

“Ignite—Igniting our Future”

Today we wrap up the invitation part of the Ignite capital campaign and this series of messages on vision, mission, stewardship and generosity. At the end of the service we all have the chance to bring our commitments forward.

Today we cross over. Because in almost everything in life here comes a time when preparing ends and you move from one place to another—one state of being to another. When you’re about to have a baby, there’s a time of anticipation and getting ready, and then there is the birth. A line is crossed and a new state of being arrives. It’s true in lots of different things. A political campaign should end in an election, an interview with a job, an engagement with a marriage. There’s a time when all the preparation and anticipation ends and the thing you’ve been preparing for, the thing you’ve been anticipating actually happens! A crossing over from one place to another.

We can see this crossing over principle in the history of our spiritual ancestors as they got ready to enter into the Promised Land. It took them 40 years to get to this point of crossing over. It had been a long journey and a rough 40 years. They’d been chased down my Pharaoh’s army, crossed the Red Sea. They had wandered from place to place to place. They fought battles here and there. They received the 10 commandments. Had a little problem with idolatry and that golden calf thing. Fought more battles. And then finally it was time to cross over and begin the next phase as God’s people. Now, by this time Moses had died and Joshua had become their leader. He was leading across the Jordan and into the Promised Land. It’s a big deal

This comes from Joshua chapter 3. **“Joshua told the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you.’ Joshua said to the priests, ‘Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on ahead of the people...When you reach the edge of the Jordan’s waters, go and stand in the river.’ So they took it up and went ahead of them” (Joshua 3:5-8).**

40 years of anticipation and preparation. Some that started the journey are no longer with them—they had died along the way or been killed in battle. Babies have been born along the way and grown into adults. Everybody had heard the story of God’s promise to bless them so that they could be a blessing to the world.

I imagine that as they stand there they’re looking in three directions. They’re looking back at all the things that have happened over the generations to get them there. They’re probably thinking about Abraham and the original promise God made to him.

They’re also probably looking at who they are right now. They’d gone from being slaves to a group of people a million strong. A people with a guiding law, a defining character, and a clear calling by God.

And they’re also probably looking ahead to who they might become in the future after they cross over. They were blessed to be a blessing to the world. They were looking ahead to how they might do that. They’re looking at their past, their present, their future.

In some ways we’re at the same place today. We’re crossing over into our future and it’s a good time for us to look back, to look at where we are today, and look into the future. As we look back we see that this isn’t the only time we’ve done this. This church family will be 120 years old this year. We’ve been around a long time and had to do a lot of crossing over in that time. The church began in 1891 at 7th and Moffett with a clear mission: “Let’s introduce people to Jesus. Let’s help people to find life and build solid relationships. Let’s help the needy in our community.” Twice in our history we’ve relocated. In 1940 to 32nd and Wall, and in 1992 to right here. Relocating was a big deal, but for Saint Paul’s it’s always been about doing what it takes to lead people to an active faith in Jesus Christ.

Several times we’ve been through the cycle of growing, expanding missions and facilities and paying them off. Always with the understanding that buildings are just tools for our mission. Again we’re at that place where we’ve grown, expanded facilities, now let’s pay them off.

We’ve got an amazing history, but let’s focus for a minute on just the last 10 years. Because 10 years ago, we had just started our 3rd worship service at 9:30 and we averaged 432 people on a Sunday morning. Our facilities consisted of the Family Life Center and the classrooms around it. We had 5 full time staff

members, one of them me, the only pastor. We had about 5 active missions: Crosslines, Homebound Services, holiday gift baskets, supporting two churches in Mozambique. We had just started Wednesday Night Live and had about 50 adults, 25 youth, and 20 children.

The church was growing, people were excited, money was tight, but we were ready for the future. 10 years ago, we were enjoying the fruit of somebody else's labor and it was a good time. An exciting time, a challenging time. And 10 years ago we faced a challenge just like this and we did what we are doing today to ensure our mission was lived out. It's good to take a glance back occasionally; I'm sure the Israelites were doing that as the prepared to cross over.

It's also good to take a glance at where we are today. Today we're one church with two locations—here and The Salvage Yard downtown. We have 5 worship services every Sunday. And we average 900 people attending worship. We have about 10 full time staff, 3 pastors. We support about 15 active missions, Crosslines, Homebound Services, Turnaround Ranch, Watered Gardens, a village in Nicaragua, Bright Futures, Life Choices, Hearts and Hammers, Habitat for Humanity, a single parent support group, Ascent Recovery, and more. Our goal is to have our people serving in every helping agency in Joplin or serving on their boards and we are doing it!

We have between 500 and 600 people here on Wednesday Nights. We offer about 25 different classes, courses, Bible Studies on topics relevant to people's lives. Not to mention home groups throughout the week and Sunday School classes.

When we take a glance at what we're doing today, lives are being transformed, marriages being mended, kids learning and growing, people learning to love God, love others and serving the world. One woman, celebrating a renewal in her marriage and family, wrote, "I'm infinitely grateful for Saint Paul's...It became my home, and the people here my family, when home didn't feel so much like home. And it continues to be that, even though our family is healing. This church has directly and drastically influenced my life and by extension the lives of my kids, my husband, and many others...I honestly can't imagine our lives now had I not given in to the nudge to come to a Sunday service at Saint Paul's almost four years ago...Thanks!"

Dustin Damerill told me last week the profound impact this church has had on his life. He said, "My faith has come alive here, I'm a different man, I see life differently." Dustin is striving to live an active faith in Jesus Christ. He's skilled as an auto mechanic and wants to put that use to serve the world. We've connected him with Watered Gardens so he can help people through there who can't afford to repair their cars but need them to get to jobs. His is just one story of what's happening right now.

There's Dave and Sharon Tresemer. They face a lot of challenges. They have three sons with disabilities. They struggle to make ends meet. David has had health problems, most recently back issues. He had to quit his job as a mechanic because of the pain and had to have major back surgery. Sharon is a nurse here in town. When Dave recently went into the hospital, he was right in the middle of remodeling their bathroom and kitchen and their house was a wreck. A friend that Dave had made here at church, Nick Capra, helped get him home from the hospital. When Nick saw the shape the kitchen and bathroom were in, it broke his heart. He knew that Dave was in no condition to finish the work, so he started making some calls. Within a few days Nick had made contact with a group of men from our church who help do projects for people in need, God's Workforce. It's a group that Jerry Cleair started. James Remillard jumped in along with some others. The church and several home groups have chipped in to pay for the materials. And the job is almost done. People loving and helping people in need.

When we look around we see people like Jim Gant who started our cheergivers ministry to visit people who are homebound or in nursing homes and he leads several others on that team.

When we look around right now we see people like Tammy Swab and Tammy Menke who lead our Mathew's class. That's a small group they started for adults with special needs. We pick them up at Ozark Oaks and they feel so at home here, so connected, several help on hospitality teams, or sing in the choir, or just come to worship and feel the love of this place. That's what we see in the present.

On Sunday mornings we'll have around 200 children in Sunday School and Kids' worship. Our youth group is rebounding after Josh Jackson's tragic death and we have around 100 youth on Wednesday nights.

What else do we see when we look around now? What's going on through Saint Paul's in the present? Part of our stated mission is to help and revitalize others churches. We have whole bunch of people that are doing that. **Bob and Dixie Wynn** lead a group of about 6 others from Saint Paul's who take turns preaching out at the Red Oak Church. It's a small congregation of about 15 people that we've sort of adopted. They can't afford a fulltime pastor, so we provide worship for them every Sunday.

Larry Courtney from our church is preaching every Sunday at the Diamond Methodist Church. His son **Shaun** is a Christian Counselor. Both of them came out of Saint Paul's.

Joe Crosthwait, Jack Wisener and **Dan Distler** are certified speakers and they feel called to ministry and preach as they're needed in churches all around this area. **Spencer Harding** is getting ready to graduate from Pitt State in May, he'll do an internship here and start seminary and train for ministry. He grew up here at Saint Paul's.

Betty Adams volunteers as a hospital chaplain. **Bob Summers** is the pastor of two churches, Dry Valley and Pierce City. He came out of Saint Paul's. **Lance Windsor** has been an interim associate pastor for over a year working with youth and helping lead worship at Monarch Baptist church near Neosho.

There are a lot of lives that are transformed through this place and the Salvage Yard, but there are even more lives being affected as people go out from here and serve in congregations all over the place! I think that is so awesome! And we also have to mention people like **Mike Miller** and **Teddy Steen** who are the directors of ASCENT Recovery Residences. Theirs is a Christian ministry and they are deeply connected to Saint Paul's. As we get ready to cross over today, it's good to look around and take a glance at the present and the impact we're making, and what I've shared is just a small part of what we do.

So it's good to take a glance back occasionally. It's important to take a glance around at the present, frequently. I'm sure the Isrealites were doing that as they prepared to cross over. But it's also very, very important to take a glance into the future. This is where our vision is so important. In fact scripture says this in Proverbs in the King James Version, "**Where there is no vision, the people perish...**" (**Proverbs 29:18**). Without a sense of calling into the future we have no future. It's true individually. It's true as a church. Your vision of what's possible pulls you into the future. What is our vision for the future?

With that question in mind imagine 10 years from now. As we continue to do what we do for children and youth and adults, but to do it even better. Imagine in 10 years us having started 2 or 3 other congregations in nearby communities where vital churches are needed like we helped to start Pathways in 2002 and the Salvage Yard in 2005. Imagine a Christian counseling center to help people move through difficulties. Imagine us training next generation pastors in partnership with seminaries around the country. In fact that's going to be happening this year. We've been chosen as one of three Methodist churches in Missouri to host a seminary student as a 10 week intern in order for them to learn about how we do what we do and shape them for the rest of their life—or scar them for the rest of their life!

In the next 10 years imagine the homes we could repair in the community—entire blocks—as more of us are sent out to serve. Imagine a cars ministry where we fix vehicles for working single parents. Imagine literacy training for adults and job skill preparation classes. Imagine support groups that we form for divorce recovery, Alzheimer's support, job loss, grief recovery.

Imagine the growing impact we will have in this area. So much of what we've imagined in the past has become a reality. Preschool and child care, helping to start a new church, the Salvage Yard, a worship service targeting young adults, being a part of every serving agency in town. We know the power of a compelling vision.

Completing this capital stewardship campaign launches us into that vision unencumbered by debt, with the resources to do great things.

I once heard someone say (Jeff Spiller) that there are three kinds of churches. **Wishing churches, dreaming churches and visionary churches.** Wishing churches spend their time wishing about the future, but don't do anything about it. Dreaming churches are pretty much the same as wishing churches except that they're emotionally involved in it. But a visionary church dreams the dream, envisions the vision and is willing to pay the price for that vision to become reality. It's willing to work toward that vision. It's willing to make

sacrifices. As we eliminate our debt over the next two years we will be freed up to initiate ministries that are a part of God's vision for our church. But it takes work, it takes engagement.

I remember a youth mission trip I led to Harlan, Kentucky when I was a youth director in Blue Springs. We were helping to repair and re-roof a house for a family who could not afford to do it themselves. They lived in desperate poverty. We were all pretty inexperienced at doing that kind of work, but we had some good supervisors who taught us and were patient. All of us worked very hard. When the day was over we were all hurting and sweaty and stinky. All of us, except one youth. No matter how hard I tried, no matter how hard our supervisor tried, he just didn't want to do work. He became the official water-cooler guard.

When the week was over and we finished our project we stood back and looked at what we'd accomplished by our work and sweat and it felt great! We had helped a family have a good roof over their head and a solid foundation under their feet that they would never have had. Everybody thought it was a big deal...except that one youth. He criticized our work and said our painting was sloppy. What we had accomplished wasn't a big deal to him. I realized later that he didn't see the value of what we'd done there because we had put ourselves into the project and he had not.

Janet's grandmother died last Sunday. She was our last grandparent. I did her funeral on Thursday in Versailles. She's buried next to her husband in the High Point cemetery. That is a significant place to me. It's a plot of ground that Janet's family donated. It's where Janet's parents will be buried. It's where she and I will be buried. As I did that funeral I thought about that. It hit me, again, that I don't have much time between here, and there. That God has called me to do certain things with this life I have, and with the resources I've been given, and I want to make an eternal difference because one day my window of opportunity here will be over. And I don't want to be remembered as the water-cooler guard. And you don't either.

Your giving, your stewardship, helps what we can imagine to become a reality. We've been doing this for over 100 years, and as our vision of what we can imagine grows, our giving must grow too. What we imagine to be possible in the future will only become a reality if we commit, make sacrifices, and give to God's work in the present.

Hebrews 11:1 says, "**Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen**" (**Hebrews 11:1**). It's with faith and through faith that we move forward. We can't know exactly what lies ahead, but we do know that God has plans for us to reach out to the helpless, hopeless, and spiritually hungry people in our city. The decision that each of us will make in just a little while will have a lot to do with God's work at Saint Paul's in the years ahead. Because when we take a pen in our hands and make a commitment to this project, generations will be changed. We are here today because those who were before us made sacrifices. They gave of themselves to see the future unfold. We are called to do the same.

You see, we stand on the banks of our own Jordan River, and in a few minutes we will cross over. This is an exciting time that God has led us to be a part of. The future awaits. Let's make our commitments, let's cross over into God's tomorrow. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.