Stop, Look, Listen!
Genesis 45:1-8
Acts 2:1-12

Remember those quiet days of summer, when everything seemed to move at a leisurely pace? When there was time for quiet evenings with friends and family, for picnics and afternoon naps. Those quiet, lazy days of summer, when life used to slow down, are now long gone. In fact, schedules often become more hectic. There are summer camps and activities for families to coordinate. What was once a break from the regular routine has now been replaced by the challenge of new and often more complicated schedules.

I am not naïve enough to suggest that it is possible to return to the quiet, slower summers of 50 years ago. The demands on our lives are different now. If we are no longer able to change the whole rhythm of a season, what realistic options do we have?

Let’s begin by narrowing our time frame. Instead of thinking of summer rest in terms of months or weeks, let’s consider the rhythm of each day. In summertime, with more daylight hours, we have the opportunity to try something new.

The first step is to stop! Too often, we simply attempt to slow down . . . just a little. Which is always an exercise in frustration. Slowing down never achieves the renewal we so desperately need. Unfortunately, we dismiss the whole idea of stopping because we feel that we do not have the necessary time; however, the solution is simpler than it might first appear.

Take a timeout. I know, I know, timeouts remind us of childhood punishments, but I want you to move beneath those feelings to the purpose behind a timeout. Being forced to take a childhood timeout always meant taking an intentional break from whatever you were doing. It is this intentional break that pays the dividends.

I have a confession to make to you: I am energized by my full, busy life. I seldom take a timeout. The invitation to return to Davidson for my 35th College Reunion has forced me to take one of life’s significant timeouts. It has given me the opportunity to stop and to look back over more than a half-century of memories.

You see; I am a child of this congregation. This sanctuary holds a significant place in my life. At 3 months old, I was baptized over there. At 13 years old, I was confirmed on those steps. Endorsed by the Session, I went to seminary from this church. My deep connections with this congregation are filled with wonderful people. I know that more than a few of you remember Dr. James Woods. He brought me into the world. Stood as the Elder at my baptism. Participated in my ordination service. John Rogers, the pastor of my youth, planted the seed of ordained ministry in a conversation I did not recall until relatively recently.

The point of this reminiscing? Perspective! It’s a reminder to all of us that we need to stop long enough to see the broader sweep of the unfolding events in our lives. To recognize the connections that are so easy to miss as we rush through our busy days.

This morning’s passage from Genesis epitomizes the power of such perspective. Joseph’s brothers are standing before a mighty, Egyptian official. Dressed in official, formal attire Joseph was the image of Egyptian power and authority. Then we are invited into an intimate family moment. Threatening to detain Benjamin on trumped-up charges, Joseph’s brother Judah offered himself in Benjamin’s stead, pleading with this Egyptian prince to take him as a slave rather than the second son of his father’s beloved wife, Rachel. The love and sacrifice Joseph witnessed moved him so deeply he had to clear the room of all Egyptians, and then revealed himself to his brothers.
The brothers were confused and then terrified. This was their brother Joseph that they had sold into slavery! Now he had the power to exact terrible vengeance on them. In their native Hebrew, he reassured them: 

*Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life . . . it was not you who sent me here, but God . . .* Joseph placed all the twist and turns of his own life into a much larger, broader context. God had a plan for the people of Israel and Joseph was called to play a critical role. The hardships that he personally experienced were secondary to the importance of the mission. Joseph looked at the unfolding of his life from the perspective of years and decades. He understood that it was not simply about him. He took the *long view.*

Taking the *long view* is not easy today. Our world moves too fast. We live episodically, slicing our lives into ever-smaller time segments. The very speed at which information comes at us reinforces this problem. News stories are on an ever-shorter cycle. Commercials have gotten briefer. In the 1960’s, they lasted one minute. When was the last time you saw a one-minute commercial? The average commercial today is 15 seconds long. There are actually 7-second commercials! If you see a one-minute commercial now, it feels like a mini-drama!

This weekend marks my 35th College Reunion. Reconnecting is the theme of reunions, but I discovered that it is more than renewing old friendships. It involves reconnecting with the deeper things in life. If you will permit me a moment of personal privilege, I would like to describe a gathering yesterday morning. It was the Class of 1979’s Memorial Service. In the remembrances, the years melted away. We reconnected with classmates that had gone on ahead of us, we reconnected with each other, and we recognized the importance of what we had shared over three and half decades ago. How it had profoundly shaped the course of our lives. It is well said that we know *who* we are and *where* we are going by taking stock of *how* we got here. Life is truly full of wonderful and surprising discoveries, if we take the time and attention to appreciate them!

Today is the celebration of Pentecost. When God surprised the disciples in the rush of the wind. With transformed voices they began proclaiming the *Good News* in a way that everyone could hear and receive it.

The gathering on the Day of Pentecost had deep religious roots for each of the disciples. Traditionally in Judaism, Pentecost recognizes the *Giving of the Law* at Mt. Sinai and is celebrated fifty days after the Exodus (Passover). In the receiving of the Ten Commandments, God spoke to the people of Israel through Moses. On the first Pentecost following Easter morning, fifty days after Christ’s Resurrection, God is speaking intimately to and through the first church leaders. On Pentecost, the church celebrates its birthday with the coming of the Holy Spirit. The disciples were *set on fire!* They left the relative safety and security of Jerusalem and began spreading the *Good News* to the world.

Perhaps you saw this recent segment on *60 Minutes.* It is an extraordinary story from the Second World War in which a 29-year-old London stockbroker saw a desperate need and responded to it. My recounting of it is borrowed from several sources.

Nicholas Winton went to Prague, and ended up saving the lives of 669 children, mostly Jews, from almost certain death. His story begins at the end of 1938, with Europe on the brink of war. In Germany, violence against Jews was escalating.

In December 1938, Winton was about to leave for a skiing holiday in Switzerland, when he received a phone call from a friend asking him to cancel his holiday and immediately come to Prague, telling him: *I have a most interesting assignment, and I need your help. Don't bother bringing your skis.*
What Winton witnessed were thousands of people hopelessly trapped. No food, limited shelter, and no way out. Winton is now one of the few people who can bear firsthand testimony to those desperate days; he's 105 years old. *All I knew was that the people that I met couldn't get out. And they were looking for ways of at least getting their children out.*

In Prague there was no organization to help these families. When asked, what made him think he could do it, he replies: *I work on the motto that if something's not impossible, there must be a way of doing it.* Working frantically through the early months of 1939, he, his mother, his secretary and a few volunteers raised money and found host families for the children. By his own admission, he used a bit of smoke and mirrors to get the children out. On September 1, 1939 the effort ended when Hitler invaded Poland and closed the German borders.

For 50 years, he didn't tell anyone about his wartime rescue efforts, not even his wife. In 1988, she found a scrapbook from 1939 in their attic with all the children's photos, a complete list of names, and a few letters from parents of the children. *I didn't really keep it secret, he told CBS. I just didn't talk about it.* Later that year, the BBC learned about the story, and he went on a show, where he met scores of the children he had saved. In 2002, he was knighted and celebrated in a documentary called 'Nicky's Family'.

But he doesn't care for the attention. *I'm not interested in the past,* he said. *I think there's too much emphasis nowadays on the past and what has happened. And nobody is concentrated on the present and the future.*

Recently, I heard about a commencement address that emphasized the connection between discipline and virtue. The speaker wanted the graduates to recognize that living a virtuous life does not happen by chance. It requires making intentional choices and putting them into practice.

Friends, disciplined living involves taking *“the long view.”* Recognizing that each day we are establishing a legacy, and it is this legacy that has the power to create a virtuous life. The question for us is not: Will we do the right thing when the moment arrives? Rather, have we been putting into practice, every day, the habits and behaviors that will ensure we do what is right?

Coming full circle, there are three steps that can get us started. **Stop!** Schedule a break into your day. It does not have to be a long one. Try ten minutes. Ten minutes when you are not thinking about your to-do list, answering emails, or organizing yourself. Ten minutes to stop completely and step outside of the demands of the day – to **look** and **listen**. Learn to really **look**. Open your eyes to the world around you. Notice the shape of a tree, the color of the sky, the pattern of the clouds. Look into the eyes of the people in your life and see the gift they are to you and the world! Open your ears and **listen** to the amazing sounds around you, the song of a bird, the rustling of branches in a tree, the music of a loved one’s voice. Let the sheer wonder of the world fill you with awe and gratitude. *Amen!* 