

Sunday, March 22, 2020

Clifford Baptist Church, Amherst, Virginia
Rev. Dr. Michael R. Fitzgerald, Senior Pastor

(Transcription from the Morning Service that was Streamed Live)

Prelude music by Randy Bixler

Hymn: “Just a Closer Walk With Thee” Ivetta Campbell, soloist; Mike Fitzgerald, guitarist

Sermon: “God’s Redirection”

Scripture: Acts 16:6-10 (from the New King James Version)

Good morning, Clifford Baptist Church! I am glad we have about 28 or so people here this morning--a little gathering, but I am grateful that they are here, and we’re grateful that you are there as we come together to worship our Lord and our Savior, Jesus Christ, and we’re doing so in a bit of a different way—something new today. And yet I believe that this is the beginning of something new that is going to take hold and get traction and move on through time to come. So we’re beginning today on a new threshold of ministry and a new way of doing ministry, and a new way of taking Jesus Christ to the world. So thank you for joining us this morning as we worship together, and the gathered church is not only here but the gathered church is in the world as we share this worship service together. And Jesus is going to bless your heart and mine as we give these moments to him.

Our country is bracing to withstand the sweep of the Corona virus that is coming through from border to border, and we’ve been asked to stay home. We’ve been asked to refrain from gathering in large groups in order to stem the spread of that flu that can be very dangerous to our population, especially to certain segments of our population. As the church, we certainly need to cooperate with not gathering together in big groups, keeping our families safe, but also keeping our community safe. And so we want to be a part of that and cooperate in that effort to keep this flu at a bare minimum. So today, we’re doing something that is entirely out of the box in that we are worshipping in a new way—we are leaving our daily routines in this larger effort to slow down, to stay calm, and to ask the Lord to bless us through these days in which we’re living. At 63 years old, I can tell you that these days are different from any that I’ve ever seen before, and so today as we step out of the normal box into something that is new, we know God is going to lead us, God is going to bless us, God is going to put His hand of blessing on us. And we’re streaming this service **out** of this sanctuary instead of calling people **into** the sanctuary—something completely different for us. I’m

grateful that you are joining us today; we're privileged that you are with us as we worship together this morning. And a huge thank you goes to our media team; they have worked throughout this week to make sure that these services could be streamed today and in upcoming Sundays as long as we need to do this. But thank you, media team, for making sure that we can touch the world today. You are our heroes today as you put all of this together for us.

This week I learned a story of a man whose name is Mark Goffeney, and I watched a brief documentary of his life. He's an interesting man; he was born without arms. And so he has learned how to live life without arms, and the way that he's adjusted his life is to do everything with his feet! And he's an interesting man—he's in his forties and instead of using his hands he uses his feet for everything including driving his car. In this documentary, you actually see him driving his car with his foot on the steering wheel taking him where he needs to go. It got more interesting in that he drove his car through a drive-thru restaurant window. He orders his food, and he pays for his food by reaching his leg and his foot out of the car window with the money clenched in his toes to give it to the young lady who was going to receive payment for his dinner. She looked a little bewildered, but she took his payment. And then, I actually saw him in this documentary hold the burger with his foot like you and I would hold it with our hand and eat it. He's an amazing man, but what drew me to watch this documentary of Mark Goffeney is that he's a professional musician and he plays guitar and he plays the bass in an amazing way. God gave him the ability to play an instrument in a very different way than 99.9% of us play an instrument in that Mark Goffeney plays it with his feet, and he does it very well. That documentary caught my attention thinking this man has taken a circumstance in his life, and his life has met the circumstance. He's living in a different way than you and I live. But his life is meeting his circumstance given to him by God. There's a message for the church in that, particularly in these days.

Today, I've never seen us worship like this before. I've never seen the sanctuary this empty on a Sunday morning before. So today for the first time, we've asked the mainstream of people to stay home. Most every other Sunday of my life in this pulpit I have said get up out of bed in the morning, get your kids ready, get everybody set, get in the car, and come to Clifford Baptist Church and join us for worship. Today, we're saying "stay home." But we're also saying you can still join us for worship with the media contact as we stream this service live. So for 38 years, I've been asking people to come. Today, we're saying stay home. But God has turned our circumstances completely around, and here's what I believe: The Lord is saying to us in these days the church is now facing a new way of doing things. The church is directed by our God that we're going to meet this challenge and meet these circumstances, and we will never change the gospel of the living Lord Jesus Christ. But there are times when we have to change the way that we give that gospel to the world. We're in the midst of change right now. But I believe that this is a change in which God is growing

us and God is leading us that we are going to take the gospel from these doors in greater ways in days that are ahead. God is not asking us to hunker down and stop ministry; God is not asking us right now to take a break from ministry. But rather, He's telling us to follow Him and to seek His direction as He leads us to be His church with the same gospel of Jesus Christ in a new way. And I am grateful we are rising to that challenge that we continue to take the gospel to the world. Ministry never stops, no matter the circumstances. The church never stops, despite what's going on in our culture. I want to remind you that Peter addressed the church in 1 and 2 Peter in the church's greatest moment of persecution. The church in those days when Peter wrote this letter was called the "Diaspora"—they were dispersed into the world because of persecution. But in 1 Peter, Chapter 2, verse 9, Peter writes this to the church: "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his own special people that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." Do you notice that Peter says to the church—even though you are under severe persecution right now, running for your lives, never cease to praise our Savior, Jesus Christ. The mission and the ministry of the church never changes despite the circumstances. So today, we're giving the gospel message to people where they are rather than calling the people to the church we're taking the church to the people. Thank you for joining us in that and worshipping with us in that. God never once told us to quit but rather God says carry on in the way I lead you to do that. And this is our call from God—I believe this day to continue on in a path of ministry that is going to grow in increasing our borders in allowing us to be God's people in God's way in God's timing that we think and we grow in introducing people to Jesus Christ, whether it is inside of this sanctuary or now whether we take that message outside of these doors.

The scripture for today is in Acts Chapter 16. I want you to take your Bible; if you're home, get your Bible and turn it open with me to Acts Chapter 16 in your New Testament. If you remember, the great missionary Paul took three mission journeys. Acts Chapter 16 shows us the beginning of the second missionary journey. He'd already been on one journey, and he was now developing a team to take the second missionary journey. He pulled that mission team together, and on that team of assorted people were Paul and Silas and Timothy, and they were going to travel with the gospel. And Paul had developed a plan. Paul had decided that they were to stay in the territory where they had taken the first missionary journey, and they were going to recover all that territory on their second journey and re-visit all the places they had been on their first journey. But Paul's plan was not God's plan. Paul had developed a plan, and God said that's not the plan for you, Paul, this is not the plan for your mission team. Look at Acts Chapter 16, verse 6. Scripture says this: "Now when they gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia." So Paul's first missionary journey was traveling through Asia Minor. And yet it tells us in verse 6 here that while Paul had decided that for the second journey they were going to re-travel through

Asia Minor, God said no. I forbid you to go there; that is not where I want you to be. So Paul says, OK God, well here's my second plan. If we're not going to be traveling through our journey of the first mission journey, then we're going to travel north and we're going to go to Mysia and Bithynia and we're going to take the gospel there. But look at Acts 16, verses 7 and 8: "After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them." That's interesting to me. Look at verse 8: "So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas." Well as we get to that portion of the scripture, for the second time God says "Paul, your decision about where the mission team to go is not my will—it's not my plan and so I'm shutting down your mission team. I don't want you to travel in that direction." So the team just stops, and they're in the city of Troas. Interestingly, the Aegean Sea sits right at the edge of the city of Troas. So, in other words, the mission team had reached a dead end. They did not know exactly where to go from that point because God had said I don't want you to travel on your first plan, I don't want you to go on a mission trip for the second plan—Wait. Stop. Listen to Me. And so they end up in the city of Troas. And if you were to walk up to Paul on that day and say "Where are you going from here, Paul—where's your mission team going?" Paul would say "I have no idea! I am totally confused where God wants us to be." It's a confusing moment for the entire team. Paul has the team ready; they're ready to travel; they're ready to preach; they're ready to call in the unsaved but God said "Stop. Wait for me, because I have a new plan for you." Then one night in that state of confusion, Paul goes to bed and goes to sleep, and God speaks to him in a vision. Paul has six visions from God throughout his ministry; this is the second of those six visions. Look at Acts Chapter 16, verses 9 and 10: "And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them." So in this vision, God tells the mission team "I want you to go to the territory of Macedonia." In our modern day world, that is the continent of Europe. They were to change from the continent to continent to take the gospel there. So God had instructed them "Take your team, Paul, get on a boat right here in Troas at the edge of Aegean Sea. I want you to sail across about 120 miles and when you disembark, you will be standing on the continent of Europe." And the first city they entered was the city of Philippi. Interestingly, God had shut them down in two visions of where they were to go but He gave Paul the correct vision of where He wanted them to be. It was a brand new place, a brand new continent where people had never heard the name of Jesus Christ. So God planted his team in a pioneer mission effort to take the gospel to people who had never heard. So I want you to understand that God made them stop two times and rethink and wait. He showed them a new plan for ministry.

That's important. I believe there are times in our modern world when God stops us and says "Wait for me; I want to show you a new avenue of ministry." And I believe we stand on that very threshold this day. The

Almighty is using a “flu bug” right now to slow us down. And, of course, our nation has been told to stay put, to stop moving, to prepare to live different lives for a time. And, naturally, there are fears about that. There are fears about how we’re going to continue to live financially. There are fears about our health. And if all of us are truly honest about this, there’s some level of fear in us about how this flu bug is going to affect our community and affect our family and us personally.

But God has stopped the church right now. Most of our sanctuaries are empty today. Our Sunday School has been canceled. Our Wednesday night services are not meeting, and I’m sure that’s true for most churches across the board as we cooperate with what’s happening and keeping this flu at a minimum. We’ve never seen the church this quiet before. And I believe that we have this plan that’s going to be enforced for a few more weeks to come as this flu bug passes through.

But God has stopped us for us to hear a new plan. He has **not** told us to quit! He’s told us to **listen**. He’s told us to reformat the way we do ministry—today, tomorrow, maybe for the next weeks. But I believe that this is the beginning of a new ministry for this church and perhaps many others as we see what’s happening in these days. But God has told us to listen to Him but not go dormant. He’s not asked to stop ministry. Absolutely not! The church is still the church. The church is still called to ministry no matter what’s going on the world; we still walk out in mission for the Lord Jesus Christ. And there are multitudes of scared people outside of our doors. And they need to hear the name of Jesus Christ. Today, the church—you and I—as individual believers, we need to take the hope and the comfort and the healing and the outreach and the peace of the gospel of the living Lord Jesus Christ today into the world because the world needs to hear. This world is in tumultuous times, and only the word of Jesus Christ is going to bring the calm and the healing that we need in this day. The church cannot stop. If anything, I believe the Lord is calling us to deeper ministry in these days as we listen to His new plan and His new outreach as we take the church into the world. One primary way today is most people are certainly not sitting in their traditional place in a sanctuary. But rather you are hearing and seeing the gospel and hearing the Biblical message by media, by streaming today. Now, today, this sanctuary as I look at it is mostly empty. This sanctuary will seat about a thousand people. And yet what we’re doing in this moment can reach untold thousands of people. As a matter of fact, audience, I want you to know that we put a simple invitation streaming yesterday online, and that invitation alone was seen over five thousand times preparing for this service. There’s no telling how many people are worshipping with us today. But I believe this—it far exceeds the capacity of this sanctuary.

God has given us a new plan. God has enacted us in that new plan. We’re grateful for that. So this morning, I am assured that there are people listening who’ve never been here before. There are people listening, I

know, from personal report in other nations this morning. God has given us a new plan. God has taken us across a new threshold, and we are to follow Him. There are times when He tells us to stop, and wait, and listen. But then He gives us the plan, and we are to move forward in the way that He directs us. In this day of keeping “social distance,” there’s a buzz word that will not leave us for a long time. When we keep social distance as we’re staying separated, we know today we need to rethink, with God’s guidance, how you and I are to take the gospel out of the church and into the world. How do we stay on mission with social separation in these days?

Believers, I believe we have in our hands one of the greatest ways to keep touch with the world that is now in separation from one another. Most of us hold it in our hand because we can send texts, we can send emails, we can keep in touch with people by cell phones and face time, and we can reach out to others, and it is completely germ free! But we can’t allow ourselves to sit dormant and do nothing. I believe as the people of God, we need to be in connection with the world. And we need to be checking on people using the media we have in our own personal possession that we can be reaching out to people who need a touch from the Lord Jesus. We might be confined to our homes, but the Lord never said we’re confined to silence. We’re to be reaching out with the good news of Christ.

So believers from Clifford Church and other churches represented watching us and worshipping with us this morning, use your opportunity to touch face with your fellow believers. Check on them; make sure that they’re doing well. Make sure that everyone within your church family is well taken care of--especially check in on those seniors. Check in on those who are compromised in health; make sure they’re doing well. But expand that base a little more: Check on those people who are not close to a church. Check on those who people—give them a call, send them a text. But let them know you’re concerned. Those who may not be close to Jesus, the Savior. Check on those who ones who may not be saved. Make sure you’re contacting them because you never know the seed that you might plant when you simply show that you’re concerned in the name of Jesus Christ for someone’s life, for someone’s well-being. We need to reach out; we need to use the opportunities that we have on hand that we can keep touch with the world. Let people that you are concerned, and in turn, believer, they will know Jesus and His concern for them as well.

Pray with people. You know, it’s interesting how many opportunities the Lord gives us to pray with people. Use your phone to pray with someone. It’s interesting so many times, myself included, we can say “I want you to be better; I want you to be well; I’m thinking about you; I want the Lord to bless you” and we hang up the phone when we miss an opportunity when we say “Can I just have a little prayer with you?” And let’s ask the Lord Jesus to touch you and take care of you where you are right now.

So use your opportunity to pray with people. It's amazing how God will open that door of opportunity when we simply say "Let me have a few words of prayer with you." Remind people that all of us have our fears—that all of us are worried in this time, but there is a Savior who steadies the storm. There's one who takes care of us when we need Him. The Bible calls Him the "Bishop of Souls." The Bible calls Him the "Comforter, the Deliverer, the Good Shepherd." The Bible calls Him our "Shield," our "Protector," our "High Tower." So remind your friends as you contact them, as you reach out with the gospel that Jesus is always in control. And though the world might have its fears and its confusion when things are happening in our nation that makes life very different, the Lord God has never lost control. He holds the reins, and He will take us through and He will protect us in this journey. He can calm the most anxious fears out there, and we need to relate that good news to those who need to hear it.

Be a minister. Of course, we also can do some things that allows us to step out of our houses (and we do this carefully) and especially as we check on the senior people of our lives and to those who have compromised health, perhaps the Lord will call you or me to go get groceries for someone or to take care of them in some way. Visit a drug store; take them what they need. But be aware that the Lord may call us out of our homes that we can go out in a guarded way, certainly, and to take care of the needs of those who absolutely cannot get out in what we're going through right now.

Yes, God has slowed us down. God has asked us to remain a little distant from one another. But He's never asked us to stop ministry. He's never asked us to stop studying His word.

And so believers, and those of us listening today, when the Lord gives you a little extra time maybe you can spend a little more time in His word than you ever have before. Maybe you can have a devotional time that extends beyond your few minutes that you give Him on a very busy day. Use this opportunity well. We're reaching out to others, but we're also allowing the Lord to reach into your life and into your heart to speak His word in those extra minutes we have in this shutdown we're going through right now.

Friends, this is just a temporary layover. This is not going to be permanent. But I believe that God is using this little temporary layover to speak a word of wisdom to His church. This church, and every church that preaches and teaches and ministers in the name of Jesus Christ and what He's saying to us right now is this: "In this little layover that we have, I'm going to put you on a new track of ministry and you need to follow Me and you need to open your minds and your doors to new ways of taking the gospel to the world."

And my prayer for this church and every church represented as we worship together this morning is that we won't miss that train on that new track. But we will follow Him and that we will adjust ministry to the circumstances of the world. The gospel never changes. It's sometimes the wine skins in the way we do things get old, and we need to seek new wine skins for ministry. This is one of those days.

I'm grateful that we worshipped together today in a new way, but I'm thankful, too, as we worship in this new way it is the introduction to perhaps of a new way of doing ministry in the long term as we seek Him, as we follow Him, as we give our lives to Him. Adjusting ministry to the way the world needs to hear the gospel of the living Lord Jesus Christ.

Again, I'm so thankful that we worshipped together and I want to remind you there may be someone in this audience listening today that is worshipping today that has never come to Jesus as Lord and Savior. If you've never come to Him, I want to thank you first of all that you listened. Thank you that you heard the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, that He has a plan for every ministry team. He has a plan for every church, and He has a plan for every life. But the beginning of God's plan for your life personally is to know Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior. And once you come to Him as your Savior, He can then enact that plan and that purpose for your life.

And so today if you've never come to Him, I want to tell you that He went to a cross for you and for me and He took our sins there. And He died as the perfect Lamb of God, the last sacrifice. Jesus Christ died on the cross that you and I might be forgiven of our sin. He rose from the grave on the third day that we might have life everlasting and we simply need to come to Him and say: "Lord, I am a sinner and I repent and I am sorry for what I've done against You. I'm sorry for what I've done that has been against Your will for me. I ask you to forgive me, through Jesus, Lord and Savior. Yes, Lord, I accept you to be my King, to be my Lord, to be my Savior, and to walk with me every day. And as You adopt me into the family of God through Jesus Christ as my Savior, I know that You're going to give me a home for all eternity. So Lord Jesus, yes, I receive You; I accept You."

Today, if you've never done that I'm going to lead us in a prayer and in this prayer if you've never come to Jesus as your Savior, you pray this prayer with me believing with your heart, pray it with your lips and believing with your heart you fulfill Romans 10:9 because that verse says "If we say with our lips that Jesus is Lord and that God raised Him from the dead, you **will** be saved." Today, if that moment is something that you need, this is the moment that you can entrust your life to Him.

Church, God bless you. I'm grateful that we worshipped together in a new way, and we will probably worship in this way for some Sundays to come. But as we do, be reminded God is telling us there's a new plan and a new way for us to take the gospel to the world.

Let's pray together: Our Father, our God, thank you for letting us worship in this way today. Thank you for the many who have joined us streaming online today, Lord. I am so grateful for them. I have no idea how many are listening today, but I believe, in faith, that there are more listening today in this online version of a sermon than could fill this sanctuary Lord. I believe that this sanctuary would be absolutely overflowing if all the people watching this morning were here. Thank you, Lord, for that tremendous blessing. Father, today, if there's one person who has never received Jesus who is listening and joining us in worship, I pray that he or she will pray this very simple prayer with me: "Dear Lord, I know You love me. You love me so much that Jesus, Your Son, went to the old rugged cross and laid down His life for me that I might be forgiven of my sin, that I might be adopted into the family of God, and as He was resurrected on the third day, He promised me life everlasting. Lord, I need You. I want You. I lay my sin down at the foot of Your cross, and I ask to be Your own. Lord, I accept You as my Savior this day." Father, if one man or woman, boy or girl, prayed that prayer with me this morning, their eternity is absolutely changed. Bless them, I pray. If they prayed that prayer, I ask, Lord, that they would be in touch with me somehow and just let me know—let us know as a church, Father, that they have received Jesus as Savior. For we who are believers, Lord I pray, that as You introduce this new way of ministry to us this is a new way for us for a few weeks and a few days as this epidemic/pandemic passes by our country. But Lord, I believe that the residual of this will be a new way to do ministry in the long term days ahead. Bless us as You slow this down and given us a new plan and ask us to follow You. May we be faithful in that, Lord. Bless every one who has joined us for worship today. We love You, we trust You, we thank You in the strong name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

The service closed with the singing of the first and last stanzas of "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms."