

Guided by the Holy Spirit

By Brian Thomas

So, I have four kids. There are a little bit more than eight years between my youngest and my oldest, and so I have spent a significant portion of my adult life not only changing lots of diapers but also watching way more animated films than I ever imagined my adult life would look like.

And so, to be honest, like I love a good movie. I love a good TV show. But when it comes to animated movies, I feel like I've kind of put in my time with that, with one exception. And that is any time Pixar makes a film, I make it a point to watch it because I love Pixar movies, even though they are animated.

And one of my favorite Pixar movies is the movie Up. That is the entire name of the movie. Up and so Up is a story about an elderly widow by the name of Carl. And Carl is being forced out of his home by some scary real estate developers. Not to say that real estate developers, in general, are scary, but these guys are very intent on acquiring this land where the house that Carl has lived in his entire adult life.

And so Carl, in an act of defiance, embarks on a quest to fulfill his late wife's dream to visit Paradise Falls somewhere in South America. Carl's quest is complicated, though, because Carl decides to fly his house to South America. Right. That seems logical, But Carl's quest is complicated by Russell. Russell is he is a nine-year-old wilderness explorer, and he is dead set on earning his last badge that he needs his assisting the elderly badge.

And he has chosen Carl as the elderly person that he's going to assist in. So, accidentally, Russell becomes a stowaway on Carl's quest to visit Paradise Falls. So when they arrive in South America, Carl and Russell find themselves at odds with Charles F months, who is, ironically, Carl's childhood hero and was an explorer who disappeared many years ago, many decades ago.

They assumed that he was dead, but he was not dead. Spoiler alert. It turns out that Charles F Months is a psychopath, and his only companions are a pack of dogs, which he has trained and equipped with collars which he invented that translate the dog's thoughts into speech. And so if you imagine a pack of dogs that now suddenly can talk and communicate with each other and with their psychopathic master, well, you can see that this could be a problem.

And these dogs are very highly trained and they're they can do all kinds of things that your dog hopefully cannot do. But they have one weakness: these dogs. How many of you guys have seen the movie up? All right. Okay, good. Most of you have seen it. So, these dogs have one weakness. Does anybody remember what their weaknesses?

Oh, yes. That is the weakness. The dogs are laser-focused. They're sitting on a mission, and they're laser-focused on their mission. I mean, these dogs are intense, especially alpha. I mean, these dogs are intense, and they're focused on what they're supposed to do. And I mean, nothing can distract them. A squirrel and then they're back on task, right now.

It's a good movie. The psychopath falls to his death. Um, Carl and Russell fly the dirigible back home. Russell gets his assisting the elderly badge, and the dogs who went with them are adopted into loving homes. Now, I am not suggesting in any way that God is like the villain in the movie, like Charles Manson. I do think, however, the dogs are a good metaphor for us.

Um. It would be nice to have those collars that could translate our thoughts into like, speech, those collars, the colors to translate our thoughts. Um, but as a church, it is so easy to get distracted from the mission that God has called us to. There are always things that have the potential to sidetrack us from the most important things.

That's why, periodically, we have to take a hard look and reevaluate how we understand what God is calling us to do and who God is calling us to be as a church. That's what this season is about. That's what this season of, uh, um, revisiting our values and kind of updating the mission statement of the church. That's what it's all about because it's so easy to kind of have what we call mission drift, where we just kind of get off course a little bit.

So last week, Pastor Mandy introduced us to this new teaching series, Guided by Values, fueled by generosity. And I'm going to spend the next few minutes unpacking the first of our values statements. And so I want to we're going to put it up here, and I just want us to read it aloud together. Let's say it together. Okay?

We are guided by the Holy Spirit. Go ahead and read it with me. Okay. We are guided by the Holy Spirit. We are anchored in Scripture and in prayer as we strive to listen. The Holy Spirit empowers us to be more like Christ. Prayer is the heartbeat of everything we do, say and believe. I love this, that it says that we are guided by the Holy Spirit.

And if we are to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to be more like Christ, we must be anchored in Scripture and in prayer. I love that these two pieces are paired together, anchored in Scripture and in prayer. And why? Why have we paired these together in our values statement? It's because Scripture, the Bible and prayer create this kind of holy tension that help us stay on course.

You think about Scripture. Scripture reveals to us who God is. Scripture reveals what God is like and what He wants from us as followers of Jesus. Scripture shows us Jesus, Jesus, the ultimate revelation of God. How do we know about Jesus? We know about Him from Scripture and Scripture is this tangible thing that we're able to touch and feel.

And it's its literal print on paper. And when we think about our faith, so much of which is intangible, it's so valuable to have something tangible to open the pages and look and read. And it helps us make sure that our faith is more than just mere opinion or emotion. On the other hand, prayer provides this relational connection with God that transforms our faith from something that's more than just a laundry list of do's and don'ts.

Prayer transforms our faith and makes it something that is life-giving. And beautiful prayer enables us to love God with our whole hearts. Prayer offers this 24-7 connection with God, where we can hear the voice of God, the Holy Spirit. And so prayer and Scripture work together to keep us on track as we seek to be guided by the Holy Spirit.

And here's what Scripture tells us. Jesus fulfilled his because He was guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Now, we believe that Jesus is God incarnate. Jesus Is God in human flesh? Fully God, fully human. And yet the Scriptures teach us that Jesus did what He did because He was guided, empowered by the Holy Spirit. None of the gospel writers show us this more clearly than Saint Luke.

And when we read the opening chapters of the Gospel of Luke, there's this flurry of activity by the Holy Spirit, and we see the Holy Spirit working to set the stage for Jesus. And so we read in the opening chapters, and we see Elizabeth and Zacharias. And it says, Both of them were filled with the Holy Spirit. We see Mary as she speaks, not like she doesn't just speak like a young village girl, but she speaks like a prophet as moved by the Holy Spirit.

We see John the Baptist, who begins to declare that God is on the move. Right. Then Jesus shows up on the scene, and he comes to John the Baptist, and John is baptized as Jesus. And you remember what the Gospels say happens when Jesus comes up out of the water. It says that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove.

Right? And then Jesus is Luke says next that Jesus is led by the spirit into the wilderness. Right. And then here, here we go. Oh, yeah. And then he comes out of the spirit, comes out of the wilderness, full of the spirit. And then in Luke, chapter four, I want to pick up here, Luke, chapter four, verse 14.

It says Jesus written, Born to Galilee. How in the Power of the Holy Spirit. News about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up on the Sabbath day. He went into the synagogue as he usually did. He stood up to read, and the scroll of Isaiah, the prophet, was handed to him.

Jesus unrolled it and found the right place. There it is written. And Jesus, in his first recorded message. This is the text that he chooses from Isaiah 61. It says, The spirit of the Lord is on me. He has anointed me to announce the good news to poor people. He has sent me to announce freedom for prisoners. He has sent me so that the blind will see again.

He wants me to set free those who are treated badly. And he has sent me to announce the year when he will set his people free. Then Jesus rolled up the scroll. He gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were staring at him. He began by saying to them, Today, this passage of Scripture is coming true as you listen.

And so Jesus, in his first recorded sermon, he turns to the prophet Isaiah. And what does he say? He says, The Holy Spirit has anointed me to fulfill this mission. So he not only describes his work but describes his mission proclaiming good news to the poor, setting free the captives, and comforting the oppressed. But he declares that he will do it because the Holy Spirit is guiding and empowering him every step of the way.

Think about that for a minute. Jesus Christ, God incarnate, fully God, fully human. He did what he did. He said what he said. He lived as he lived because he was guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Now, here's the beautiful thing. Jesus promises that the same spirit that guided and empowered him will be with us and will live in us.

My, uh, my Pentecostal background just kind of is creeping up here. I just kind of feel a little bit like I should go. Whoa. The same spirit that guided and empowered Jesus will be with us and will live in us. That's what Jesus said in John. Chapter 14, verse 12. Jesus said, What I'm about to tell you is true.

Anyone who believes in me will do the work I have been doing. In fact, they will do even greater things. That's because I'm going to my father. I will ask the Father, and he will give you another friend to help you and to be with you forever. That friend is the spirit of truth. The world can't accept him.

That's because the world does not see him or know him. But you know him. He lives with you. And he will be in you. I would never have the audacity to say that Jesus is calling us to do the same things that He did and even greater things. But that's what Jesus said.

Anyone who believes in me will do the work I have been doing. In fact, they will do even greater things because I'm going to My father. So here's the thing. When Jesus stood up in the synagogue that day and read from the prophet Isaiah, he wasn't just announcing his own mission. He was announcing hours as well. Jesus did not come to accomplish the entire mission alone.

Yes. He's the only one who could die for the sins of the world. Yes, he's the only one who could restore the broken relationship between creation and the Creator. But Jesus did not come to personally do the entire work. If so, he would have never called and equipped disciples. Jesus came to do the work of redemption and to build a church that would continue his work and carry it to completion.

So today, Jesus calls us to join Him in his mission. Jesus' mission is the ongoing mission of the church. So that means that horizons we exist as a local church to continue the work that Jesus himself began.

That's kind of exciting. That's really exciting. And our work is the same work that Jesus did. Now, it's going to look a little bit different. Jesus lived 2000 years ago. The Roman Empire was in charge of things like life, which was significantly different back then. We live in Lincoln, Nebraska, in the year 2023. But underneath, at its core, our mission is the same.

So think about this. If Jesus himself accomplished his mission guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit, why would we dream that we continue? We could continue his work in any other way. We also must be guided by the Holy Spirit to do this good work. We will only succeed in fulfilling the work that God has called us to do to the degree that we are guided by the Holy Spirit.

So, what does it look like to be guided by the Holy Spirit? This can be really confusing. I don't doubt that in this room we have represented a lot of different backgrounds, a lot of different religious backgrounds, even. And so when we talk about being guided by the Holy Spirit, I think at least for me, it is really tempting to kind of start developing these grandiose ideas, really kind of big, big ideas of what it looks like to be guided by the Holy Spirit.

And sometimes it can feel unattainable in a bowl for some ordinary guy like me, unreachable. But here's what I believe. I believe that the Holy Spirit guides us in the mundane in the everyday. And so that's why we center this value around the practice of prayer. And depending on your background, the word prayer can bring a lot of different ideas to mind.

But one definition of prayer, which I got from Pastor Alley-Crawford, I don't know where she got it from. You can ask her. She's usually at the second service, prayer is paying attention with God. I like that prayer is paying attention with God. So, prayer is not about saying the right words. It's not about a formula. It's not some kind of Jesus magic.

It's not about working yourself up into some kind of emotional or spiritual lather. It's not bending or coercing God to do what we want him to do. Prayer is about creating space so that we can see what is important to God. Prayer is about allowing what is important to God to become important to us. Prayer is paying attention with God.

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church, said that prayer is the grand means of drawing near to God. He said, Prayer is the breath of our spiritual life. In the value statement that we read. Earlier, we said that prayer is the heartbeat of everything that we say, do and believe. So, let us strive to listen. Let us be empowered by the Holy Spirit to become more like Jesus.

May we be guided by the Holy Spirit? So here we are. We're in this stewardship campaign, and there are many characteristics that indicate the presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of a local church. But Saint Luke again gives us the clearest picture of what a Holy Spirit guided community can look like. If you read the Book of Acts, maybe you didn't know this, but the Book of Acts is actually part two.

It's the sequel to the Gospel of Luke.

In the last few verses of Chapter two, provide this beautiful summary of what their lives looked like. Those first believers. One of the predominant marks of this community is that they were people of genuine generosity. At the end of chapter two, it says this: All the believers were together. They shared everything they had. They sold property and other things they owned.

They gave to anyone who needed something. Now, I'm not suggesting that we try to recreate that unique moment in time, but I hope that we walk away today with a sense that the things that matter to God should matter to us. I hope that we walk away with this renewed desire to pay attention with God, to create space where we can hear the voice of God.

And with this renewed determination to invest our time, our talents, our energy, and even our money invested in the things that matter to God. So this week, I want to challenge you. I know I talked about several different things, but this week I want to encourage you to practice paying attention with God. That's probably going to mean that you need to eliminate some squirrels.

Okay. You need to set aside some time, clear your schedule. And in that moment, ask God if there are some things that you need to pay attention to right now. And then this is the hard part. At least for me. After you ask God to show you, wait, wait, wait until you have a sense of guidance to consider something in your life. Maybe a relationship or an experience. Practice paying attention with God.

Video From Monica:

Good morning. I'm Monica Miles Steffens. I've been a member. Horizons for a really long time. And Karen asked me to talk a little bit this morning about prayer and the value of prayer. I'm really excited that our one of our pillars or values is focused on prayer. I honestly can't remember a time in my life that prayer wasn't present.

Growing up, we were always praying. It was just something that we did not just at mealtime and bedtime, but just really focused on how prayer is, how we have that relationship with God. So I always think when I'm struggling or when I'm excited or I've really learned to just use prayer as that conversation, definitely when things are challenging.

I think many of you maybe knew my mom and how powerful prayer was in her life, and she helped lead the prayer team here and would pray over chairs in the sanctuary. It just really instilled in us that prayer is just the foundation of that relationship that we have with God and that it's just a constant conversation. So we've done a lot of praying.

Parent of two teenagers. That requires a lot of prayer. I just can't even think of a time. It's just like the thing that I do. I go to all the time, any time, whether I'm in the car or at home during my quiet time, prayer time. Just instill that as a habit in our family, too. So I just am really excited.

So thank you, Horizons, for making prayer a priority and helping us to remember that that's the anchor to our relationship with Jesus.

Prayer from Brian:

Let's pray together. God, thank you so much that you have invited us to be part of what you're doing in the world. Thank you. That your Holy Spirit is with us and has within us got him asking that you would help us as individuals and as a community to learn how to pay attention to the things that you're most concerned about. We want to be closer to you. We want to keep in step with what you are doing in our lives and in our community. Thank you, God, you're so good to us. Jesus name, We pray, Amen.