“The World Ahead: Purpose”

Matthew 6:25-34

What would you do if you woke up tomorrow morning with no hearing? This is the question which the movie “Sound of Metal” tries to tackle. A young drummer, Ruben, suddenly loses his hearing and is devastated by the diagnosis. What to do? Trailer: <https://youtu.be/3m_WaWC3c84>.

Through a mentor at a deaf community, this newly deaf man gets the assignment of learning how to sit by journaling every morning. <https://youtu.be/L8Wqw02_cp0>. He had kept himself busy and focusing on doing things to fix his situation and get back to “normal,” but the wisdom which the older mentor offered him was about a different way. It was about learning to be. The deafness was only one of Ruben’s challenges. He had a deeper problem that needed to be healed. He never learned to appreciate life for what it is and to live in the present moment.

I see in this movie a great example for our life through and past this pandemic. Life changed dramatically for all of us. The world as we knew it came to an end. We have struggled to find our way through. In our country, we even politicized mask wearing and vaccination. I believe a part of the problem is that people try to control life one way or another. So how do we move forward with grace and faith? Just like Ruben in the movie “Sound of Metal” we are trying to regain control of our lives when everything became so out of control. What the pandemic exposed for most of us is that control is ultimately an illusion and that is a very hard spiritual lesson to accept. Control is one of the great spiritual and psychological pitfalls or temptations of humanity. When we lose our illusion of control, we may suffer greatly and even feel a sense of despair.

The invitation of the sermon series is to find our way into the world ahead with grace instead of control. We have an opportunity before us that is very rare and special. We can squander it by going back to our old ways or we can accept it as a gift of our time. The gift of this time of uncertainty and lack of control is that it is giving us the opportunity to look deeper into the meaning of life and our purpose for being here. The world before the pandemic lured us into believing that control, esteem, and power are the ways to be happy and fulfilled in life. We learned from an early age that control, power, and esteem are things to pursue, even if they came at the cost of love and compassion. As these illusions came into question with the pandemic, we are looking more honestly at what truly matters in life and what our purpose might be in the world.

Two scriptures give us guidance and inspiration about the power of focusing on the grace of God that permeates all of life. They remind us that if we learn to focus on God’s purposes, everything else would fall into place. The first one is Matthew 6:25-34 and the second one is Philippians 4:6-7.

When we hear these teachings, they resonate with us because deep down in our hearts, we know that they are true. Yet, when the fears and anxieties of a world arise, we forget to live by the wisdom of Jesus. That is where a daily practice of stillness and reflection comes in. We cannot sustain ourselves in our focus on the kingdom of God without the help of God and a group of people who are committed to the same purpose and who can help us to remember when we forget. Sooner or later, the anxiety of the world takes a hold of us and knocks us off the course of love and faith.

I have been thinking of a dear friend, Gordon Webster, who has been struggling with COVID pneumonia for 8 months. He has finally been sent home after months of being in the ICU. I know that the world ahead of him will continue to be challenging, but he has had amazing support and love from the medical community and his faith community. Their care, prayers, and visits have kept him connected to love even as he was living in great fear and anxiety.

In his book We Make the Road by Walking, Brian McLaren writes (screen), "Our first core problem is anxiety. Driven by anxiety, we act out scripts of destruction and cruelty rather than life and creativity. We worry about things beyond our control - and in so doing, we often miss things within our control...Jesus advocates the opposite of an anxiety-driven system. He describes a faith-sustained system that he called God's kingdom and justice. He makes this staggering promise: if you seek God's kingdom and justice first, everything that we truly need -financially, physically, or socially - will be given to us...When we each focus anxiously on our own individual well-being without concern for our neighbor, we enter into rivalry and everyone is worse off. But when we learn from the songbirds and wildflowers to live by faith in God's abundance, we collaborate and share. We watch out for each other rather than compete with each other. We bless each other rather than oppress each other. We desire what God desires - for all to be safe, for all to be truly alive - so we work for the common good. When that happens, it's easy to see how everyone will be better off. Contagious aliveness will spread across the land!"

I would like to end with the final scene from the movie “Sound of Metal” where Ruben finally gets the power of stillness. He had fought so hard against being deaf that he missed the beauty of the world around him. His focus on getting an implant blinded him to seeing the gifts of life that were still around him, especially when he learns to be still.

<https://youtu.be/RJGOLvyyUBo>. Finally the words of his mentor, Joe, come to life for him, “But for me, those moments of stillness: that place, that’s the kingdom of God. And that place will never abandon you.” Amen.