



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“If It Is You”

May 7, 2023

Matthew 14:22-33

Rev. Andy Call, Lead Pastor

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

²⁸ Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹ He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and, beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Church of the Saviour is a Christian community committed to growing deeper in faith and pursuing God’s hope for every life.

I realize that an exploration of our church’s vision may not be what you came to worship this morning to hear. Many of you are immersed in the world of mission statements and strategic vision plans in your everyday work life, and the thought of doing that in church may not be especially appealing. The church is not a corporation, after all. We commit ourselves to fidelity to scripture, openness to revelation, and following the Holy Spirit, not executing a multipoint action plan. But a vision doesn’t have to be filled with business language or a series of impersonal metrics. A vision is about where we are going and how we intend to get there. It’s essential for us to have a clear sense of vision if we want to be faithful to where God is calling us to go. And having that clarity can be both exciting and spiritually engaging. What is God’s vision for us, and what will it look like if we achieve it?

Three years ago, we began a process to discern and articulate God’s vision for Church of the Saviour for the next three to five years. At the time, we had no idea how long the disruption to our lives from COVID would last. As it became apparent that we could not project what would happen in a week, let alone 3-5 years, we put that process on hold. In the fall of 2021, as we resumed some level of in-person and hybrid gatherings, we began to revisit those questions. The Long-Range Planning Committee surveyed our congregation to gather input with questions that included, “What does it mean to be the Church?” and “What do you sense God is calling us to do in the world?” The major themes that emerged from the survey were a strong commitment to mission, racial justice and inclusion, spiritual growth, and congregational care.

A series of one-on-one conversations and roundtable discussions in the spring of 2022 helped us go deeper. You expressed a desire to leverage our resources – facilities, finances, and people – to impact our community, through building stronger connections and being more engaged in the things that matter to our

neighbors locally and in places we're connected globally. A deepening sense of calling to grow spiritually and to engage the world from a Christ-centered commitment clarified that we are not just looking at growing the church, but being a vital presence for Christ in our neighborhoods and communities. The people of Church of the Saviour want to be a welcoming and inclusive congregation where everyone can encounter Christ and together we can help people experience fulfillment, joy, and wholeness.

We also gathered input from neighboring community leaders and mission partners to find where our passions intersected. We held conversations with the mayors of Cleveland Heights, Shaker Heights, and University Heights, as well as organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Nehemiah Mission, the Early Learning Center, and the Cedar-Lee Business District. While each has a distinct mission and goals, some commonalities emerged: racial and economic justice; creating thriving, healthy lives; and building more connected communities.

We had great input and plenty of data – spreadsheets and power points and pages of handwritten notes and brainstorming newsprint. Now we needed to distill it into a form that would be useful for articulating what we heard. After weeks of wordsmithing, drafts revised and discarded, comparison studies, and countless hours of prayer, the statement that emerged is the one you see printed on your worship bulletin (projected on the screen) this morning:

Church of the Saviour is a Christian community committed to growing deeper in faith and pursuing God's hope for every life.

Is this a vision statement, a purpose statement, or a statement of identity? I'm not certain how to label it or if it is even necessary to do so. I present it to you today and invite you to contemplate it, pray about it, hold it up to the light and test it. Over the next three weeks, we'll take a more concentrated look at each component of this statement and how it can guide us. This is intended to be a conversation, an invitation to determine together if this is who we are and who we're called to be. It sounds a lot like us to me.

At the same time, the governing board used the data collected to identify an annual vision of ministry – what we're focusing on over the next year as our highest priorities: re-engaging the congregation post-pandemic, increasing our capacity and competency for leadership, and building stronger connections with our community and each other. Board chair Chris Mundorf shared that annual vision of ministry with us several weeks ago, and you'll continue to see it regularly through the coming year. We'll keep shaping our identity and actions through the open questions process. What responses will those questions yield? Do we have the faith to trust that God will provide what we need when we need it?

We've learned a great many things over the past few years. We've learned how much we value community and need connections to help us thrive. We've learned that we can do amazing things when the moment calls for a faithful response. We've learned that there are some things we need to keep doing and some things we need to let go. And we're in the process of discovering that the way we used to plan doesn't work anymore. Mapping out a detailed action plan of progressing objectives and goals projecting five years into the future isn't the most effective way of carrying out ministry. Things happen we didn't expect and could not have predicted. Disruptions occur – like a global pandemic, a national reckoning with systemic racism, and denominational uncertainty – making strategic planning more volatile and less reliable than ever. That doesn't mean we shouldn't plan for the future; we just need to learn to do it differently. Church strategists and trusted leaders have been calling on the church for years to become more nimble, committed to core values and a few key priorities to guide our ministry. This season in our lives has made the wisdom of that guidance clear.

In the early days of COVID-19, our questions were things like, “Is it safe to leave my house?”, “How do we stay connected with each other?”, and “Do I need to wash my groceries?” Over time, those questions became, “What kind of mask should I wear?”, “When will a vaccine be available and how do I get it?”, and “Is it safe to start meeting in person again?” The questions we have as we emerge from crisis may be less urgent, but they are still critically important: “Why aren’t people coming to church like they used to?”, “How do we re-engage with our neighbors?”, and “Will things ever feel *normal* again?”

We’re navigating some choppy waters together. Sometimes, it feels like we’ve got this and everything’s going to be okay. But most days, it still feels rather precarious. How do we know if we’re doing the right things, investing in the right ministries, choosing the right priorities? What if we get it wrong?

The disciples were all together in a boat, but without Jesus. He had sent them ahead while he went to be by himself to pray. After fighting the wind all night, they looked and saw Jesus walking on the water. At first, they couldn’t tell who it was, and they were frightened. Then he called to them and calmed their fears. But Peter wasn’t satisfied with watching from a distance. He saw the miraculous thing Jesus was doing, and he wanted to join him. Yet, he hesitated. He saw it was Jesus. He heard him call out. Jesus said not to be afraid. But what if he was mistaken? What if it wasn’t Jesus calling them, but just a figment of his imagination? What should he do? “Lord, if it is you, if it is *really* you, summon me to come to you. Let me know it’s okay. Give me some assurance I can do this, that I’ll be okay.”

Planning for the future is hard right now. It may be harder than it has ever been for the church to imagine what the future will look like, even a year or two out. The winds are shifting. The water is choppy, and who knows how deep it may be. We don’t know what will happen to us out there. It’s safer to stay in the boat and ride it out, wait to see how things work out. While it may keep us safe, staying in the boat means missing out on the chance to experience a miracle. Friends, I want to be where Jesus is. And I have a sense you do, too. So we do our most diligent work, make our best assessment of where we are and what lies ahead. But we know that our own wisdom will only get us so far. We need a greater power. *Lord, if it is you, command us to come to you.* If Christ is calling us, that’s where we should go. We need the courage to step out in faith. And when we do, we need to keep our eyes fixed on him. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.

A Christian community committed to growing deeper in faith and pursuing God’s hope for every life. Is that who we are? Are we committed to being more deeply formed, connected to Christ in a way that transforms us? Are we courageous enough not only to look for signs of life in the world, but to pursue them with passion and commitment? Do we believe that the Gospel – this *Good News* – is for everyone? Church of the Saviour, who are we? Are we boat-dwellers or water-walkers?

Lord, if it is you, if it is you, call to us. Do more than invite us – *command* us to come to where you are, to get out of the boat and put our whole trust in you. You know us, Lord. You know how we pine for the past but settle into places of comfort in the present. We need to hear your voice, to see your guiding hand. Call us, Lord, and lead us where you want us to go. Amen.