

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors at North Shore Alliance Church. It's a privilege to be with you this morning and to open the Bible and teach.

As I began my message last week, I said that I thought I might be having a mid-life-crisis; it was part jest and part truth. I have been thinking about my life with God and where it's taking me. I've been thinking about the transformation factor in my life...what does Jesus want to shape in my life? Am I letting Him do His work or am I getting in the way of my own transformation? *If the goal of a disciple is to become what Jesus is, how is my becoming coming along?*

Last Sunday, I asked you to participate in a corporate, spiritual, mid-life-crisis...to stop and take stock of where you are at with God...I trust God spoke to you...I trust that God has been speaking to you this week...He's been speaking to me.

As I prepared to preach this week, strangely enough, my thoughts weren't focussed on the mid-point of my life, I was drawn into thoughts about the end of life. Do you ever stop to ponder what eternity will look like? Regularly my mind is drawn here. A number of people that I've known and loved, are people who knew and loved Jesus before they died--sometimes I think about what they are experiencing right now.

The Bible refers to life after death, eternal life, the life to come; "heaven" is a biblical catch-all phrase that both describes the dimension where God dwells, and, as the life with God that awaits every person who places their faith/trust in Jesus Christ.

What will heaven be like? I've had people ask me: *will we be floating on clouds, strumming harps, retrofit with angels wings?* And I've had to tell them, "that's not the picture the Bible paints."

I've had others ask: *will there be golf in heaven?* I think the easy answer is "no;" the Bible says that in the life to come there will be no more tears, no more pain. The game of golf has caused me and others untold suffering--I can't see how golf could be present in heaven. But then, maybe after Jesus transforms my body, my golf swing might straighten out a little bit...so maybe, just maybe...

I've had people ask, "will we get bored in heaven?" You know, I don't think it will be possible. Boredom comes from repetition to be sure, but so often boredom stems from unmet desires. We want to feel fully alive, engaged, living on purpose, hardwired to something important, something bigger than ourselves--when we see Jesus face to face, we will be fully satisfied.

I've had others ask, "will there be teaching in heaven?" I used to imagine entering eternity and instantly knowing everything there is to know about everything that was, that is, that will be. In a sense I imagined Jesus giving me an instant download, a software update upon arrival.

But software updates are computers, not for people--there's nothing relational about a software update, and God is relational to the core. I suspect that we will have all of eternity to enjoy and explore the beauty, the mystery, the complexity of God--endless delight in discovery--this adventure alone will keep boredom at bay.

The bottom line is that I can't say for sure which activities will (or won't) be a part of the life to come; the Bible doesn't answer all of our questions. But I know with certainty that one activity will be absent in heaven; when Jesus returns, *mission* will cease to exist.

Do you know what both milk and prescription drugs have in common? They both have a best before date--some things are time sensitive. There won't be any Alpha courses in heaven. In heaven there won't be any Billy Graham crusades, there won't be any backyard conversations with our unsaved neighbours, there won't be people who are investigating the claims of Jesus--when Jesus returns, mission will cease to exist.

It's a sobering thought, isn't it? Like a splash of cold water on the face, it's the kind of thought that's meant to wake us up, to shake us out of our lethargy. There is more to life than going to work/school, investing in family, and looking for adventure or entertainment--there's an eternity looming, and we're either shaping our life in light of it, or we're not.

I want to ask each of you who are here today, *have you put your faith in Jesus?* Have you received the forgiveness He offers? Without being the least bit melodramatic, there's an eternity riding on this decision. When we get to the end of life, when we take our last breath, God the Father will ask us: *how did you respond to my Son, Jesus?*

This morning, my preaching is going to center around the subject of mission, or, missional living; this is core to our vision and values as a church, and it's core to our denominational identity. Our church

belongs to a family of churches known as the Christian and *Missionary Alliance*.

I grew up attending an Alliance church every week. Every year, my mom and dad invited missionaries to come and share meals around our table; these were people we knew, people we prayed for, people we supported financially. Every night, I went to bed praying for friends and family who didn't know Jesus.

The Alliance Church I attended had a two-part-slogan that was fixed on the walls of our sanctuary. It looked awful, but I've never forgotten what it said: *Jesus our message---people our mission*. As I think about it now, I don't think the phrase quite captured things. The message is "Jesus," and the mission is people, but neither the message nor the mission are *ours*--they belong to God.

And here's where we need to grab hold of a little phrase that pops up all throughout the New Testament: *in Christ*. Without exaggeration, it's impossible to overemphasize how crucial these two words are: *in Christ*. Our sin kept us cut off from the life of God, but the death Jesus died for us, the forgiveness Jesus offers us, has the power to reconcile us to God.

What Jesus has done for us, in effect, has changed our spiritual geography. We are now inextricably bound up with, and connected to, the life of Jesus. Galatians 2:20 says, "*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*"

We have a new spiritual address that reads "*in Christ*". We are in Christ, He is in us, and through Jesus we have been thrust headlong into the life and communion of the Trinity.

The question is, *what does any of this have to do with mission?* Just this...because of Jesus, we are invited to partake of God's life, and to participate in God's activity--this includes mission. This past week I've been reading a brilliant article on the Trinity, written by James B. Torrance. In it he writes about mission and evangelism, asking, "are these activities primarily ours? Do we engage in them simply because Jesus commanded us to do them and left us an example of how to do them?"¹ His answer is "no."

You see, God never asks us to do things in His absence, because God is never absent. God never assigns us to a task that He is unwilling or unable to do. No, God invites us to participate in what He is already doing. The message is "Jesus" and the mission is "people" but both the message and the people belong to God.

The whole Trinity is involved in mission: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **Consider the Father's role:**

- He loved the world so much that He sent Jesus on a rescue mission (John 3:16). Not only did the Father send His Son, but to this day He is actively drawing people to Himself through Jesus (John 6:44).

- The Father continues to arrange the exact geographical location and time in history when people will live; He does so that people will seek Him--He is not far from any of us (Acts 17:26-28).
- The Father forgives those who repent and find life in Christ (Ephesians 1:7).
- And the Father waits--the reason He hasn't sent Jesus to return is not because He's slow in keeping His promise but because He doesn't want anyone to perish---He wants everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

Consider the Son's role in mission:

- Jesus took on our humanity and did not consider His status as God something to be used to His own advantage (Phil 2:5-8).
- Jesus loved the world so much that He laid down His life for humanity (Luke 19:10; John 10:14-18; 1 John 3:16).
- Jesus' death and resurrection secures the Father's forgiveness and purifies us from sin (1 John 1:7).
- and Jesus continues, right up until present, to intercede on our behalf, and on behalf of the world (Hebrews 7:25).

Consider the Spirit's role in mission:

- the Spirit is at work in the world to testify about Jesus (John 15:26).
- the Spirit is at work to convict the world with respect to sin and judgement (John 16:7-11).
- by the Spirit, the Father pours out His love into the hearts of those who turn to Jesus (Romans 5:5).

¹ James B. Torrance, "*Contemplating the Trinitarian Mystery of Christ*," 300.

Mission is God's work from beginning to end, but because we are *in Christ*, we are invited to participate in what He is doing. Mark Buchanan puts it like this: "It's not that the church of God has a mission in the world, but that the God of mission has a church in the world."²

I want you to take a moment and grab a Bible, and turn with me to 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; that's page _____ in the blue Bible in front of you.

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

² Mark Buchanan, taken from a sermon delivered at a retreat I attended in January of 2011.

³Darrell W. Johnson, *Experiencing The Trinity*, 68.

⁴ Johnson, 68.

Why do we engage in mission? Because our personal experience of Christ's love compels us--we want others to know the love of God. We cannot be "*in Christ*" and continue to live for ourselves--we end up divided, at odds with ourselves, and, with His life within us.

Darrell Johnson writes, "*As disciples of Christ, we are co-lovers with God of the world.*"³ In Christ, by the Spirit, we participate in, and are caught up with, the love of God. In his book, *My Heart, Christ's Home*, Robert Boyd Munger writes: "the closer you get to the heart of God, the closer you get to what is on God's heart." And on God's heart are our neighbours, friends, and family--people dealing with emptiness, sinfulness, brokenness--people for who Jesus died.⁴ Christ's love does more than compel us, it fills us, it enables us to join God in loving them.

We engage in mission because God is on mission--vs. 18 says, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation". It's His work, He's the one doing the reconciling, but as partakers in His life, we have the privilege of participating in His activity.

What is this message of reconciliation? That God loves the world! That through Jesus, God will erase our sinful past, He will transform us in the present, and He will secure our future. When it comes to sharing this good news with others, we are never in it alone--the

whole Trinity is involved: Father is drawing people, the Son is interceding, and the Spirit is convicting.

Mission is God's activity: we didn't start the work, we're not going to finish the work, and we don't need to take over the work...we just need to follow His lead.

Eugene Peterson writes, "We are not simply told that Jesus is the Son of God; we not only become beneficiaries of His [death]; we are invited to die His death and live His life with the freedom and dignity of participants. And here is a marvelous thing: we enter the centre of the story without becoming the centre of the story."⁵

illus: Nearly every week I hear a story from one of you about how you have been loving your neighbours, friends, classmates, and looking for opportunities to share how much Jesus has done for you-- I heard another one this week. But this morning I want to share a recent story of my own.

Some of you will remember that last Spring I was hobbling around on a bad foot. I had just started playing with the church soccer team and I came down on the wrong end of a bad tackle. I finished the game that night but the next morning I woke up with considerable pain. My big toe had swollen up like a sausage, and my toenail was as black as night. In order to relieve the pressure from all the extra blood under the nail, I had to drill through it with the end of a red-hot paper clip...

Aren't you glad I'm telling you all this? Pastor by day, back alley surgeon by night. The nail fell off a few days later and I was back to playing; what I didn't know was that I was playing on a dislocated toe--that took three more painful weeks to discover.

It took nearly three months until I was running again, but the nail began to grow back right away. Unfortunately, instead of growing outwards, it began to grow downwards--right through my flesh. A few weeks ago the pain began to intensify and I decided it was time to see a podiatrist.

My wife, who's a nurse, prepared me well for the appointment: *Mark, he's probably going to rip you're whole toenail off...it's really going to hurt, it's probably going to bleed a lot, you may need to come right home afterwards.* Thanks honey--that's really swell of you--now I can really look forward to the appointment.

So when I got into the examine room, thanks to my wife, I was looking around for sharp metal instruments and preparing myself for excruciating pain. When the doctor came in I was a little on edge, waiting for it all to begin, but he sat down and for the next 20 minutes he wasn't the least bit interested in why I came in--he wanted to talk about faith.

It started when he asked what I did for a living. Now for the record, when I tell people I am a pastor, that is typically a conversation-stopper--I've seen extroverts turn into introverts in less than a second. But when I told him that I was a pastor, he wanted to know what denomination, when I told him what denomination, he wanted

⁵ Eugene Peterson, "Saint Mark: The Basic Text for Christian Spirituality," 337-338.

to know where the church was. *"You have a very interesting profession,"* he told me.

Have you ever been in a conversation where a window opens, allowing you to speak about Jesus? We've all been there--and when we're on our toes, we recognize the moment and seize it. I could see that he really was interested in what I did, he really wanted to talk, and since excruciating pain can always wait a few minutes, I thought, *why not talk about Jesus for a few minutes.*

I asked him if he had gone to church when he was younger and he told me he had grown up in Chicago going to a Lutheran church. He was curious, intelligent young man, with lots of questions. He wanted to know whether science contradicts faith, he wanted to know whether Jesus was the only way. But it became plain that one couldn't ask *those* questions; he stopped asking and left the church.

He told me about where he went to school, what brought him to North Vancouver, about his two girls...the more he talked, the more I liked him, the more I sensed God's love for him. At one point I asked him what he believes in these days. He said, *"I suppose I'm somewhat of an agnostic, but after all my years of medical study and practice I'm convinced that there is a God---the design of the human body is too intricate for it to have just 'happened,' the universe is too perfect for it to have randomly come together."*

He told me that he believed in heaven but that he thought that any path was just as good as another. But, he admitted that his ambivalence in choosing a path was likely due to laziness more than anything else.

He asked me why I thought Christianity is growing so rapidly in countries like Africa and China, where poverty and oppression abound. And I began with a one-word answer: *hope*. You can't talk about Jesus without talking about hope. The good news is that God loves the world, that through Jesus, God can erase our past, He can transform us in the present, and He can secure our future.

Twenty minutes we went on like this...it was incredible. Five months ago I dislocated my toe, for three of those months I could hardly run a step, and once I could begin running my toenail did a nose-dive right through the flesh. Now God didn't dislocate my toe or redirect my toenail, but God can (and does) use us to represent Him wherever we go.

Our conversation didn't end with him dropping to knees and asking Jesus to lead his life; it ended with him grabbing an incredibly sharp instrument and tearing half of my toenail off. Mission is God's work, and we have the privilege of joining in what He is already doing in people's lives. I'm trusting that God will use the conversation we had as one more link in the chain.

I wonder, how many people are there, just like podiatrist, who would happily talk with us about life, faith, eternity, and Jesus? I guess we'll never know unless we open our mouths and begin to speak.

For the last three weeks, I've been preaching on our vision and values as a church. And in talking about God's "vision" for our church, I've been attempting to describe what a community of disciples looks like, thinks like, and acts like. In the end, what I'm describing is the life Jesus lived.

God has a vision for our lives but His vision goes beyond the small circle of me/you. A.B. Simpson once said, "God is calling us at this time to a larger faith for this special work—the testimony of Jesus in all His fullness to all the world".

The Father sent the Son--He took on our flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood; our vision is to do the same.

We want to model a life of mission in our own backyard. We want to love and serve our city in Jesus name. We want to proclaim the good news that Jesus saves, both when we gather together, and when we scatter back to our neighbourhoods, our schools, our businesses. We want to train people how to share about Jesus in this current culture. and we

Our vision is to discern and develop strategic partnerships locally⁶ and globally. Already we have 4 local missionaries that we are connected to as a congregation, and 7 others who are working overseas. When it comes to overseas, one of our passions is prioritizing indigenous church planting. And as a leadership we are praying for God by His Spirit to raise up and deploy people from our church to full-time missionary work overseas--maybe God has you in mind.

We want to represent Jesus in our city and around the world.

The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are actively on mission. We are called to be His ambassadors, to be co-lovers with God of the world,

⁶ We need to keep in mind that we already have a number of local strategic partnerships: a growing ministry to people trapped in the poverty cycle (Coffee Time, The Harvest Project), partnerships with the youth in our city (North Shore Neighbourhood House, School BBQ's, City-Fest, etc.). Is God calling us to new partnerships, and/or to expand existing partnerships?

and to know the joy of seeing people rescued and transformed. Will you be one? Will you join us?