

Psalm 1:1-3 & Isaiah 40:8

“Stretch to Grow”

Play “Your Words” by Third Day

(Invite the congregation to get up and stretch)

How many dog or cat owners do we have in the congregation today? **(pause)** Have y’all ever noticed how every time a dog or cat gets up from a nap they stretch real bit with their mouths open wide and their tongues hanging out? **(pause)** Believe it or not, but all living things stretch to grow. When the weather is warm the grass, the trees and the flowers stretch towards the sun. Every animal getting up from a nap stretches. All four of my children stretch and push the boundaries of what they can do in an effort to grow just a little more. All living things stretch to grow.

Several years ago I had the wonderful experience of working at the Asbury University Challenge Course with Bill Hogan a retired Airforce Colonel, pilot of B1 bombers and as it would happen – a fellow seminary student. Bill would say, “All living things have to stretch to live, and stretch to grow. If you aren’t stretching you’re not dyeing, you’re already dead.” You would be surprised how many people; and how many churches take this statement for granted.

Here’s an example. I have a bad back. I was diagnosed with scoliosis in the fifth grade. I was the smallest kid in my class. The doctor said there really isn’t anything we can do. You should be fine as long as you don’t have a major growth spurt. **(pause)** Ha! My Dad is 6’6” tall. Was I gonna have a growth spurt? You bet! And I did. Then the back problems started. I have stretches I am supposed to do every day to keep me from having problems. However, I get lazy and don’t do them. If I do not do the stretches for my back it’s a given I am going to turn or twist or lift one of my children, or pick up a piece of paper and my back will suddenly go out. **(pause)** Why? **(pause)** Because I didn’t do my stretches. **(pause)** My sisters and brothers, what do you think happens to churches who do not stretch to grow? **(awkward pause)**

In an effort to help us all stretch a bit this morning I have another quote for you. It’s from Eugene Peterson. Dr. Peterson says, “God is less interested in what you are doing than with who you are.” **(pause and repeat)** A person can do all of the right and moral things and still be an atheist. A social group can do all of the right things and serve all of the needy people, but that does not make them a church. God is not interested in our doing churchy things. God is interested in the Church being the hands and feet of Christ. All of this brings us to the first of our two Scriptures this morning.

(Read Psalm 1:1-3)

Isn’t it interesting the Psalmist uses the analogy of a well-watered tree? The tree grows, and yields fruit and does not wither or die. **(pause)** Church, why does the tree grow so well? **(pause)** Why does the tree yield fruit in its season? **(pause)** Why does the tree prosper? **(awkward pause)** What makes this tree different? **(pause)** Could it be because this tree is well fed on good water and because it stretches every day up toward the sun? **(awkward pause)** If we are to be the Church – God’s church, the hands and feet of Christ what must we do to **be** fruitful for God’s kingdom? **(pause)** Is there something more we need to be doing? **(pause)** or is there something greater we need to **BE**?

Up until I was appointed to Central I served a number of smaller churches. All of them had this in common. Either they had become so focused on providing Christian service they stopped living like Christians, or they stopped serving all together, and wanted the world to come to them. Providing Christian service to the poor

and working poor, to women and children and those in need is important, but **doing** for the sake of **doing** is not enough. Faith without works is dead, but works without faith is just showing off (James 2:14-17). **(pause)** What are we to do? If we really want to become faithful disciples of Jesus Christ what must we do? Or better yet, what must we be?

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Today is not the first Sunday of Christmas. Advent is very much like Lent in that Advent is a time of waiting and preparation for the coming of the King. At Easter, we are purifying ourselves for Christ's resurrection and victory over death. Isn't it wonderful that the start of the Christian year begins with waiting and anticipation? What we are waiting for is the birth of hope in the form of a poor, homeless baby, born to an unwed teenage mother who gave birth in a stable. These are hardly audacious beginnings. Before the birth the world was a mess, much like it is today.

There was a tremendous divide between the haves and the have nots. The wealthy abused the poor to gain more power. The devastation of sin was rampant. Too many church leaders were too hung up on law and doctrine to be bothered with what really matters to God – Loving God and loving our neighbor (Deut 6:5 & Lev 19:18). You see my brothers and sisters – it is not enough to study God's word. It is not enough to be able to memorize or obey the letter of God's word. God does want obedience, but obedience is not merely about rule following. Obedience is about being willing to be stretched by the Word of God through the power of the Holy Spirit by God's amazing grace.

At the start of this message I played a song by Third Day that I played at the end of last week's message called, "Your Words." The verse which inspired that song comes from Isaiah 40:8.

The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

The reason I played that song this morning is because I want to remind y'all of the power of God's Word to stretch our hearts. Seasons change and so do our opinions. The things we are afraid of bloom and fall like the changing seasons, but the Word of God does not change. The Word of God is meant to change us. God's Word is not just supposed to change our minds. God's Word is meant to change our hearts.

As we prepare for the birth of our King at Christmas are we willing to have our hearts stretched and changed? Are we willing to become more alive than we have ever been before? Are we willing to allow God into our hearts, to stretch our understanding, and to stretch our ability to offer compassion for the needy?

My sisters and brothers Advent is also like the winding of a spring. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to action, but the winding of that spring has to take the form of compassion in our hearts. It is time to begin turning the crank. Store up for yourselves compassion, love and grace. Let's spend Advent tearing down the walls we've built to protect our hearts. Let's break down the fences that would keep us from loving our neighbor. Let us be reminded our pews are not nearly so comfortable as we presume. There are people outside these walls in the rain and cold who need to feel the warmth and grace of God's love in their lives. Will we allow God's grace and love to stretch our hearts so we might offer room in the inn of our hearts to those who need it most?

In the name of Jesus Christ,
Amen