying their hosts, or in what form they appear. Apparently they can be seen, because Mark, or whoever is reporting this to Mark to be written down, has seen them. We know from other passages in the New Testament that demons can inhabit human beings, and pigs, and we can assume that they are able to inhabit other living creatures as well, but for them to appear naked or undisguised, in all their demonic ugliness, is not the usual pattern. The Today's English Version presents verse 11 like this: "And whenever the people who had evil spirits in them saw him they would fall down before him and scream, "You are the Son of God!" The Living Bible also chooses to put human flesh on

these demons. This rendering of the verse is probably what is implied but it's confusing, and the literal translation of the Greek here, leaves us wondering. Whatever the case, we are given to understand that it is the demons that are speaking and unmasking Jesus' true identity.

The second confusing thing about this passage is that the demons are only telling the truth. Jesus is the Son of God, so why does He rebuke them from telling the truth? It's hard for us to say for sure, but it might be a matter of timing. Jesus already has all the publicity He can handle and then some. He has to preach from a boat anchored off shore to keep from being crushed by the crowd. He doesn't need the demons giving Him any more publicity. The other likely possibility is that Jesus doesn't want anyone to think that the forces of evil are on His side, or that His authority, as some tried to claim, came from the evil one. One of the favorite tricks of the Devil is to confuse good and evil, evil and good, and to lead people to believe there is no difference between them. At any rate, Jesus commands the demons to be silent.

It is enough for us to know that when Jesus is lifted up in our midst, so that people are drawn to us because of Him, and to Him because of us, there will also be opposition. Either through a small minority of the new people who come among us, or in someone already present, the Evil one will find voice and try to confuse, blur, or otherwise defeat the message of Christ. Demonic opposition is the second sign that Jesus is able to be seen among us. **But, to be forewarned is to be forearmed.**

A third evidence of the presence of Jesus among us is the calling and sending out of disciples. Notice verses 13-15: "Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve--designating them apostles--that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons."

Sometimes this means that people are given to us for a short time and go out from us to proclaim Christ elsewhere. This has happened among us several times already. Kenny Zitsch went to Wallaceeton. Judy Bork went to Henrietta, Roger and Yvonne Templeton went to Waterstreet and then to Hollidaysburg. Jerry Sneath began a Sunday Morning ministry at the 11th Street Tower. We can feel good that we had a part, however large or

small, in these lives and ministries. One of the things that indicates that Jesus is present here is that He calls and sends out pastors and missionaries from here.

But it is not only those who go out. Jesus calls all of those who believe in Him to follow Him. Some disciples go out with apostolic-like ministries to other people in other places, but others are called to minister right here among us. In any case, you will notice that there are three things such persons are called and commissioned to do. Verses 14b-15 say, again: "that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons."

For those chosen and called by Jesus to His service three things are true: They are called to an intimate fellowship with Jesus. They are called to proclaim His word or message. And, they are called to receive His authority to drive out demons--to do battle against evil and to prevail--to be warriors for the King and for His kingdom. When we hear anew and respond in obedience to His call, we will prove our readiness to begin the second hundred years of our spiritual Journey with Jesus. We will be in position to take part in what Christ is doing in the midst of our world. **Impelled by His love, empowered by His Spirit, we are called to proclaim His message and to do battle against all evil. And by the Spirit of the Cross, we will conquer.**

Beloved I ask you to do two things as we prepare to begin our second 100 years of ministry at Fourth Street. #1, pray for the presence of Jesus among us. "Lord, we are gathered in Your name as best we know how, and when we do this, You have promised to be with us. Lord, be with us today and everyday we gather. Without You, Lord, we will surly perish, but if You are with us we cannot fail." Pray that prayer or something like it on a regular basis. #2, offer your body and all the talents and abilities you have to be used in His service. Ask Him for a vision of what changes you need to make to be useful in His work, and make those changes. Ask Him for a vision of what He wants you to do, and begin to do it. Remember that the Holy Spirit is God's gift to those who obey Him.

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Mark 3:7-19

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