GETTING FOCUSED
Scripture: 2 Samuel 11:1-15 and John 6:1-21

FOCUS: God’s miracles surround us, but if we fail to focus on God we may well miss them and may wander off in the wrong direction.

Remember the days when you actually took pictures with cameras, that used film? For one of you that was not all that long ago! But for most of us that has been a while and for the youngest in our midst film is unfamiliar. Yet I remember well the horrors of taking the perfect shot only to wait a couple of weeks for the film to be mailed off, processed and sent back, then to find that the picture was completely out of focus. Back then you actually had to manually focus the camera, and I was not particularly skilled in that craft.

Focus, it is vital not only when it comes to taking pictures. Clear and properly placed focus is a vital and determining factor when it comes to living life. At times my poorly focused film work would manifest itself in a manner that still pops up occasionally even with auto focus on my phone. It is the distortion which comes when the lens has been focused in the wrong place. Say what you really want to be the focal point in your photo is off to one side. If you have your camera set for auto focus it is most likely going to make sure the center of the frame is correctly focused which often means that the objects off to the side are not as clear.

In the scriptures we have read today we encounter folks who are having a bit of trouble with this matter of proper focus in their daily lives. I know I often have problems that as well. Oh there are things in focus, but they are not the central things which ought to be the clearest in my mind if I am to be all I am created to be. I let my mind wander, I fret about things that don’t matter. I worry about stuff that in the end takes care of itself. Most disconcerting is my tendency to focus on me and to ignore others, to ignore God.

I am looking forward to our Disciple study, in part because it will force me to focus more time on reading scripture, on prayer, on reflection. Whether you are in the study or not I encourage you to set aside a significant amount of time for Bible reading and prayer each day over the next 34 weeks. I am convinced that if you will commit to such a discipline it will make a difference in your life, in the life of this congregation and in the lives of those we encounter each day. Isn’t it odd that we are pretty good at developing routines for those things we consider to be “necessary”, those activities we must perfect because of commitments we have made or because life simply requires them, yet we often manage to neglect our faith lives as we have our focus set for those often mind numbing routines. When that happens we can find ourselves slipping further and further away from that which ought to be at the center of all we do, often with dire consequences.

That is what happened to David. Last week we encountered him as he pondered his good fortune and faced his inattention to matters of God. Although his desire to build a temple was misguided, at least he was focused for a while on being attentive to the God who had so blessed him. As is the case for all of us at times, once the moment had passed, once he had become comfortable and accustomed to his privileged and powerful position, David again lost his focus.

As one of you is fond of saying, there are no atheists in foxholes. That may not be exactly true, but you get the point. When things are not going particularly well, when we are in a fix, we are far more likely to truly turn to God because we don’t know what else to do. But often that is not because we have kept things in focus, rather because external circumstances have forced us to rethink things. And sadly, once things settle down, our focus tends to again wander. Wouldn’t it be great if we could all be just as faithful to commune with God in the good times and in the in between times as we are when we need something. Not only would God be blessed by our attention, we would all be blessed by a lively communion with the Spirit which seeks to enrich our lives each and every day, good days, bad days and all those other days which are just sort of there.

So we return to David. This is a sad story on so many levels. It is also a story which ought to cause each of us pause as we consider the times we have misaligned our focus. The first thing that strikes me about the story is the number of times that we find the words, send and sent. David had once been that bold young man, the one who took on Goliath with nothing but a slingshot and a hand full of pebbles. When none of the brave warriors, when none of David’s seven older brothers were willing to take on the massive foe, it was the humble shepherd boy who listened to the voice of God and who put his trust in God as he boldly went where none of the others would go.

But listen to what we find now that David is comfortably established in his palace, his power secure for the time being. ***“In the spring of the year, when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel.”*** Then when David noticed Bathsheba he ***sent*** someone to find out who she was. The he ***sent*** someone to bring her to him for their illicit affair. Once David realized that he had a significant problem as a result of his indiscretion he ***sent*** word to Joab to have Joab ***send*** Uriah back to the palace. Then in the most horrific of moves he ***sent*** the letter with the instructions for Joab to set Uriah up to meet his demise by the doomed soldier himself.

David had allowed his focus to become tragically misaligned. Oh his actions were clearly in focus. They were focused on David, what he wanted, and nothing more. We have all heard the saying, ***“An idle mind is the devil’s workshop.”*** The origin of this gem is uncertain but similar quotes are found as far back as the eighteenth century. As I was looking for the quote this week I ran across these words in one explanation of its meaning. ***“Idleness means you have no particular goal in mind and thus you can be easily distracted.”*** That is exactly what happened to David. He didn’t go out on his rooftop patio that evening to lust after his neighbor. It appears he didn’t even know she lived down the hill. But his mind was idle. Basking in the luxury of his palace, exercising freely his ability to command others he stepped outside for no particular reason and saw something that intrigued him. So he pursued it.

Ironically though David had placed himself a safe distance from the danger of battle, by succumbing to idleness he had placed himself in the path of temptation and had succumbed to behavior which placed his soul in danger. Someone once told me that they had decided to always tell the truth because it just made life much easier. He then remarked that if you always tell everyone the truth, you don’t have to worry about remembering what you told to whom. So it is with indiscretion. When you have transgressed you become focused on how to manipulate, how to cover up, how to deceive.

David finds himself in that uncomfortable situation. In David’s case it required an elaborate scheme filled with deception, lies and manipulation to cover his indiscretion. David’s actions not only complicated his life, they snuffed out the life of an innocent and faithful subject. Uriah was the model soldier. He was the antithesis of everything David was about. He had every opportunity, with the king’s blessing to take a few days for R and R. But he would not let himself do that knowing that all his brothers in arms were still fighting the battle

It is easy to be hard on David, but we have all been there. It may not have been as dramatic a transgression as his, probably didn’t include a plot to destroy an innocent life, though the thought might have crossed our mind, but we have all suffered the ill effects of an idle mind. The offense might have been nothing more than wasted time. But we have all been there. And haven’t we all known that there are things we ought to be about doing, things God would have us do, but like David, who once would not have considered sitting back at a safe distance from the battle, who once was willing to go it alone against the most intimidating of enemies, like David we have put aside our calling and succumbed to the lure of an idle mind.

May David’s sad story remind us all that an idle mind can indeed be the devil’s workshop. May we all face the uncomfortable truth that when we misalign our focus, when we allow our minds to wander off center, we are in danger of creating a life portrait that is blurry at best and alarming at worst. So I challenge each of us to work on focusing on the most important part of this wonderful picture we call life as children of God. May all our days come out clear and bright with the central character of Christ in sharp focus at the center.

David’s story also reminds us that we need to properly be focused on the present. We must be attentive, we must be active, we must be aware and focused to make it through the day, though there are surely days which seem to be a bit out of focus. We also need to focus on the future. To be sure we need to plan. As a church we are constantly talking about the future, as should we. As individuals we make plans for the future, plans to educate our children, plans to have something to live off of in retirement, plans for the coming week. We all need to spend some of our time focused on the future as we make plans.

It certainly matters where we focus our daily lives and it is important to focus on the future. But it also matters how we catalogue all the portraits, and landscapes from the past. We recently had to take everything off the floor in all our closets in order to have the house treated for fleas after discovering that Whitney had brought back an unwanted souvenir from her trip to Georgia. I must confess that I have had several of those idle moments when I knew that I really needed to help Kathy go through some of the stuff so we could get rid of what we didn’t want or need and could put the rest back in the closet but I just couldn’t make myself do it.

Now we have begun to go through stuff and we have found things that remind us of times past. Pictures of special folks, maps of special places, vinyl recordings by the Beatles; Led Zeppelin; Crosby, Stills and Nash and the like. The relics from the past brought up memories and reminders. So it ought to be on occasion when we plunder through the spiritual relics on our proverbial closet floors. When we come to realize that we have been neglecting God, we need to be reminded of what God has meant to us in the past. When we face those inevitable difficult days we need to reflect on ways that God has been faithful in the past, we need to gaze at those old mental snapshots.

As we turn to the gospel lesson from John we encounter some guys who had pretty short memories and who failed to focus on the past when they desperately needed to. Just days earlier the disciples had witnessed the healing of one who had been lame for his whole life. It had been an astonishing feat, everyone was amazed. Even the religious authorities, who were outraged because it occurred on the Sabbath, could not dispute the fact that this fellow was up walking around. After Jesus lit into the Jewish authorities and explained in no uncertain terms why what he did was acceptable, and from whom he derived his authority, Jesus and the disciples moved across the lake in hopes of some time to refresh and reflect.

But the crowds were so struck by his power and authority that they beat him to the other side. John doesn’t mention Jesus teaching the crowd, but the other gospels tell us that he did. What happened next is the only miracle found in all four gospel accounts. It is the story of the feeding of the five thousand. Imagine yourself being Philip in this story for a moment. There you are with a massive crowd of hungry people and Jesus calls you over. He didn’t ask, ***“What are we going to do with these folks?”*** He didn’t say, ***“We need to send these folks off before meal time.”***  He didn’t say, ***“Man, we need to get out of here before these folks expect us to me up with something to eat.”*** Jesus calmly asks you, ***“How are we going to feed these folks?”*** And you answer as would I, ***“Have you lost your mind?”*** I like the way The Message describes Jesus’ motivation here. The NRSV says that Jesus asked Philp that to test him and that is not a bad translation, but I really like the spirit of what Peterson says in his paraphrase, Peterson writes, ***“He said this to stretch Philips’s faith.***

Then we read the familiar story of a few fish and a little bread feeding the crowd. Jesus knew he could handle it. Jesus had a plan. And everyone was filled. But Phillip couldn’t see what was coming because he was not focusing on what had already happened. Had he thought back to the healing he had witnessed only hours before, and other amazing acts, he might have had the wisdom to defer to Jesus and to seek his guidance. Had he remembered he might had thought to say, ***“I really don’t know, but I have faith in you, give me some direction here.”***  But Philip was so focused on the problem that he forgot to defer to the one who had the solution. Wow, that is me sometimes folks and I suspect it is you as well.

So the crowd is fed, the baskets of leftovers are collected and it is time to head back across the lake. But a storm pops up. Like on a late summer afternoon in Daleville, there on the Sea of Galilee it was not unusual for storms to come up seemingly out of nowhere. The disciples are rowing feverishly. Someone looks up and there is Jesus walking across the waves. But the twelve were terrified we are told. I would have been too. What in the world could it mean, people don’t walk on water, this must be some kind of hallucination or some otherworldly creature. Stuff like this just doesn’t happen. But neither are those lame from birth made to walk by a simple command. Neither are five thousand people fed from a single kid’s lunchbox. Yet the disciples had seen those miracles just a few short hours earlier. But when things looked a bit dim, they seem to have forgotten Jesus power. They have forgotten that at times it makes sense to focus on the past, to remember and recognize what God can do and what God has done and to trust he can still do amazing things.

From David we learn that it really does matter where we focus our attention and what we do with our idle time. We are called to always focus first on the One who created us and who seeks to be at the center of our lives. We are called to avoid too much idleness lest the devil begin to make mischief in our lives. From the disciples we learn that there are times when we need to focus on the past, not to yearn for its return, not to beat ourselves up with regret, but to remember the marvelous things that God has done, so that we might have faith today and for the future.

My friends it is time for us to focus on the One who makes all the difference in this life. It is time to focus on our calling to be those whose lives reflect clearly for others to see, the love, grace, compassion and mercy of Jesus Christ. For your sake, for the sake of an often fuzzy world and for the sake of the kingdom of the only one who can refocus and redeem us all, let it be so. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.