

Our Story
December 31, 2023

I am going to tell you a story today. It is our story.

Invite choir to come down to the congregation.

Address the children.

I know many of you are visitors and you are not part of this story. But as you listen, I hope you will discover how God calls us and uses us and empowers us and walks by our side through all of life's ups and downs.

It was the year 2009, and I was a solo pastor in New Jersey. After 5 years, I missed working with colleagues, so I began to look throughout the country for associate positions in the church. I didn't want to be a head pastor because I am not a fan of buildings and budgets and all those administrative things. I wanted to focus on the spiritual growth of people, drawing people closer to God and helping them in their spiritual walk.

I spent 9 months looking when I came across a job description for Valley Church: Associate Pastor of Christian Education and Outreach. The description said Valley was a retirement community. What in the world was a retirement community? And Arizona? By this time, I was a bit desperate and I did like the job description, so I sent in my resume.

It wasn't too long before the search committee from Valley contacted me to do a phone interview. The search committee included:

Eloise Fredrickson as chair

Helen Philips

Linda Freeman

Pat Keyser

Dave Moore

Bob Herrick

Bruce Rader

We had a great time with the phone interview. We laughed and talked, and all of sudden, one of the guys said, "Okay, that's it. Thank you." And they hung up! I imagined everyone on the phone pointing their thumb downward in a "no."

It was the exact opposite. The thumbs were pointing up. They called back and invited me to visit. One of the first questions I asked: Do I have to learn how to play golf? They assured me I did not.

I remember so many things about that first visit:

- Eloise picking me up at the hotel and telling me about their beautiful sunsets. I looked back and there it was.
- Meeting John Dunham and Larry DeLong for the first time. We hit it off instantly.
- Teaching a class/devotion to the committee at Eloise's house. It was a beautiful day, and the door was open to the outside. I don't remember what I taught, but what I do remember is that the birds began to sing. Linda Freeman told me later that God was using the birds to confirm I was to be their next pastor.
- Having our last meal together at The Stables in Tubac. After the meal, several on the committee pulled me aside and offered me the job. We all knew this was right. But I did the pastor thing and said I would pray about it. It was just a formality...I accepted the next day.
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This was October. I met you all in November, and I started January 1, 2010.

As I began my call with you, this became my prayer as Paul prayed for his congregation:

Read Eph 3:16-19

"I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

This was the focus of my work here at Valley.

The first 3 years were happy years. John Dunham and Larry DeLong and I worked well together and became good friends.

John retired in 2013, and Paul Phillips came on board.

One of the questions we ask new members when they join the church: will they be faithful members in the good times and the bad times. The church is run by humans, and humans make mistakes, they get angry with one another. We are just like any family. People became angry and critical. Larry began to struggle. People began to leave.

It was the spring of 2016, and I called our Presbytery for help. As they walked by our side and Larry's, I was scheduled to go on a Sabbatical in the middle of May. Sabbaticals are offered to pastors in their 7th year in the church. It is essentially a 3-month paid leave, a time for rest, a time for study.

I offered to delay my sabbatical, but everyone encouraged me to take it – Larry, session, Presbytery...everyone. So I left for three months.

I took the most ultimate introverted Sabbatical known to humanity. I stayed home. I quickly developed into a pattern: mornings were for God. I prayed, read scripture, read spiritual books (total of 12) and journaled. I journaled my prayers, what I read in scripture, what I learned in the books I read. Sometimes this time with God lasted several hours. Sometimes it went well into the afternoon. The rest of the day was for house projects. I did a lot of painting.

I returned to church in mid-August. Ten days later, Larry took his own life. And we were thrown into the deepest grief a church can know. It was a Friday night, and I was at the scene of Larry's death. Brad Munroe, our executive presbyter and my pastor, called me. He was in Texas. I remember his exact words, "Diane, you are now moderator of Session. Call a Session meeting Saturday morning, and figure out how you will handle Sunday morning." That was the beginning of walking with you through this grief.

But here is what was amazing: everything I needed for the next 8 months was in that journal: every devotion, every sermon, every Valley Voice article. In a horrible way, it was almost easy. God had prepared me for this time.

Eight months later, it was time to call an interim pastor, who was trained to handle situations like ours. And I did one of the hardest things I have ever done, even more difficult than taking you through a suicide. I had to let you go and hand you over to another pastor who had not gone through what we had gone through.

Mark Medina arrived April of 2017. Mark's job was not to get us to like him, but to change our behavior so this would never happen again. Mark had some interesting requirements of his associates, and one of them was to have Pastor Paul and me sit in the congregation from time to time instead of leading worship.

I was ticked. I did not want to sit in the congregation. I wanted to lead the congregation in worship. But we did it anyway, and I remember sitting in the middle of the sanctuary on this one particular Sunday I was assigned in the congregation. I don't know what part of the service this happened, what was being said or sung, but I suddenly heard God speak. I can count on one hand the number of times I have heard God speak in my 47 years of walking with God.

But this was so clear: I brought you to this place for this time. At that moment, without a doubt, I knew this was my call...to take this church through Larry's time and the aftermath of his death. This is what God had prepared and equipped me for.

Has God called you to something? Did God ask you to do something difficult? But you know without a doubt that God gave you the ability to do it? This is what God does. God uses us in this world to be the arms of Jesus in all kinds of situations. God will equip you. God will not fail you and never leave you.

In the Fall of 2019, Pastor Craig arrived. And before we knew it, we were thrown into a pandemic. Jamie and Wes and Craig and I spend hours trying to figure out how to get a worship service to you in your homes by using my cell phone. Much of it we learned by trial and error with the help of Jeff Babcock and Dick Horn. We started the daily email blasts, and eventually, we learned how to livestream...two ministries that are still going strong today.

Today, you are a strong, vibrant, happy church. After Larry's suicide, I did not know if we would survive. Would God ever bless us again? But God deemed us worthy to continue, and we were resurrected for we are resurrection people. We are a new congregation, a grateful one, a stable one, a caring one, much wiser one.

For me, the call that I heard that day in the congregation during worship is now over. I did what I was called to do. As a result, I bear the marks: I am grayer, more wrinkled, more stooped, I developed a turkey neck. And now I get to rest. You are in good hands with Pastor Craig.

During my time here, we have grown to love one another so deeply. You upheld me through the death of my pets and both my parents. You fed me, gifted me, prayed for me, enabling me to do my call. You have become my family.

So it seems strange to say I must go. All I know is that it is the right thing to do. All calls come to an end. It is time for Pastor Craig and any other pastor who comes along to move you into the future. I am so excited to see what God will do.

So here is another prayer for you from the Apostle Paul. It is my heart: Read Phil 1:3-11

"I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

⁷"It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart...

⁹"And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God."

I have learned from you how to love. How to care for one another. How to be a family. I saw your heart for God...to know God deeper, to serve God wholeheartedly, your compassion for the needy. You have taught me how to love and give and serve.

I end with a charge. This is similar to the charge I gave you all when Pastor Craig was installed as Pastor. It is similar to the charge I gave Session in my final report to them. The charge is based on a movie we all know and love: the Wizard of Oz.

In that movie, while on a journey, the main characters are each searching for something:

The Lion is looking for courage

The Scarecrow is looking for a brain

The Tin Man is looking for a heart

Dorothy is looking for home

So congregation, I first charge you with courage.

Have courage to hear and follow God's call, wherever that leads. Have courage to face changes and the unexpected. Embrace the possibilities. Have courage to try something new.

Pastor Craig's job is not primarily to make you happy or feel good about yourselves, but to shepherd you, to poke you from time to time, to herd you towards Christ. Grant him the freedom to dream and lead.

Have courage, congregation.

Second, I charge you with being wise (or having a brain).

We are all excited because our seats are filling up again, but that is not why we are here. Church is not primarily numbers, but what God is doing in the hearts and minds of people. Church is about sharing the Good News with others, inviting people into this Body of Christ, and allowing them to express their faith through their service. When you make decisions, it is not to get more people into this building, but to share God's love with more and more people...whether they join this church or not.

Have wisdom, congregation.

Third, I charge you with heart.

You already do have heart for the homebound, the sick, the needy, the troubles in the world. You show this heart through the mission committee, the prayer group, the flower ministry, Network of Caring, Grief Ministry, and so much more (including the Noisy Offering this morning).

My challenge to you today is have a heart for Pastor Craig and Judy. Pastor Craig will be a solo pastor for at least a year in a pretty big church. He will have many demands on him. Do not be one of those demands. Work alongside him. Offer help. Offer your respect, your care, your friendship.

Allow Craig to have his days off. He has those days off for a reason. He needs his down time, and time to spend with Judy.

Pray every day for them.

Pray for strength and wisdom and courage. Pray for his soul, that he will know the love of God more fully each day.

Have heart, congregation.

Finally, I charge you to be a home.

When I have new member class on the first day of class, I ask this question: Why did you decide to join this church? The answer I hear the most is: "It felt like home."

Green Valley is made up of people away from their families. You have created a home for many people. I think of Thanksgiving when we become a home for 150 people who have nowhere else to go.

I charge you to continue making this church a home for everyone, including the lonely, the displaced, the homebound for you are a family of God.

So, Church, you continue your journey with Pastor Craig...and God. You don't know where the yellow brick road will take you, or whom you will meet along the way, but God is with you every step of the way. Have courage, have wisdom, have heart, be a home. Walk together into a future full of hope. Because God has given you a second chance.

May you follow wholeheartedly the One whose birth date we have remembered this past week and today. He is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing.

Please stand as we sing a Christmas carol "What Child is This."

Amen.