

“When You Are Ready”
October 29, 2023
Pastor Aaron Johnson

Good morning, Central United Protestant Church! Are you ready? I'm ready. We're going to be in John 16 this morning, the Gospel of John, chapter 16. And while you're turning there, I just had an epiphany this morning. As I watched Pastor John do the announcements, I realized he uses the same introduction, regardless of whether he's doing announcements or the sermon. And so, I thought, you know what? Good morning, Central United Protestant Church!

It is a privilege to stand up here in front of you. Would you guys stand as we read from God's Word? John, chapter 16, starting in verse 5.

“But now I am going to Him who sent me, and none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears, he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

“A little while and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.”

This is the word of the Lord, and we are grateful for it. Would you please be seated?

Months, before I had asked my wife to marry me, I was feeling out the water and introducing the concept, in the hopes that she would say yes when I asked. I know. I married up. It was a long shot, but I had to go for it. At the time, the global war on terror had just kicked off, and Sarah asked me, “What about Iraq? Could you end up over there?” And I told her, “No. I work with a battalion of tanks. It would have to get pretty bad before they sent us to Iraq.” So, when I asked, she said yes, and six months later I was on my way to Iraq. Needless to say, we were both a little bit scared. And I began to sense that my life was going to be a little different than I had expected. Preparing to leave, and then leaving, I had decided that I wasn't going to do anything too risky. I was flirting with the very real possibility that I had widowed my wife, and there was no point in worsening those odds. I wouldn't volunteer for anything outside of my responsibility. I wouldn't volunteer for anything dangerous because, as you know, my fate is in my own hands!

During the training they hit us with everything that you could expect, and then they hit us with a little bit more, and I diligently focused on my job. Nothing too risky, of course. Towards the end of one of our training events, it was getting busy. Patrols were patrolling; security was securing; staff was managing. All were overburdened and on the

verge of one-too-many requirements, when a report came in that a suspected car bomb was parked at the gate. The Operations Officer looked around for anyone, and then right at me. "Lieutenant Johnson, get to the gate and find out if that car has a bomb in it." Confidently I looked him right in the eye, and I said, "Sir, that's not my job." I'll never forget his response: "Your job is whatever I tell you your job is." Of course, that's minus all of the military vernacular. And he was right. I grabbed my rifle, my helmet, my bulletproof vest, and started the walk to the gate. I had about that much time to figure out what I was going to do when I got there. You know, it's not as simple as just poking your head in the window and looking. And as I began to work out how I was going to determine bomb or no bomb, I heard the Spirit whisper, "You know, if it's true that your job is whatever he tells you it is, then it's even more true that your job is whatever I tell you your job is." Of course, I couldn't disagree. It's true that at the moment I accepted God as my Lord and my Savior, my God became my Operations Officer. If He said, "Go," my job was to go. If He said, "Stay," my job was to stay. Then the Spirit whispered again, "What if I called you to a battlefield in full knowledge that you won't come home? Could you trust me with your wife?" Well, shoot. I had to go even if it meant my demise, and I had to trust that this possibility was not outside of God's plan for me and for my wife. This is profound, and the implications are profound.

I got to the gate and muddled through, probably. How, I don't know. I know I didn't fail, but I don't remember those details. What I do remember, that I will never forget, is that I couldn't wait to call my wife and share this epiphany with her. God had this. This war and all that it did and could entail, it was in His hands, and I needed to let her know that it was in His hands, not mine. I waited my turn to use the phone, and Sarah answered. I said, "I have something that I have to share with you." To which she responded, "No, I've got something I have to share with you." I said, "No, I've got something I have to say." And she replied, "Me, too." And I remember thinking, "Aaron, ladies first." When Sarah spoke, she said, "Okay, I've written a song and I need to play it." She placed her cell phone on a piano and played me a song that she had written that was all about how we can trust God in all situations, with all things. Of course, I was a blubbering mess. Sergeant First Class Ryan Leonard saw me a blubbering mess and gently closed the door, gave me a wink, and said, "We've all been there." But at least I didn't have to cry in front of the rest of the staff.

What if I had known I was going to Iraq? Would I have asked Sarah to marry me if I'd known? Would she have said yes? I don't know. But it was a rough 18 months. And what got us through those first months of our marriage was the knowledge that God was in control, and the experience that the Spirit was working in and through me in the same way that He was working in and through her, regardless of the amount of miles between us.

I'm guessing that each of you have had easy Christian lives, that each of you, from the moment of your conversion, has found your life getting easier and easier. Your marriages have been easy. Raising your kids has been easy. You have probably always been able to pay your bills. I'm guessing that each of you, at the moment of trouble, illness, not enough money, new kinds of temptation or addiction, has known immediately what God was about to do and how He was going to do it. You could see what God was going to expect of you, and you could see how it was going to be advantageous in regard to your Christian development. And now that many of you are even in your twilight years, it's been nothing but gravy. No, it's more likely that, like me, you're usually ill-prepared, unprepared, and/or completely surprised when your

expectation of how your life should be was derailed by the realization that living faithfully was going to be living differently than you had ever imagined. No, I know. I've gotten to know you. I know many of you have gone through things that you thought you would never make it through. In fact, I know and suspect that some of you are going through things now that are harder than you imagined. Only but the naive among us know that this thing called the Christian life is going to be hard on a whole other level.

This is where the disciples found themselves in our passage this morning, when Jesus delivered His farewell address. Farewell discourses were common, and this one followed the generally accepted outline: a meal, prediction of death, some warnings, final instructions, prayer for those who would follow, and the appointment of a leader. After Judas departs on his duplicitous errand, (I've been practicing that word all week!) Jesus began to prepare the disciples for the events to come: His betrayal, His arrest, His trials and crucifixion, ultimately to be followed by His resurrection and ascension. Wait, what? Jesus is going to die? What? The disciples weren't ready to hear that. In fact, they were still concerned for their own preeminence in the earthly kingdom to come. Luke, recording the same address, notes that there was a dispute among the disciples as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. At the moment that Jesus was telling them that He was going to die, the disciples still thought that they were on the verge of being the high muckety-mucks of some new dynastic kingdom on the order of David and Solomon. That's how far off they were. They were not even close to being ready. I even imagine Jesus asking Himself, "Do I tell them what is in store for them after my death? Do I tell them?" I wonder what would have happened if Jesus had shared what His death meant for them. How would Peter have reacted to the knowledge that he would one day be crucified for Jesus? Andrew, Thomas, Philip, Bartholomew, James, Simon the Zealot, and Matthias would all be killed for Jesus in the most gruesome of ways. What if Jesus had shared, in that farewell discourse, the details of what was to follow for them? And John, he's one of the few that would die of natural causes. What if Jesus had shared the time he would spend in Patmos?

One of my all-time favorite stories is the story of Corrie ten Boom. She was a Dutch woman who worked with her father, her sister, and her family members, to help many Jewish people escape from the Nazis during the Holocaust of World War Two, by hiding them in her home. Eventually they were caught, and she was arrested and sent to the Ravensbruck concentration camp. Her book, "The Hiding Place," recounts that story. If you haven't read it, I highly recommend it. It begins as her family plans a birthday party for her elderly dad. Reflecting on that birthday, after the war, Corrie writes: "It was a day for memories. A day for calling up the past. How could we have guessed as we sat there--two middle-aged spinsters and an old man--that in place of memories we were about to be given adventure such as we had never dreamed of? Adventure and anguish, horror and heaven were just around the corner, and we did not know. Oh Father! Betsie! If I had known, would I have gone ahead? Could I have done the things I did? But how could I have known? How could I imagine this white-haired man called Opa—Grandfather--by all the children of Haarlem, how could I imagine this man thrown by strangers into a grave without a name? And Betsie, with her high lace collar and gift for making beauty all around her, how could I picture this dearest person on earth to me standing naked before a roomful of men? In that room on that day, such thoughts were not even thinkable."

Jesus knew they weren't ready, and although He couldn't yet reveal what was to come, He could leave them with some words of comfort. Not just a little comfort, comfort that

would see them through the trials to come. He would send them the Spirit to guide them. "It is to your advantage that I go away," He says. "There is still much more to know and even more to accomplish, but right now it would be more than you could bear. You are not ready. But when the Spirit comes, He will guide you." Jesus was about to change the nature of reality as they knew it. And until it came to pass, He knew that they weren't ready. So, He promised them the Spirit. Of course, then it begins. That very night Jesus was betrayed, arrested, tried, and sentenced to death. Three days later, He would rise from the dead and finally appear to those very same disciples. And yet, they were still not ready. They were startled and frightened, thought they saw a spirit. When Jesus calmed them, they asked, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" They were still in that mindset. Did they know how trivial that was in comparison to the kingdom that was just opened to them? Not yet. It wasn't enough, even for the disciples, to witness with their own eyes the death and resurrection. They still needed to be taught, and their skepticism still needed to be addressed. Jesus says to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning with Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending you the promise of my Father." When the Spirit of God comes, He would guide them into all the truth.

Are you ready? Could you bear to hear what God has planned for you over the course of the rest of your life? What would have to occur for you to be prepared? And there are layers and layers to this question. Layers! It wasn't enough for the disciples to have heard and understood, for them to have been prepared for what Jesus was to do, and what it meant for them to live faithfully to it. The Law had to be given; the prophets had to speak; and the Psalms had to be composed. Sometimes I think we are impatient, as God is preparing the things that need to occur in order for us to be ready. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." The fullness of time. Everything was in place for the moment that Jesus changed the world. Everything will be in place for the moment when the Spirit guides you, in the fullness of God's timing. What does it mean to be guided by the Spirit? It doesn't mean that He will teach you all that can be known, only that He will remind you of what you already know, at the time in which it was needed. I was fully aware that God was my Operations Officer, but it was exactly what I needed to hear at that moment. He will guide us as we strive to live our lives in light of the truth, in such a way that we might witness to that truth. He won't tell you how to fix your life, only how to live rightly through your life. And I say "strive," because we don't always do it right. But like Peter's denial, God uses even our failures for His purposes.

Are you ready? I'm reminded of Elijah. On the verge of failure, that great prophet of old ran in fear and hid in a cave. And when God says, "Where are you?", he tells God that all the other prophets have been killed, and he is scared. God tells him: "Go and stand on the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the

sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

Many sermons have been preached about the whisper that Elijah found. But we can also take comfort that, not only do we have God's written Word, but we have His Spirit living in us when we need Him most. And He is preparing us for that moment. Elijah couldn't hear God in the strong wind, but God was there. Elijah couldn't hear God in the earthquake, but God was there. Elijah couldn't hear God in the fire, but God was there. And God used the strong wind, the earthquake, and the fire, to prepare Elijah to hear the whisper.

I don't know what you're going through this morning, but I promise you that God is using it to prepare you. And when you're ready, rest assured that the Spirit will whisper the guidance that you need in the moment. A friend of mine shared with me just last week, and it's timely. Sharing from C. S. Lewis's "Mere Christianity," C. S. Lewis writes: "When a man turns to Christ and seems to be getting on pretty well, in the sense that some of his bad habits are now corrected, he often feels that it would now be natural if things went fairly smoothly. When troubles come along, illnesses, money troubles, new kinds of temptation, he is disappointed. These things, he feels, might have been necessary to rouse him and make him repent in his bad old days, but why now? Because God is forcing him on or up to a higher level, putting him into situations where he will have to be more brave, more patient, more loving, more than he ever dreamed of being before."

Seems to us all unnecessary, doesn't it? But that is because we have not yet had the slightest notion of the tremendous thing He means to make of us. The disciples thought that they were going to be sub-rulers of a kingdom on earth, but Jesus had so much more in mind. When Jesus called the disciples to follow Him, I suspect that if He had told them what was in store, they would have all politely refused. But I also suspect that if you asked them all right now if what they went through was worth it, they would unanimously agree that it was. I wonder what God has in store for us. What does God have in store for Central United Protestant Church? What does God have in store for the people this morning who are sitting in Central United Protestant Church? What does God have in store for those people who have joined us online? Will it be worth it, even if it costs us everything? Are you ready? Let's pray.

Lord, right now, in the stillness of this moment, I pray that You would speak to each and every one of these hearts. I pray that You would provide comfort as they go through whatever it is that You have them going through, that is preparing them for whatever is next. Lord, You have called us to be Your witnesses, to be Your witnesses through some of the most challenging things imaginable that life can present. And the comfort You offer is Your Spirit. Lord, I pray that Your Spirit would guide us today in new and wonderful ways. In Your precious name, amen.