

Every now and then I see billboards around town that encourage us to make prudent preparations for emergency situations such as the recent earthquake and tsunami in Japan or the TVA holding pond collapse at Watt's Bar two years ago. Usually the billboards reference the government website, [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov) as a source of information for such preparedness.

Last week we considered the idea of “divine discontent” from session six of the *Prayer Guide* for our Spiritual Strategic Journey, and this morning we look at the final session of the *Guide*, which has the title, “God has Something for Us to Do.” It begins like this:

“While divine discontent gets our attention and prepares us for transition and change, it alone is not sufficient to sustain our journey toward God’s desired future. Individuals and congregations must [have spiritual readiness if divine discontent is to bear fruit]. Spiritual readiness is about hope and anticipation. It has to do with recognizing that God is not through with us, either individually or collectively, as His [representatives in the world].

The *Guide* continues, “God has something important for us to do—even though we might not be clear about what it is at the moment—and God is already at work in and through our congregation to accomplish this purpose. . . . We are often critical of the disciple Thomas because of the doubts he expressed when he said, ‘*Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it*’” (John 20:25). The *Guide* went on to point out that “In some ways . . . we can affirm Thomas for not being satisfied with a ‘second-hand experience’ with Jesus. . . .

“Spiritual readiness is like that. . . . Spiritual readiness has to do with not being satisfied with seeing God working somewhere else through someone else but [being committed instead to] seeing God work through me [and us right here and now. We can be very grateful that God continues to invite us to join the divine] mission of reconciliation in the world.”

I thought those words from the *Guide* were pretty good, and Jesus was talking about such spiritual readiness when He told us in this morning’s text, “*You are the salt of the earth. . . . You are the light of the world. . . . let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven*” (Matthew 5:13-16).

And we read a similar word about the glory of God in our text from Joshua: “*The LORD your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God*” (Joshua 4:23-24).

Our purpose as God’s people in the twenty-first century is still to live for God’s glory, and the launching of the new chapter of our life together that will happen this summer requires us to be spiritually ready to be “salt and light” in ways appropriate to the times in which we live. Rather than thinking of [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov), then, I’ve called this message [www.ready.god](http://www.ready.god).

In order to launch this new chapter, you and I must grow more deeply in love with Jesus and more deeply in love with one another—the first and second commandments—so that we also grow more deeply in love with that which and with those whom He loves. The next ten years can be some of the most exciting years of any of our lives. God is already building a spiritual wave beneath us, a wave whose full shape and character is yet to be revealed.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on March 27, 2011.

By the end of this year, we'll know a good bit more about our next chapter together than we know today. But as wonderful as that will be, "business as usual" won't get us there. Whatever "business as usual" looks like with respect to your own spiritual life and your relationship with this congregation, more will be required.

Not unlike those who are risking their lives in North Africa and in the Middle East in pursuit of political freedom, Jesus calls us to give everything we have and are to be "salt" that seasons and "light" that illumines until God's spiritual Kingdom really does come right here in Bristol as it is in heaven.

Matt & Anna and Hadley & Afton are in town this week from Beaufort, South Carolina, down the coast a bit from Charleston, where Jill and I set up housekeeping as a young Navy family nearly forty years ago. As many of you know, and as you can easily see in Beaufort as well as in Charleston or Savannah, or any other river port, the deep water of a river channel is marked by the Coast Guard with pairs of large orange rectangles called range markers.

On each leg of a navigable river, the fastest way to determine where the ship is in relation to the center of the channel is to look at the alignment of the range markers both fore and aft. If the range markers form a straight line, then the ship is in the center.

The truth of the matter is that spiritual strategic planning has a lot more to do with listening attentively and looking carefully at things going on around us than it does with trying to generate ideas about things we might want to do. What we're trying to discern is the shape of what God is already doing—to perceive the divine initiatives already underway to which God invites us to join our lives and labor.

I've suggested to you before that discerning God's will and guidance in our lives is a lot like watching range markers. When the markers begin to line up, we're nearing the center, and it seems to me that there are four range markers we'll do well to watch as we seek to discover what God is up to in this season of our church's life.

The first of these range markers is **OPPORTUNITY**. What opportunities are before us, and of these, which should we pursue?

Now if God is in an opportunity, that opportunity tends to have three characteristics. The first of these is that God's guidance is almost always brief and to the point. It's **simple**. We could probably state the purpose for which God is getting us spiritually ready in just a sentence or two.

Abram had been praying on the mountain, as he often did. When he came back down for breakfast, he said to his wife, "Sarai, we're going to move." That was simple—just four words.

"What! Where are we going?"

"Don't know."

"How long will we be gone?"

"Don't know."

"Will we ever come back?"

"Don't know."

*"So Abram departed as the LORD had instructed him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. He took his wife, Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all his wealth . . . and finally arrived in Canaan"*—the Promised Land (Genesis 12:4-5).

Our text in Joshua 3 is a continuation of that same story. Some six hundred years had passed since Abram and Sarai moved to Canaan, with Israel's slavery in Egypt occupying most of those years. Now Abraham and Sarah's descendants had become a great nation, and they were about to enter the Promised Land once again.

The problem was that they had to cross the Jordan River, and the river was at flood stage. God told Joshua to have the priests who were carrying the Ark of the Covenant to walk out into the river as if to cross it, with the rest of the people following, flood stage or not. That was pretty simple, but it also seemed pretty impossible, which is the second characteristic of a God-sent opportunity.

A God-sent opportunity is usually simple . . . and **impossible**. We can't see how in the world we could possibly do what's being asked of us. We don't have the necessary skill or resources, and we're afraid to make the attempt.

In his hugely popular study guide, *Experiencing God*, Henry Blackaby cautioned that no matter how impossible things look, we should "never, ever determine the truth of a situation by looking at the circumstances."<sup>2</sup> In the life of faith, we don't evaluate our situation based simply on what we can see at the moment. We put our trust in the promises of God, knowing that if God calls us to something, God will get us through it:

*"As soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (that is, the Dead Sea) was completely cut off. . . . The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on dry ground, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground" (Joshua 3:15-17).*

Hudson Taylor (1832-1905), the great missionary to China, put it this way: "There are three stages in the work of God: impossible; difficult; and done." Here's a recent story of that same kind from Iran:

A Christian pastor and his wife stopped in a small Iranian village to buy some water, and as the pastor got out of the car, he noticed a man with a machine gun leaning against the front of the store. The pastor's wife assessed the situation and handed her husband a Bible. "Give that man this Bible," she said. That was simple, but her husband replied, "I don't think so!"

She persisted: "I'm serious. Give it to him. Please, give him the Bible."

"Okay, I'll pray about it."

The pastor went into the shop, purchased the water, climbed back into the car, and started to drive away. His wife looked at him and said, "You didn't give him the Bible, did you?"

"No, I prayed about it and it wasn't the right thing to do"—because doing such a thing as that would be impossible.

"You should have given him the Bible," she said, and then she bowed her head and started praying. At that point, her husband turned the car around and told his wife, "Fine! If you want me to die, I will die."

When they arrived back at the store, the man with the machine gun was still leaning against the wall. The pastor walked up to the man and handed him the Bible. When the man opened it and saw that it was a Bible, he began to cry.

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: LifeWay), p. 100.

“I don’t live here,” he said. “I had to walk for three days in order to get to this village. But three days ago an angel appeared to me and told me to walk to this village and wait until someone had given me the Book of Life. Thank you for giving me this book.”<sup>3</sup>

That story also illustrates the third characteristic of a God-sent opportunity. God-sent opportunities are *simple, impossible . . .* and **persistent**. No matter how much we try to avoid them, to duck them, to cover them up, they simply will not go away. We find God’s call always at the edge of our consciousness, with God’s quiet Voice restating it over and over, sometimes even in our dreams.

Now some of you are thinking that such simple, impossible, and persistent ideas are sometimes nothing more than the arrogance and obsession of an ego that has lost touch with reality, and that’s certainly possible. The other three range markers are protections against that.

The second range marker, after *OPPORTUNITY*, is **GOD’S WORD**. Is this opportunity consistent with the teaching of the Bible, especially the New Testament, and most especially the teaching of Jesus? God will never ask you to do anything that’s inconsistent with the revealed Truth of the Bible . . . but of course you won’t know what that Truth is unless you’re a serious student of God’s Word. It is most unwise to try to navigate life without the map God has provided, and many lives have met shipwreck through that neglect.

After *OPPORTUNITY* and *GOD’S WORD*, the third range marker is **GOD’S KINGDOM**. Does this opportunity help God’s Kingdom to “*come on earth as it is in heaven*,” as Jesus taught us to pray (Matthew 6:10), or is this something that honesty would have to call self-interest? Does it lift up Jesus, or does it lift up me, or us?

Finally, the fourth range marker is the peace of **GOD’S SPIRIT**. If God is in an opportunity, we’ll have spiritual peace about pursuing it, even if we have to move forward with unanswered questions and lots of loose ends.

George Mueller (1805-1898) was one of the great prayer warriors of the nineteenth century. He lived in Bristol, England, for which our fair cities are named, and he transformed that city through his commitment to the care of orphans, long before such care was considered a Christian duty. Here are George’s guidelines for discerning the will of God:

“I seek at the beginning to get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own in regard to a given matter. Nine-tenths of the trouble with people generally is just here. Nine-tenths of the difficulties are overcome when our hearts are ready to do the knowledge of what his will is.

“Having done this, I do not leave the result to feeling or simple impression. If so, I make myself liable to great delusions. I seek the Will of the Spirit of God through, or in connection with, the Word of God. The Spirit and the Word must be combined. If I look to the Spirit alone without the Word, I lay myself open to great delusions also. If the Holy Ghost guides us at all, He will do it according to the Scriptures and never contrary to them.

“Next I take into account providential circumstances. These often plainly indicate God’s Will in connection with His Word and Spirit. I ask God in prayer to reveal His Will to me aright.

“Thus, (1) through prayer to God, (2) the study of the Word, and (3) reflection, I come to a deliberate judgment according to the best of my ability and knowledge, and if my

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Ramsden, “An Uncompromising Faith Lived Out with Grace,” *Just Thinking* (1-26-09). That pastor became a courageous witness for Christ, and later, along with many other Iranian Christians, he was martyred for his faith.

mind is thus at peace, and continues so after two or three more petitions, I proceed accordingly.”<sup>4</sup>

That sounds a great deal like our four range markers of **OPPORTUNITY, GOD’S WORD, GOD’S KINGDOM,** and **GOD’S SPIRIT**. When these line up, before and behind, we can be confident that we’re close to the center of God’s purposes for our lives, individually and together.<sup>5</sup>

One more story and we’re done. A professor was arriving to speak at a military base one December and a soldier named Ralph had been sent to pick him up at the airport. As they walked toward the baggage claim area, Ralph kept wandering off. He went over to help an older woman whose suitcase had fallen open. He lifted up two toddlers so they could talk to Santa Claus. He gave directions to someone who looked lost. And each time he came back to the professor with a smile on his face.

“Where did you learn that?” the professor asked.

“Learn what?” Ralph responded.

“Where did you learn to live like that?”

“Oh, during the war, I guess.” He told the professor about his time in combat as a demolition expert whose job it was to clear mine fields, and about how he watched his friends blow up before his eyes . . . one after the other.

“I learned to live ‘between steps,’” he said. “I never knew whether my next step would be my last one, so I learned to squeeze everything I could from the moments between when I picked my foot up and when I put it down again. Every step became a whole new world, and I guess I’ve been living that way ever since.”<sup>6</sup>

Ralph had discovered not only [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov) but [www.ready.god](http://www.ready.god) as well. Ralph had learned to live in “first-hand experience with God,” not with “second-hand” left-overs.

Paul liked to refer to Christians as “soldiers,”<sup>7</sup> and one of the chief characteristics of good soldiers is that they’re ready for action at a moment’s notice. Indeed, military folk spend most of their time achieving and maintaining “readiness.” There’s an old hymn that makes this same point:

Ready to suffer grief or pain, ready to stand the test;  
Ready to stay at home and send others if He sees best.

Ready to speak, ready to think, ready with heart and brain;  
Ready to stand where He sees fit, ready to stand the strain.

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<sup>4</sup> Blackaby, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> In those times when the fog just will not clear, and decisions have to be made anyway, I’ve found considerable strength in a prayer by Thomas Merton: “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone” (from *Thoughts in Solitude* [New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Cudahy, 1976], p. 83).

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, in *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching from Leadership Journal* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:7; Philippians 2:25; 2 Timothy 2:3-4; Philemon 1:2.

Ready to go, ready to stay, ready my place to fill;  
Ready for service, lowly or great, ready to do His will.<sup>8</sup>

Faithful stewardship of God-sent opportunities requires us to stretch into new ways of following Jesus so that others can also come to know Him. No matter how young or old we are, God calls us to continually invest and then reinvest our lives in those places and at those boundaries where the transforming, Eternal Kingdom is being born.

God has something for us to do; and when God calls us, the only appropriate answer is, **“When do we leave?”**

**Benediction:**

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships so that you may live deep within your heart. May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may wish for justice, freedom, and peace. May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “Ready,” words by A. C. Palmer, tune, TILLMAN, by Charles D. Tillman, 1903.

<sup>9</sup> A Franciscan blessing, quoted by Gordon MacDonald in Leadership Weekly (3-31-03)