

Series: Time to Build
Title: Preparing for a Miracle
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Preacher: Rev Stu Cameron

This week Bieber-Fever hit Brisbane. For those of you who have no clue what I am talking about, teenage heartthrob Justin Bieber played a sold out concert on Tuesday night for 13,000 screaming fans. Teenage girls stalked the airport and his hotel all desperate for just a glance of their idol. Such adulation is nothing new of course. Back in 1964 in my old home town of Adelaide, 300,000 people, 1/3 of the population, lined the streets to greet a new sensation out of England called the Beatles.

Jesus was no rock star, but he did know how to attract a crowd. Perhaps the most conspicuous 'character' in the four gospels is the crowd who flocked to see and hear Jesus. At times the crowd that followed him was so large and their needs so overwhelming, Jesus and the disciples would literally flee to get some peace and quiet. In the story we are about to read, Jesus has just sent his 12 disciples out on a mission trip and they have returned with exciting reports of people being healed of diseases and delivered from demons. But the crowd interrupts them so much they did not even have time to share a meal together. Jesus suggests they find a quieter place to talk and so they travelled by boat to the north-eastern side of the Sea of Galilee.

Despite this the crowd was not easily thwarted. They were desperate to be in Jesus' presence. They ran ahead of the boat and were there when Jesus and the disciples landed. Eventually a crowd of at least 15,000 people gathered to see and hear Jesus. Let's pick up the story as it is recorded in the Gospel of Mark:

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.
(Mark 6:34)

Let's hit the pause button. Fascinating here is the same crowd that Jesus and the disciples were seeking to flee, Jesus now has compassion on.

The word translated as compassion is the Greek word that looks like this. You pronounce it this way – *splagchnizomai*. Say it with me.

Translated literally, it means to be moved in one's bowels. It comes from *the* Greek root word for entrails, the vital inner organs of a person—the stomach, heart, lungs, spleen, liver, and kidneys. In the ancient world it was this part of a person that was thought to be the seat of human emotion. One scholar suggests that an accurate translation of the word is to have your guts ripped apart.

Today we say our heart was moved; then they said their bowels were moved.

To say that Jesus had compassion for the people – that he felt *splagchnizomai* – is really to say that he had a feeling deep in his gut, that he was sick in his stomach at their plight. He felt so moved he had to do something. Let's continue:

By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat."

But he answered, "You give them something to eat."

They said to him, "That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?"

“How many loaves do you have?” he asked. “Go and see.” When they found out, they said, “Five—and two fish.”
(Mark 6:35-38)

Let’s pause again. The crowd has gathered, Jesus has compassion on them and so teaches them many things. The disciples are tired and fed up. It’s late in the day and they are miles from a warm bed and a hot meal. They point out the bleeding obvious to Jesus; they will need food soon.

Jesus’ response – ‘You give them something to eat’ – is astonishing, and the disciples reaction completely understandable.

‘You can’t be serious Jesus – feed them all!’ The disciples get very practical. They count the cost.

The disciple’s logic is sound. First there are 12 disciples and the crowd is somewhere around 15,000 strong. You do the math. Second, the disciples have just returned from a mission trip that Jesus commissioned them for. They went with these instructions:

Take nothing for the journey except a staff - no bread, no bag, no money in your belts.
(Mark 6:8)

The disciples have just returned from a mission trip for which they left with no resources whatsoever. They have not returned home. All they would have with them would have been the gifts of people they met on the road and which they could carry. Not very promising at all. But Jesus presses them and they tally up the food in the pantry they find they have five small loaves of bread and two fish. The normal size of a loaf of bread would have been a couple of centimeters thick and no more than 20 centimeters long. Not exactly a smorgasbord. Let’s continue the story.

Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish.
(Mark 6:39-43)

Jesus gets the crowd to sit down on the green grass.
He then proceeds to lead them to food. He cares for them.
These sheep without a shepherd.
Remind you of something?

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters...He prepares a table for me in the presence of my enemies.
(Psalm 23:1-2, 5)

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who with gut-level compassion and through a miracle of provision cares for the lost sheep.

Not only do the people eat, there are 12 baskets of leftovers. Their cups overflow and their plates are piled high.

This miracle of provision, which is the only ministry miracle of Jesus recorded in all four gospels, reveals again the true character of Jesus as the son of God, the Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep.

It also reveals the true calling of Jesus disciples; to be those through whom Jesus extends his ministry to the world.

This week we begin a nine-week journey that is pivotal in the life of our church. After years of planning, dreaming and praying it is Time for us to Build – to extend our facilities simply so that that we can reach more people in our city with the gospel.

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To achieve this vision we are going to need a miracle of God's provision. The project will cost \$4.5million dollars. \$3million of that \$4.5 million dollars will need to be given from the resources of people like you and me who call Newlife home.

\$3million! We must be crazy. Let's be honest, it's not a great time in our economy, particularly here on the Gold Coast. Let me be personal; I don't know about you, but when Sue and I look at our financial resources we are tempted to see nothing much more than a few stale loaves of bread and a couple of smelly fish.

Make no mistake, to achieve the vision God has set before us, we need a miracle of God's provision like the miracle that fed the crowd. We are in an 'Only God' moment in the life of our church. Only as God moves in and through us will we see this miracle of provision happen.

So as we move into this season, let me in faith suggest what will happen over the next nine weeks:

God will move us

A miracle occurred after Jesus was moved with compassion, after he had his guts torn open when he looked over for the crowd. They were sheep without a shepherd.

In 2005 some shepherds were eating breakfast outside the town of Gevas, Turkey, when they were surprised to see a lone sheep jump off of a nearby cliff and fall to its death. They were then stunned when the rest of the nearly 1,500 sheep in the herd followed, each leaping lemming-like off of the same cliff.

When it was all over, 450 of the sheep perished in a billowy, white pile. Those that jumped from the middle and end of the herd were saved as the pile became higher and the fall more cushioned. A shepherd said afterwards, 'There's nothing we can do. They're all wasted.'

We live in a city full of lost sheep, a city of people who are starving spiritually and who are staring down the barrel of an eternity without God. We live in a city of wasted lives.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said this of people without a shepherd:

There were questions but no answers, distress but no relief, anguish of consciousness but no deliverance, tears but no consolation, sin but no forgiveness.
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

All around us are people struggling with loneliness and depression.

All around us are people strangled by addiction, including the most pervasive of addictions, materialism.

All around us are people weighed down with anxiety.

All around us are people struggling with unemployment and poverty.

As he commanded Peter, Jesus commands us, 'Feed my Sheep.'

Over these nine weeks, in new and profound ways, God is going to stir in our hearts, Spirit and guts so that we see these people as he sees them. We are going to become agitated, uncomfortable and distressed.

The image of this season is this chair. We are not extending our building for us. We have just enough room for those of us who are already here. We are not extending our building for us, but for those who are to come – the lost sheep of our city who desperately need to hear the gospel.

So my daily prayer for our church through this time will be this, an adaptation of the prayer of Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision:

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Break our hearts Lord with the things that break your heart.

God will move us, and over the next couple of months:

God will use us

Jesus engaged the disciples in the miracle in three ways. First he commanded them to feed the crowd. Then he collected all the food they had, performed a miracle of multiplication, and then had the disciples distribute the abundance he had created.

Jesus was well and truly capable of calling Manna down from heaven to feed the crowd, just as Moses did in the wilderness. But he didn't. Jesus chose to use the finite faith and resources of his disciples to perform the miracle. A thimble-full of faith and five lousy loaves of bread and two smelly fish.

God gave the disciples the incredible privilege of participating in the miracle. Over the next eight weeks our Father offers us the same privilege. This is how God primarily chooses to work; through us his people. It would be easy for us to look at the pile of money we need and sit back and wait for God to provide it, money falling from heaven a little like Manna. As Rick Warren says:

What we often wait for God to do for us, God is waiting to do through us.
(Rick Warren)

God will use us, and:

God will challenge us

Jesus asked the disciples how much food they had, and over the next couple of months he is asking us how much resource we have that can be used for his purposes. God is not asking us to look inside our pantry to see how much bread and sardines we have, but to assess our bank accounts, term deposits, share portfolios, property portfolios, earning capacity and even our wills. God challenges us, 'What will you make available so my sheep can be fed?'

God will challenge all of us, from the youngest to the oldest, the richest to the poorest. All of us, without exception, have the capacity to give. All of us, without exception, can experience the unbridled joy and sheer delight of sacrificial giving.

Some of us are already excited about this whole deal. We are already working out what and how we give. We can't wait for Pledge Sunday to come.

Others of us will catch the vision as we go along, which is great. We will commit to becoming a legacy leaver and history maker.

And some of us are already annoyed, if not angry. Here they go, banging on about money. We're uncomfortable and resent the fact we are. Let me say up front, no-one is going to pressure or coerce you into giving. That is the last thing we want to do. If you choose not to give, frankly that will be your loss. All I ask you is this; do not rob the rest of us of the joy of giving and growing.

Elisabeth Elliot was a missionary to Ecuador, where her husband Jim died giving his life in serving the people there. She says this:

Personal sacrifice paves the way for God's miracles.
(Elisabeth Elliot)

Make no mistake, God will challenge us to personal sacrifice that will involve behavior medication and lifestyle changes. God will challenge us to give according to the capacity he has given us to give.

God is not looking for equal gifts, but equal sacrifice.

God will grow us

Over the next nine weeks God is going to grow us spiritually. Before anything else, God wants to build his people. God will build our faith, our service, our commitment, our joy and our generosity

All of us who participate in Time to Build are going to grow spiritually. In fact I would say that if you are not interested in growing spiritually, don't come to church for the next nine weeks. If you don't want to be challenged or stretched or grow deeper in Jesus, stay away.

Time to Build is not just a Sunday thing; it is a seven day a week program. As you leave today you will be given a copy of Daily Devotions that I have written especially for this season. What a powerful thing it will be as we read together through the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah and discover the miracles God can do through his people! If you already have a Bible Reading program – great! Either add this to it, or perhaps put it your regular program on hold so you can read the Time to Build Devotions.

We also have the Time to Build small group resource. Each study ties into the weekly preaching and has been written by a different member of the ministry team – Melissa, Ralph, Orrell, Lew, me and others. The study costs \$3. Even if you aren't in a small group, buy a copy and use the study yourself.

Let me say one more thing about this season of growth. Over the next nine weeks we can also expect to be hassled by Satan. When we get serious about spiritual growth, when the church moves forward in mission, when we deepen our fellowship – then the Liar and Deceiver will do all he can to tear down and rip apart. Our unity as a church will be challenged as never before. But we are bought with a price, we are children of the King and so we can say to Satan now and always, 'Go to Hell!'

God will surprise us

God is going to surprise us. Boy, oh boy, God is going to surprise us! Jesus blessed the fives loaves and two fish, gave the food back to the disciples and got them to distribute it to the crowd. Long queues form, one fish burger is made and then another and then another and then another... Can you imagine the stunned surprise of the disciples when they tally up the leftovers? Leftovers, for goodness sake?! And 12 baskets!

AW Tozer says this:

Anything God has ever done, he can do now. Anything God has ever done anywhere, he can do here.
(AW Tozer)

I have no idea how God is going to provide up to \$3million. No idea at all. But I can't wait to find out! I really can't!

Some of us are going to experience surprise miracles of God's provision in our own lives; a new job, an unexpected windfall, a breakthrough in a relationship.

On the dedication plaque for our offices is this passage from Ephesians:

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine, according to his power at work within us, to him the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations, forever and ever! Amen.
(Ephesians 3:20-21)

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Our God is a multiplying God!
Our God is an abundantly more God!

All according to his power at work within us. God is going to surprise us at what we are capable of when we operate in his resurrection power and strength.

God will fill us

Over the next nine weeks we are going to be filled with joy. Honestly, you do not want to miss a week of worship through this season. God has laid some really exciting things on our hearts that we are planning for worship through this time, all of which will lead to praise, adoration and thanksgiving.

On June 26 we are having a combined service here in the church. On that day all four Sunday congregations will come together to celebrate as a family. We are working out how it will happen. It will be chaotic and fun and above all else, a day filled with joy. Over the next couple of months God is going to fill us with His joy.

On June 26, as the whole church is gathered, we will announce the amount that has been given and pledged to the Time to build project. Once we do, let me tell you the first thing we do after we announce the figure; we are going to sing the doxology. In fact, why don't we practice now:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise Him all creatures here below.
Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts, praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

We are going to look back and shake our heads with eyes filled with tears of joy and say over and over again, 'Only God. Only God!'

When we give sacrificially, generously and cheerfully – God fills us with joy.

Over the next couple of weeks God is going to move, use, challenge, grow, surprise and fill us.

On March 7, 2003 Karen Watson left for southern Iraq as a Baptist missionary working on humanitarian projects. One year and a week later she and four other missionaries were killed by insurgents.

Karen left a letter behind for her Pastors to open should she be killed while serving. She signed off her letter with this statement:

The Missionary Heart:

Care more than some think is wise.
Risk more than some think is safe.
Dream more than some think is practical.
Expect more than some think is possible.

What a challenge! What a basis for prayer!

In this season, through Time to Build, as in every season of our church, I hope that here at Newlife we will:

Care more than some think is wise.
Risk more than some think is safe.
Dream more than some think is practical.
Expect more than some think is possible.