

LIFT

A Vision for Christ Church | Psalm 145:14; Mark 9:27

Good morning! It feels great to be back with you once again and to be starting a new year of life together as Christ Church. The longer this COVID-calamity goes on and the more upsetting the events of our world become, the more important it is to have a strong foundation and a clear spiritual vision for our lives. That's what I want to talk with you about today. I want to begin by giving you a VISION of the GOD who is our strong foundation and ever-present hope in these times. Everything good flows from his character. Secondly, I want to share what I believe God wants to do in and through our Church in these months ahead. And then, finally, I'd like to give you some practical handles on how you can be part of that great adventure – so that you aren't just watching Christ Church but ARE Christ Church in a beautiful way.

So let's start with God – with who God is. Tim Hansel tells the story of a sunny day when he and his kids were out hiking in the mountains of California. Pausing to admire the view from a steep trail, Hansel heard a voice from behind and above him shout: "Catch me!" Whirling toward the sound, Hansel saw the body of his youngest child dropping from a ledge above. With incredible speed, Hansel flashed out his hands and deftly caught the child, only then realizing something that left him breathless: The child had jumped first and then cried, "Catch me!" "What if I didn't hear you?!" "What if I wasn't fast or strong enough?!" Hansel said with heart pounding. But the child just looked up at him quizzically and said: "But I knew you would. You're my Dad."

I don't think any of us should take from that story the message that, because God is our Heavenly Father, we will not take some tumbles in life or never get hurt. God's own child, Jesus, experienced pain and loss and told us that this would be part of our journey too (John 16:33). But I do think that we are meant to live with a childlike faith that when we are falling down, our Heavenly Father hears our cries from a heart that longs to move to help us.

That's good news, because **there is a heaviness to life today**. Have you noticed it? Maybe it's the pace of life or the constant clamor and conflict. Perhaps it's all the expectations pressing on people or this endless COVID thing. Maybe it's because life is just hard, especially if you don't have the resources to cope with it. What I sense is that people are living with a feeling of weight and burden that robs them of joy and peace and hope. Many feel like they are falling or have hit the ground hard or are stuck in a hole. I meet it in conversations I have with neighbors or overhear in coffee shops or read between the lines on social media. Last June, I started writing down some of what I was hearing and I asked our Worship Arts team if they could help me convey some of these heart cries to you. Listen with me to this... **[PLAY VIDEO]**

The weight of life can be crushing. Maybe you feel it yourself or know someone who feels like some of those voices. I know I do. But I got to thinking, we're not the first ones. Throughout history – in situations and moments not unlike ours – men, women, young people alike have felt hard pressed, only to discover that there is a Heavenly Father who hears them and has a heart to help. Think of some of the stories the Bible tells.

Job is a man with brains, brawn and a big bank account. But then he undergoes a dramatic reversal. Through a cascade of calamities, he loses almost everything on which he'd based his security and significance in life. But the one thing he will not lose is faith in a God greater than gravity. Job declares: **The lowly God sets on high, and those who mourn he LIFTS to safety (Job 5:11)**. And God not only companions and comforts Job but restores to him even more than he suffered and lost.

Hannah is a poor woman with few resources in life. In an age where having children is your only social security system, Hannah's system is bankrupt. She knows she'll be living in the equivalent of a cardboard box under a bridge, doing whatever it takes to feed her aching belly. But then God suddenly blesses her with a child she names Samuel. And Samuel learns to listen for the voice of God and becomes a prophet. And one day, when Israel is in search of a great king, Samuel follows God's voice and anoints a shepherd boy, who rises to become the greatest political leader Israel ever had. How did all this happen? Through the power of God to LIFT people. Hannah herself put it this way: **The LORD raises the poor from the dust and LIFTS the needy from the ash heap (1 Sam 2:8)**.

Time and again, that shepherd boy and king, David, was discouraged and defeated. In certain categories, his character was a catastrophe. His marriage was a mess. His kids were a crash scene. His nation was divided. But if there's one thing that distinguished David from other people is that he was not just good with slingshot. For all his imperfections, David was good with the God of LIFT, and his Psalms were all about extolling the wonder of this God. **I will exalt you, Lord, for you LIFTed me out of the depths... You set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand (Psa 30:1; 40:2)... The Lord upholds all who fall and LIFTS up all who are bowed down. (Psa 145:14)**

Many years later out of a branch of David's family, God lifted up a peasant teenager named Mary and a poor carpenter named Joseph and made them the earthly parents of a child named Jesus. Few dared to think that this child would amount to anything. He was born in a stable and raised in the Appalachia of the ancient world. **Can anything good come out of Nazareth? (John 1:46)** they said of him and the town he grew up in. The headlines of that day were all about Caesar's new taxes and Herod's infrastructure plan. But there was a deeper plan for renewal at work... a greater power on the move. **God's plan was to raise a community around his Son through whom He would move to LIFT the whole human race.**

Jesus Christ lived, died, rose again and formed a community of faith around himself whose job it was to proclaim that: **There is a grace greater than the gravity of the sin, strains and struggles that press us down and it comes from the God of LIFT.** If you know history, then you know that human civilization has been transformed by that message and the power behind it. I know that power in my own history. I have experienced that grace lift my character, my marriage, my way of using my resources, my manner of handling adversity. My life is a walking and sometimes stumbling witness to the power of the God of LIFT. What's your story? What do you want it to be in this year ahead?

Sadly, we can lose sight of who God is and what he wants to do in us and through us. We can be caught up in so many lesser movements than the great one for which we've been commissioned. This is why I'm trying to recast a vision for us today. Let me briefly call out **three crucial spiritual movements** I believe God is calling us to make in our time.

The first spiritual movement I pray we'll make is to LIFT our eyes to God anew. We need to raise our vision above the downcast, despairing, derogatory, destructive, defensive viewpoints that are dominating our time. The Psalmist says: **LIFT your eyes to the LORD from whom comes our help (Psa 121:1-2).** The prophet Isaiah urged: **LIFT up your eyes and look to the heavens (Isa 40:26).** St. Paul wrote: **Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (Rom 12:2).** Where are your eyes and ears focused these days? To the extent that any of us are, we must stop deriving our values, and modeling our rhetoric, and putting our hope for salvation in the idols of this world. Let's re-commit to lift our eyes to God and resolve to think and be more like Him.

Secondly, let's LIFT up Jesus. I'll be blunt: A lot of well-meaning Christians today have been overtaken by consuming concern for survival and power. I get sucked into it myself. Think of all the voices around us clamoring that our main concern should be the preservation of our bodies against COVID... or the survival of our church against atheism... or the ascendance of our party... or the pre-eminence of America... or the salving of our anxiety over all the people who threaten any of these.

It's not that these concerns don't matter at all. But if we are truly Christ-followers (and not just playing ones for the camera), wouldn't you conclude that our main focus would be upon elevating JESUS, who laid down his body and power and privileges for the sake of others. If we really want others to find the transforming power of his life and kingdom, it's more likely to happen if they see how you and I are laying down our SELVES and lifting up HIM. **When I am LIFTed up... I will draw all people to me. (John 12:32)**

Finally, I invite you in days ahead to work with me and others in our church's life to **LIFT** up more of the people Christ hears, sees and loves. Many years ago, I told the story of an interesting photograph that the award-winning author, Alex Haley, kept in his office. It pictured a turtle sitting atop a fencepost along a country road. When asked why he had that photo on his wall, the famous author would reply: *"Because it reminds me of the truth. If you see a turtle sitting on a fencepost, you know one thing for certain: That turtle had some help getting there. I never want to forget that I'm like that turtle,"* said Haley, and so could I. I've had a lot of help getting to where I am in life. I want to remember that so that I won't just sit around in my office or house admiring my nice furniture and awards. I want to be part of a movement to LIFT lots of other people too. What do you want your life to be about?

Think how often the Scriptures picture Jesus taking someone by the hand and lifting them up (Mark 9:27). Remember how He called you and me to love people the way he does (John 13:34). In this next season, let's do more of this together. Let's lift lots of individuals and families to a healthier, more hopeful life. Let's love others in a way that produces so many stories of life-change that the face of Jesus gets sore from smiling! We've prayed and thought a lot about this within our church's staff and elder circles. We've asked ourselves: **What would it take for Christ Church to be a force-multiplier for the Grace that overcomes the gravity of our times?**

As we've pondered this question, God led us to the conviction that alongside the three spiritual movements I've described, there were four practical measures we could undertake to help LIFT many more people toward their full potential in life. We could:

1. Foster a **Leader Revolution** that further unleashes the giftedness of our church.
2. Build an **Invitational Culture** that enlists the whole congregation in helping many more along the path toward being like Jesus.
3. Multiply **Flourishing Groups** where we experience ourselves and extend to the wider world Christ's life-changing love.
4. Provide **Tech Touchpoints** that build resourceful relationships with people whose first encounter with us or the gospel will be in the digital space.

I'm not going to take your time today to walk through all the programmatic particulars of these initiatives. We'll explore all this in coming months. What I do want to do in closing, however, is to invite you to think about how YOU might play an important part in a great adventure of life-changing impact. What do I mean?

Well, can you imagine helping **1 individual** each week rise to a higher level of thriving? Maybe you go out of your way to strike up a conversation with them on Sunday. Perhaps you invite them to share a cup of coffee or meal. Maybe you introduce them to someone with a resource that could be helpful. Perhaps you invite them to one of the monthly Gather events we'll be sponsoring or welcome them into your small group. Maybe you write someone a note of encouragement, inviting them to consider how God sees, loves and has gifted them. Perhaps you invite them to watch or attend our upcoming message series on how to build REMARKABLE RELATIONSHIPS. Could you

do that? Could you help lift one person toward their greater potential every week and model an invitational culture?

Or, can you envision how we might make a substantial impact in **10 communities** around this region? If we had hundreds of flourishing groups who made it a habit not just of studying together but of serving together in one of our local communities; or if a bunch of these groups came together to volunteer in some schools or to solve a resource problem in a particular town, can you see how we could bless our world? Does raising the quality of life and the reputation of Jesus' church in 10 nearby communities seem worthy of our energies?

Or picture for a moment what would happen if **100 groups** in our church developed a personal relationship with just one of our mission partners and prayed for them and met them on Zoom or in-person and told others about the amazing work that partner was doing. Do you suppose we might be able to move even more dollars and volunteer hours in their direction? Better yet, what if, over the next three years, there was such a leadership revolution here that the people of Christ Church played a role in developing some NEW need-meeting ventures of our own. What kind of life-changing impact could this gifted congregation have?

And what about all those families out there, living under the weight of all that presses people down these days. Could we help love and nurture their children? Could we supply them with resources that strengthen their marriages and family rhythms? Could we stand with them in times of crisis or grief? Could we inspire them to extend Christ's love to their network of relationships? I believe that if we decided to, we could lift **1000 families** to a higher level of health and spiritual influence.

And who could we bless through the touch of technology. What if we developed digital resources that addressed common spiritual questions, family issues, mental health concerns or any of the other topics on the minds of people in our region. Suppose we made these easy for you to share with people in your relational network. Imagine we had teams of Christ Church people who built resourceful relationships and even groups with people online, now sitting alone across our region or country. Do you suppose we could touch **10000 people** for good? Do you think it might bring a smile to the face of the Lord who crossed eternity to reach us?

So, here's my invitation. Let's lift our eyes to God afresh, making his character and kingdom our ultimate fascination. Let's lift up Jesus more, with a renewed passion to help others find his transforming power and community. And in his name -- come COVID or high water -- let's do what each of us can to **LIFT10000** toward their God-given potential. By His grace that is greater than gravity, we start that adventure today.

Let us pray...

Lord, we know from your Scriptures and the witness of history that you care for people. You are personal enough to care for each one and you vast enough to care for all. So, with our vision first and foremost of you and your heart, do a great thing in and through us. By your grace help us LIFT....

10000 person each week to a higher level of thriving
10000 communities around us to a better quality of life
10000 groups (or more) to greater missional impact
10000 families to a higher level of health and influence
10000 people toward their God-given potential

...for the sake of your glory and the furtherance of the redeeming purposes for which you sent Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.