

What does it look like to follow God's calling for your life? God's plan is not a straight journey to a destination. There are always twists and turns, brought about by change. These changes can be painful and difficult, but they make us into who we are and the person that God wants us to be. God has led me down a very winding path that has led me to places I never would have imagined. And it's turned out better than I could have dreamed possible.

The Winding Path

Some of you might be surprised to see me up front speaking as you are used to seeing me more behind the scenes. For those who don't know me, I served as the Technical Director at this church from 2009 to 2018, so you would most often see me standing at the back of the church. This actually isn't my first time giving a sermon, although it's been a long time.

The last time I preached a sermon was 16 years ago. I was a young, skinny guy living in Michigan. I was in a bad marriage and had no kids. I was finishing up my degree in Theology and preparing to be a pastor. Fast-forward 16 years and every one of those things has changed. I'm not as young, definitely not skinny, and have lived in Florida for about 15 years. I am divorced and remarried to an amazing woman, and currently have 5 kids at home (a mixture of biological, adopted, and foster). And I now work as an Audio-Visual professional. Everything has changed. My life looks nothing at all like I thought it would, but it has turned out 1000% better than I could have imagined.

But that kind of high-level overview obscures all the challenges and changes that have happened and brought me to the place I am now. There have been a lot of ups and downs, dark pathways, and not knowing how things would turn out. But through it all I have leaned on God to get me through, to guide me when I didn't even know where I was going.

There are many areas of change that I have experienced and could talk about. But the one I want to share with you is my career trajectory. It has been a very winding path and has taught me so much about trusting God and navigating change.

When I was in high school and college, I felt God calling me toward being a pastor. But when I say that, I don't mean I saw a picture of me preaching at a pulpit and God said that's what I want you to do. God's "calling" for me has never been that concrete. Rather it was a like a nudging in that direction, but the end was always blurred.

Isaiah 30:21 says "Your ears will hear a word behind you saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right or to the left."

That's kind of what it was like, a nudge to head a particular direction. Now, I don't know about you, but at least for me, I used to imagine that God's path for my life would be linear. That if God pointed me in a direction then it's a straight path in that direction to the end destination. But that's not the way it

works. There are two problems with that idea: First of all, our paths are never straight. There are always twists and turns. Second, it puts the focus on the “end destination” rather than the journey and process to get there. Except there really isn’t an end destination in our lives other than death and Heaven, and most people aren’t anxious to get to the death part. Instead there is a lot that we need to learn on the journey.

God calls us to walk with him, not just meet him somewhere. Eventually I felt God nudging me towards hospital chaplaincy rather than a typical church pastor.

What brought me to Florida in the first place was a program that Florida Hospital (now AdventHealth) had to recruit new chaplains who just graduated with their bachelor’s in theology. I worked for a year as a chaplain at Florida Hospital and really liked it. For those of you who may not know, a hospital chaplain is kind of a combination of a pastor and a crisis counselor. I came to realize that the aspect of chaplaincy that I really enjoyed was the mental health counseling aspect, not so much the spiritual nourishment aspect. I know that sounds strange to stand up in front of a church and say I didn’t care as much about spiritual nourishment, but I’m being honest. The part of the job I loved most was the mental health aspect. So, I made the decision to leave that program and pursue education as a counselor.

This was not an easy decision. Without getting too detailed about the program, I would have had several years of training and education paid for and then continued to work as a chaplain for several years after that. Basically it was about an 8 year track (assuming everything went well) that was a straight path from where I was to where I wanted to be, with a decent paying job all throughout (especially to someone fresh out of college). As someone who loves planning and predictability, that was really appealing. I mean, this is everything I wanted: a predictable linear path to where I wanted to go. While it was a great path, I felt God telling me that it wasn’t the path he wanted for me. After a lot of prayer and reflection I decided to walk away and pursue a path in counseling.

I had to learn a very important lesson about change: don’t let the fear of the unknown stand in the way of your dreams. Stepping out in faith is always scary, that’s why it’s called faith. I left a great path with certainty and a paycheck to step into an unknown path. It was scary and it was tough at times. Multiple times in that journey I prayed a prayer as much out of desperation as it was faith: “God, you got me into this mess, I need you to get me out of it.” I believed that God was leading me in this new direction and I had to trust him that he would see me through, even when the path was dark.

Philippians 1:6 says “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

I held onto that promise because what else could I do? When you are in the middle of a dark tunnel, you just keep putting one foot in front of the other and trust that you will eventually find a way out. Now there were plenty of times that I doubted, that I didn’t see how it would work, that I questioned my decision. But I clung to the hope that God would work things out in the end because he has always been there for me in the past. And honestly, I didn’t know what else to do.

Now I have a confession to make to you all as my church family. I never intended to be the technical director here. I never even intended to work at the church. It all happened because I didn't want to deal with parking at the hospital. Honestly. I was back in town and preparing to start my master's degree in Counseling at Asbury Seminary and I needed a job to pay the bills. I had applied at Florida Hospital and was hoping to get in there but wasn't hearing back. I thought I'd try stopping by and talking with someone directly, but I'm too cheap to pay for parking in the garage. So, I just parked at the church here. And while I was here, I figured I'd pop in and say hi. John Monday was standing in the lobby so I asked him if he knew of any jobs. He said they needed someone to mow the lawn and setup for rental groups, and I said, "I can do that". So they hired me and for a year and a half I took care of the lawn, setup tables and chairs for rental groups, and different maintenance projects. When a technical position opened up, they knew that I had aptitude for that kind of stuff and moved me over to that role. I fell into a role that I loved because I was too cheap to pay for parking at the hospital.

You never know how God is going to lead, you just have to be willing to follow. God can use the smallest and most mundane things (like parking) to open doors and accomplish his leading. As the old saying goes, "God works in mysterious ways".

My next big crisis of change came when I graduated with my master's degree in counseling. By the time I graduated, I had already transitioned to be the technical director at the church and was finding that I really enjoyed it. But I had invested so much time and money into getting a degree in Counseling! And isn't that where God was leading me? I had two career paths I could choose from and I had to make a decision. I feel that I would have been happy with either of them and I feel that I would have been good at either of them. I also felt that God was leaving both doors open for me. So what should I do?

As I wrestled with that decision, I had to release myself from this idea that I needed to pick one career and do that for the next 30 years of my life. That may have been the norm in the past, but honestly, who does that anymore? I came to realize that

I didn't have to choose a career path for the next 30 years. I just had to decide which step I wanted to take next. That was very freeing to me and it made the decision easier. In the end I decided I was more passionate about AV and decided to just keep going with that. And I don't regret that decision at all.

Now some of you may be shaking your head at this person who spent 8 years of college and more student loans than I care to admit, just to throw it aside and do something else. And then he tells you he doesn't regret it! I get that. But here's another thing I've learned: no education, work experience, or life experience is wasted. I have incorporated everything I've learned into what I do now.

I've taken the Family Systems mindset from family counseling and leverage that to view AV as a system and look at how each area interacts and impacts the whole. And that's made me a better tech. Not to mention the communication skills I learned that counselors need. As a foster parent I use the education on childhood development and psychology to better understand traumatized children. While it may all seem unrelated, the skills and education I have pursued have made me a better person, a better technician, and a better parent. They have made me who I am today.

People used to ask me “where do you see yourself in 5 years?” My answer has been that I’ve stopped trying to predict the future because thus far I’ve never been right. I could have never imagined the path God has led me on. But it’s also turned out so much better than I could have imagined. That road has turned so many times and has taken me places I didn’t even know existed. But in the end, God was leading me somewhere even better than I imagined.

Ephesians 3:30 says “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.”

God wants to do so much more for us than we imagine, and he is leading and guiding us towards that. When I look back at my life 15 years ago, and think about everything that has changed, I am amazed at where God has led me. My dreams were so small, and he had so much more in store for me, when the time was right.

Now I’m not talking about some “prosperity gospel” where God will give you a big pile of rainbows and unicorns. We are never promised a problem-free life. But we are promised that God will be with us and that he has great plans for us. I’m also not saying all of the twists and turns are designed by God. Sometimes those are just the natural result of our own actions and decisions. But God continues to shape us and walk with us.

God’s plan for our lives is not simply a destination that he wants us to get to. His plan is so much more than that. He doesn’t just care about what we do, he cares about who we are. So there are places along the journey that help us grow and develop into the person he wants us to be. If we try to just “skip to the ending”, we miss out on so much.

To illustrate that, let’s look at Saul, before we became the apostle we know as Paul. It’s clear that Paul was called to be an apostle for God, but he was actually already doing that when we first meet him as Saul. At least he thought he was. We are first introduced to Saul in Acts 7 and 8 at the stoning of Stephen. That day began a great persecution against the church.

“Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.” (Acts 8:3).

Saul was passionate and devoted to God. He had studied and become a religious leader in his community and was giving his all to serve God to the best of his knowledge. But his life was about to make a major change. Because he could not *really* do what God was calling him to do until his life changed. His capacity to serve God and to be used by God couldn’t be fully unleashed without change. God literally stopped him in his tracks, knocked him to the ground, blinded him, and made him question everything that he thought he knew.

We don’t know much about what that transition was like for Saul. The Bible says he spent three days with no food, no drink, and no sight. I imagine those three days involved a lot of soul searching and a lot of praying. What we do know is that afterwards he charged forward with all the same zeal and passion he had before, but with an even greater understanding of God and a new direction. Paul used

everything he had to serve God, wherever it was that God led him. As Paul received a greater understanding of God, he was able to serve to an even greater capacity. That pattern continued throughout his life.

I said before that I stopped trying to predict the future because I haven't gotten it right so far. That's certainly true when it comes to having kids. When I was talking to Tami about this sermon, she reminded me of all the times I used to tell her that Susan and I were only going to have two kids. My philosophy was that when parenting moves from "man-on-man" to "zone-defense", the whole game changes. Well, so much for that plan! Susan and I did have two kids and stopped, but God was calling us to more. Over the past 4.5 years foster care has led us to adopt one child and we have welcomed over a dozen other children into our home, both through formal placements and by providing temporary respite for other families in the foster community. We have had up to 6 kids in our house at one time and currently have 5. I will say that I was right about "zone defense" being a whole new game, but it's a great game. Life with this many kids and the constant changes that foster care brings is crazy and different and difficult and stressful, but it's also very rewarding.

Foster care is all about change. Probably the most consistent thing about it is the uncertainty! You don't know when a call will come in or who it will be for. You don't *really* know much about the child before you take them in. Sure, you get a little bit of information, most of which is accurate, but you never really know. Nor do you know how long they will be in your care. It could be a couple of months, it could be a year or more. And that can change at any point.

So we've learned to take it one day at a time, because really that is the only option you have. I'm here to love and provide for that child, to give them as much consistency and normalcy as possible in the midst of a chaotic situation. Because that child hasn't done anything wrong. Their world has been turned upside down with no warning, and they are dealing with more change than any child should ever have to deal with. So my job as a foster parent is to walk along side them, to hold them close, and to help them navigate that change. And while we don't often acknowledge it, God is doing the same for us, daily.

Last year we got to witness two of our foster girls going home to their mom. This family experienced many changes and transitions throughout the process. It was long, it was difficult, it was confusing, it was challenging. But in the end, two little girls who loved their mom so much got to go back home to a mom who deeply loved them and was now better able to care for them. Change isn't easy, but sometimes it leads to wonderful results.

Foster kids are dealing with an enormous amount of change. My prayer is that God will use me during this period of change in their lives the same way he has used many of you during my periods of change.

I may not remember a lot from my preaching classes 16 years ago. But one instruction I do remember is that you should be able to distill your sermon down to one sentence. One sentence that summarizes this winding story that I have led you on this morning. So here it is: If you follow God's leading, your life will not turn out the way you think; but he will always be with you.

It will contain lower lows than you imagined, but also greater highs. It will be filled with times of immense pain, blinding confusion and despair, and no idea what to do at times. But through it all, God is weaving you into the person he wants you to be. And it's a beautiful thing. I don't know what the next change or transition will be for me. I don't know what challenges lie just around the corner. But I have God who has proven himself, time and time again, that he is taking care of me. So I'll keep walking with him.



5.1.21

1. When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up? How does that compare to what you have done or are doing now?
2. How many different types of jobs have you worked? What has led you to change?
3. When in your life have you felt like God was nudging you in a particular direction?
4. If God was trying to nudge you in a particular direction right now, how would you know it was God nudging you?
5. What unexpected turns have brought challenges or blessings to your life?



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