
Hi to everybody joining us at all of our physical campuses as well as those of you joining us online at TPO. So glad to have you wherever you may be joining us from.

It's been a few weeks since I've said this, so I just want to reiterate it. I want to speak primarily to our online crowd, especially if you are in the Indianapolis area. I know that many of you are unable to join us physically for any number of reasons. You might be in a high-risk category; you might be caring for somebody in a high-risk category and you're not comfortable being around groups of people just yet. I just want you to know that we love you, we support you, we understand.

And I also just want to say this. We miss you. I know that in this season that we are in we need to be reminded more than ever of the importance of human interaction and connection. So while maybe you're not yet comfortable being physically in the room with other people, I just want you to know that I don't want you to disengage. I don't want you to push back from the table. I want you to stay connected to others so that you can continue to be encouraged and to grow.

I don't just say that because I think that may be happening. I know that it is happening. I've had several DMs and emails from people here recently who have just confessed to me, they just said, "You know what? Last week's message was the first one that I have tuned into in a really long time. And I've actually started to find myself disengaging."

And I get it. We're all under a lot of stress, things are emotional right now, a lot of anxiety even depression, so one of the responses to that can be to isolate. To just sort of push away. And I just want to encourage you. We're working really hard on all of our digital capabilities, not just so that you can tune in, but so that you can engage.

But you know that also goes for you who are in the room too. I don't want you just to show up and to just kind of take in a service and leave. Now, more than ever, we need each other. Would you not agree with that? We need each other.

I know that this has been another emotionally exhausting week as we've just seen one of the most divisive and emotionally charged elections in any of our lifetimes. And I just want to draw our eyes upward and remind us of something that is written in Daniel, chapter 4. It says that God rules over the kingdoms of men. He gives them to whoever he chooses. And God is in control, alright? He is sovereign.

And right now, as a result of the elections that have come in, whether you are full of hope or whether you are at a loss of hope, can I just say that that is misplaced hope. Our hope is in Jesus and in him alone. We trust that he is sovereign over the kingdoms of men.

I can't think of a better passage to study today than the one that we're going to look at in Luke, chapter 6. If you have a Bible or a Bible app go ahead and get there.

Just to recap and catch you up on where we are, we are in a series of messages where we are studying the gospel of Luke. And Luke is one of the four books that begin our New Testament.

Many of you know this: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are handwritten accounts written by four different individuals to four different groups of people, so that we might come to know and understand Jesus better.

Matthew writes primarily with the Jewish people in mind. Mark writes for the Gentiles in mind. John writes for those who are brand new to faith. But Luke writes for a friend. And he has a single person in mind. He spells that out in the first few verses of his gospel where he says, "I've taken the time to write out a well-ordered account, Theophilus, so that you might come to believe."

And I don't know a whole lot about Theophilus, but I know enough to know that he was unsettled in his spirit. I know enough to know that he was struggling, and he had some questions that he didn't have answers to. And Luke takes the time to say, "Let me just kind of spell this out for you. This is where your hope can be found."

We began this study back in August and we just called it *Settled in Spirit*, because all of us are unsettled right now as we journey through this season. But now, in this second section of our study, we're just calling it *Strengthened in Spirit*, because there are a lot of things that we can't control right now going on in our world.

But one thing that we do have a say in is just what it is that God is calling each one of us to do. And I want to finish this year strong. Is anybody with me in that? I can't control all of the stuff going on around me, but I can make some personal decisions for my life to say, "This is where my head and my heart are going to be," and I want to finish in a strong way.

And today, as we come to just a few verses in Luke, chapter 6, Jesus is going to tell us what we already know, and we don't necessarily like to hear it but it's true. It's that storms in life are just simply inevitable and you can't dodge them, and you can't out run them. You've got to weather them.

About 10 years ago, my home town in Joplin, Missouri got hit by a massive tornado. Some of you might recall this from the news. There was a tornado, it was a mile wide—now get that in your head, a tornado that was a mile wide. It was rain-wrapped so you couldn't see it and it went straight through the middle of my home town causing destruction for 13 miles.

We actually took several different groups, teams of people from the church, back to do some clean up a few days after that tornado rolled through. It was surreal. If any of you have ever had a tornado strike your hometown and it caused significant damage, you know what I'm talking about.

I didn't even recognize the place where I grew up. All of the landmarks were gone. Buildings that I'd always known to be there, trees that had been there for 100 years, they were gone. I could see from one end of town to the other. I'd never been able to do that before.

It was a very surreal experience. We were in one neighborhood helping to clean up and at one point I took a break, and I did something without thinking. I just reached into my back pocket to see if my passport was still there. And I was like, "What am I doing? I don't need a passport. I'm in Missouri." And I realized that I thought for a split second that I was in a third-world country. That's how strange the environment was around me.

And that tornado, that storm, has left a mark on the psyche of people in my home town. We have friends and family who live there. And every time dark clouds roll in people get nervous. And storm shelters are big business. They didn't used to be.

And now, it's not uncommon to go into somebody's garage and see like a concrete box that they've bought, and they've bolted it into the floor because they want to be ready for the next storm. They know that storms are inevitable.

Jesus actually says this in John, chapter 16. He says, "In this world you are going to have trouble, you will have trouble." Not if. But you will. But then he says right after that, "But I want you to take heart. I want you to be filled with hope because I have overcome the world."

What I want you to know today, is what you already know to be true, we are in a storm and storms are coming. Storms are inevitable. But oftentimes storms, in an unusual way, can be a gift because they are the very things that anchor us to the stuff that we never should have been disconnected from to begin with.

See, I want you to understand this important principle as we get ready to jump into this passage:

The best time to prepare for a storm is before it comes.

If you wait until you're in the middle of a storm to try and build a storm shelter, it's going to be incredibly difficult. If there is one thing that 2020 has taught us is to be prepared for the storms that are going to roll into our lives in the future. So we prepare for those storms by the daily decisions that we make in every category of our lives.

So you do the things you know that you need to do financially to create enough margin so that when the storm hits financially, and it will, you can weather it. You do the types of things in your marriage, you make investments into that relationship, so that when the storm hits, and it will, that you can absorb that.

You make the types of decisions in your own spiritual life, your own daily disciplines so that when you go through a really difficult stretch, and it's going to come, you actually have the margin to deal with it and to grow through it.

See, COVID, unfortunately, has just revealed more of who you already were. And I don't like that statement because I know that it is true for me. I've tried to be very candid with you. I've not tried to get up here and pretend to be feeling something that I'm not.

I've tried to express to you through the reality of how I've felt over the last seven months, and yet at the same time to be anchored to the hope that is found in Jesus. And I've got to tell you that this season has revealed some things in me that I've been proud of and then it's revealed some things that I haven't been proud of.

I would say this is true for organizations. I can't speak for you, and the market that you are in, but I'm sure that you have a great deal of expertise in what is happening during this season.

I can speak to the church, because I've been talking with and meeting with leaders all over the country, even all over the world. I was just on the phone with a pastor friend of mine in Germany just asking him what they are going through. It's very, very similar globally.

And I would just simply say that what this season has done is that if a church or an organization is already healthy and on mission, the crisis has just accelerated that, and they

are continuing to be healthy and on mission. But, unfortunately, if they weren't it's also accelerated the unhealth.

In fact, we're estimating, we don't know for sure, but were estimating that by the time this is all said and done, there will be roughly 20 to 30 percent of churches in the United States that will close their doors for the last time, because it's just accelerated the direction that many were already headed.

Can I just simply say that the same is true personally? The same is true personally. And now is a wake up call for us to maybe make some adjustments. Maybe this pandemic has actually been a gift and God is saying, "Hey, I've been knocking on the door of your heart and you haven't been listening. And so now I've got a megaphone." C. S. Lewis said that pain is a megaphone of God to arouse a sleeping world. So right now we can make some adjustments.

Someone needs to hear this today. Even though you may be walking through an incredibly difficult time, and there is so much anxiety and so much uncertainty and so much stress—can I just simply say, we can be real about all of that? And at the same time, please don't despair. Please don't lose hope. We will come through this and out of it and that God has a plan for this.

And I can say this confidently, not because I know the future, but because I know the God of the future and God's word promises that we will come through this and history actually shows that we will come through this. And every now and then we just need to tune down the noise of all of the talking heads and the voices that are constantly inundating us through our devices and we need to listen to what God is trying to say, because he's trying to speak.

We just look at history, and we see this. This is a simple statement that we don't hear enough of:

Throughout history, 100% of pandemics end.

Did you know that? There has never been a pandemic in history that has gone on and on and on and on. They end. Usually in about 18 to 24 months. So if history is any indicator, we're about halfway through. And we've got better therapeutics and medicine now.

Did you know that this is not unprecedented? The Spanish flu hit 100 years ago. There is a real picture of people in Northern California who have masks. You can notice a sign: Wear a mask or go to jail. I don't know. Something tells me this has been contentious before. And yet, I don't know about you, but I've never worn a mask in my life until now.

So we'll come through it. We'll come out of it. When you're in the middle of it, of a trial, it feels like it's never going to end. And that's a recipe for despair. And God says, "No, no, no. You hold on to hope."

This is what we are reminded of as I mentioned to you Daniel, chapter 4 just a minute ago:

God rules and reigns over earthly kings and kingdoms.

God is in control in a world that seems so out of control. And maybe we were addicted to control and God says, "I'm going to pry your hands off of that steering wheel. And I'm going to actually put you in a place where you might even be forced to lean on me like you never have before."

So in the meantime, as we are waiting for God to work out what he's doing in this world, can I just simply ask you this question? And this is for you and you alone to answer. What are you going to look like on the other side? How do you want to come through this? What do you want your life to look like?

And even though it's not ideal to start a shelter when you're in the middle of the storm, it is never too late to start building well. And that's what Jesus is going to communicate in Luke, chapter 6, starting in verse 46. He says,

"So why do you keep calling me 'Lord, Lord!' when you don't do what I say? I will show you what it's like when someone comes to me, listens to my teaching, and then follows it. It is like," so this is an analogy that he is using, "it's like a person building a house who digs deep and lays the foundation on solid rock. When," not if, "the floodwaters rise and break against that house, it stands firm because it is well built."

One of the things that this year has revealed to many of us, quite possibly, is that our foundation wasn't on solid rock and we've gotten blown all around. And Jesus is simply saying, "Here's how you stormproof your life. Here's how you stand secure."

You don't just say with your lips, "Jesus is Lord," you actually hear what he says through his word by way of the Spirit and you apply it. And when you apply it, even if it's just one thing, even if it's just one baby step he says that that is contributing to the rock-solid foundation of your life. So that way when the next storm rolls around, and it will, you can stand firm.

So, regardless of who is teaching from this platform, we've just sort of gotten this into our mentality as we talk about delivering messages up here. We ask these three questions. We're not ready to preach or teach until these three questions are answered.

And the first one, I just want you to know this, is: What do I want you to know? So when we get up here, primarily, we are taking a passage of Scripture anywhere from three to 15 verses of God's word and we're saying, "We're going to make sure that it is thoroughly unpacked as best as we can. Here's the information we want you to know."

But it's not just what you know. The next question is: What do I want you to feel? Until I get you to feel it, you're probably not going to do anything with it. That's the language of the heart. That's story. That's emotion. That's the thing that stirs who you are.

Then the third question is so important: What do I want you to do? That's application. What's the step that you can take? Regardless of where you are on your spiritual journey, whether you've been following Jesus for 30 years or three minutes, you can say, "Here's the next step that I need to take."

It's this process right here, we want to explain God's word—it's explanation. It's application. We want to illustrate the application that always leads to life transformation. And it is one, small baby step at a time. It's sort of like building a foundation---just one stone at a time.

Then Jesus goes on in verse 49 and he says:

"But anyone who hears and doesn't obey," doesn't apply, "is like a person who builds a house right on the ground, without a foundation. When the floods sweep down against that house, it will collapse into a heap of ruins."

So I want you to get the picture in your head. You've got two builders, two houses, probably a lot of the same types of supplies that are going into them. They probably look very similar. At a

distance they don't look any different. But you get up close and you do some examination. You see that one is at high risk of collapsing in a storm because there is no foundation.

Can I just say that a foundation of a house is so oftentimes overlooked? I mean I've been over to a lot of people's houses for a meal or to visit with them, I've been over to a lot of people's houses that I have admired. Never once, I can honestly say that as I was walking down the sidewalk I said, "That is a great looking foundation." That's just a part of the house I don't look at.

I look at the paint. I look at the shutters. I'll look at the design: French farm house, mid-century modern, whatever I just admire all of that stuff. It doesn't really matter. If a storm hits it and the foundation isn't good, it's gone. And the same thing is true for all of our lives. At a distance, on the surface we might look like we've got it together, we might look like we are doing okay, but how's the foundation?

And only you can assess that fully. Only you know yourself better than anyone. How's your foundation? And can it withstand the storms of life? Are you cutting corners? Are you overlooking some things you know you need to pay attention to?

A couple of years ago I was in our basement at home on a Saturday. We have an unfinished basement. And from one of the pipes that are pre-plumbed for one day when we will finish our basement, water started to come out of the top of it. Now, I'm not an expert by any stretch of the imagination, but I know that's not good.

So I called the plumber. He comes out later that day. It was January. It was really, really cold out. And he goes out in the back yard—and we have a septic tank—and he opens up the cleanout pipe and it's full of sewage. Once again, I'm not super brilliant but I know that's not good.

And he said, "Well, let me snake it and see if there is anything clogging it. So he snakes it, unclogs it all and it kind of goes down a little bit. But he said, "This isn't working right. You may need to have your septic tank pumped to see what is going on."

So I called that company the next day. They came out. They pumped our septic tank, and the guy came up to me and he goes, "Hey, you've got a major problem." Which, once again, is not usually what you want to hear when it comes to septic tanks. And he pulled me over and he took a flashlight and showed me inside (our septic tank is just a big concrete box) and there was a giant crack from the top all of the way down to the bottom.

And it was starting to crumble. And within the next 48 hours, because he had pumped it all of the way down, it started to collapse. So our septic tank collapsed. That was a fun day. And it just kind of created this sink hole in the back yard. And we called the company and haggled with them for a little bit and they finally said, "Yeah, we'll pour another one and get it out to you. It will be two months, though."

That septic tank worked. I don't know how, but it did. It was just this big giant hole. We had to put this yellow tape around it so our kids didn't fall into it. And we asked the company, "What happened? What went wrong?"

And at some point, in production of the original one that we had, they didn't put enough rebar in it. So the concrete just cracked, it just crumbled. Now, how are you going to know? We were

there the day they installed it. It looked good. It looked solid, but the inner workings of it were weak.

Can I just say that what Jesus is talking about here is the rebar of your soul? It's these daily decisions that we make and on the surface we look good. We're fine. We're in church. We're doing okay. How's it really going? How are you doing spiritually? How are you doing emotionally? What's really going on inside?

And many of us, if we're not careful, especially in a season of crises, we neglect the things that we know we need to be doing to gird up our faith and to strengthen ourselves spiritually. Or it's misplaced. We start looking at all of the things going on around the world and we're desperately looking for hope, we're desperately looking for the things that will calm our spirits.

And all along Jesus is saying, "It's not found in the hail Mary, it's found in the daily decisions you make on a regular basis." Jesus is driving down on two very simple principles in the passage.

Number one, I've already said it:

Storms are inevitable.

Stop trying to outrun them and stand in them with the strength that only Jesus can provide.

Here's the second thing:

It's not just what you know, but what you do with what you know that makes all the difference.

Which is why we can have baby Christians who have been attending church for life. And they've been believing in Jesus for 30 years, but have they been following him? That's a different question.

So, Jesus is simply saying, "Hey, listen. This is not as hard as what you might make it out to be. Just take a very simple thing that I'm trying to say to you today and apply it into your life. You just take one step in front of the other. "

Spiritual growth is not a sprint. It is a marathon. It is one right decision after another. And this is not neutral. Your spiritual growth is not passive. You will not fall into growth. You will not stumble into it. You have to make intentional decisions to do it.

Now, why don't we? Once again, I can't speak for you. I can speak for me. And oftentimes the things that I know I need to do, I don't do them for any number of reasons.

I want to show you this little continuum here. It's actually something that I shared first service today, I've not shared it with anybody else. Usually when I want to teach a principle, I'll run it past a few individuals first to see how it sounds, and then I share it with all of you. But today, I just decided to share it with all of you and see what happens, alright?

So, if this doesn't make sense, I'll stop talking about it. But I think, at least in my mind this is what I've been thinking about, is that oftentimes what keeps me from growing is this continuum:

Insecurity<—>Arrogance

So, can I just tell you I am both? And you probably are too. There are times in my life where I'm incredibly insecure about things and times in my life where I am too arrogant about things

and both stifle my spiritual growth. And here's why. Here's another way to say it. It's the continuum between:

Unsure<—>Too sure

And when you are unsure of yourself, when you are unsure of where you stand with God, when you are unsure about your strengths and your weaknesses, what ends up happening is that it leads to apprehension. So you don't do the things that you know you need to do. But if you are too sure of yourself, that leads to apathy. You're like, "I'm good. I don't need to do that. I think that I'm okay." And both paralyze your personal and spiritual growth.

This last week I was with a group of leaders and somebody just spoke some words into my life that I really, really needed to hear. He said, "You know, Aaron, if you're going to continue to be an effective leader, you've got to strike that balance between being sure of yourself without getting full of yourself. Just because you get a few victories under your belt, doesn't mean that that's you.

"So you've got to redirect your identity, you've got to place it in someone outside of you, which is Jesus Christ. Jesus wants you to ground your identity in him and what he alone has done for you."

See:

Your personal and spiritual growth has to be intentional.

You're not just going to fall into it. And you can't do it alone. Which brings me back to one of the first statements out of my mouth today. Please don't disengage. Please don't isolate yourself from others, even though you may not be able to be physically in proximity like we would like to be, it doesn't mean that you emotionally distance yourself or spiritually distance yourself. We need other people to grow. We need other people speaking into our life.

Now, listen. Not everybody needs to speak into your life, but somebody does. And it all begins when we just raise up our hand and say, "I need help." Do you need help? How are you doing?

Back at the beginning of the pandemic in March, I mean like all of us... It was crazy. And it was surreal. And I remember it was like every day I was in a full-on fist fight—not literally but emotionally and spiritually. I was like fighting for my life, "I don't know what decision to make next. And I don't know how to translate all of this information." And I was stressed, and I was anxious. I wasn't sleeping very well. My neck hurt all of the time.

And many of you know this, but I'm accountable to a group of individuals here at the church called our Elders, our Eldership. And the simplest way that I can explain who they are and what they do is that they pastor me so I can pastor you.

And they came over and got around me and they said, "Hey, we're concerned for you. We want you to stay healthy emotionally and spiritually so we will pay for you to get counseling. Find a good therapist. Find a good counselor. Meet with him regularly and unpack what you are going through."

And so I did. And I am not ashamed to tell you, I've been in counseling regularly for the last seven months and I don't have any plans to stop. I just kind of like it.

And then we said to our whole staff, “We’ll pay for you and your spouses to get counselling because we need you to stay healthy. We need you to be emotionally and spiritually on your game, because this is a battle that we are in.”

And here’s what I would say. Counseling before you are in a crisis is called preventative maintenance. Oftentimes there are people who come into my office and they are like, “Can you fix this?” I’m like, “Well, you’ve been neglecting that for years. I don’t know that I can resurrect that.” So don’t be too proud. Go. Reach out. Talk to somebody. We all need help to take those next steps to make sure that we are healthy.

See, I want you to understand something—so much of my job here is just to remind you of what I think you already know. It’s just that we forget. It’s that you are a whole person:

Spiritually
Emotionally
Physically

And so this is the dashboard of your life. God created you this way. So when you look at how you’re doing, you’ve got to look at these three gauges and you’ve got to honestly ask yourself these questions on a weekly, if not daily, basis. And you need to let somebody in your life who will speak into you as well, just to simply say: How are you doing spiritually?

So, how are you doing? And just be honest. You don’t help yourself in any way by being dishonest about that. I know we want to be dishonest at times, especially if we don’t like the answer. But just be honest.

How are you doing emotionally? How are you doing physically?

See, if you’re not doing well in one of these three areas, then you’re not ready to weather the storm. And actually, the other side is true too. If you focus on any one of these at the expense of the others, then you get out of balance and you’re not ready to face the storm.

Here’s what I mean. Some of us are all about the spiritual, but we neglect the emotional and the physical. And so it’s just all in our head. And so we don’t have a very high EQ. We burn our relationships to the ground. We’re somewhat legalistic. We’re mean. We’re judgmental.

Some of us are about the emotional. So we all love the Enneagram. We know all about the StrengthsFinder. We know if we are a thinker or a feeler, but we’re not doing very good spiritually or physically. We are out of balance.

Some of us are addicted to the gym. That’s our therapy, I don’t have a counselor, but I have dumbbells.” It’s just like, “I’m all about that.” And I love physical activity. We need it. It’s good for our endorphins. But listen. We can’t neglect the emotional and the spiritual.

You get the idea. You just look at that dashboard and on a regular basis you’ve got to ask yourself, “How am I doing? And what steps do I need to take?” because all three of these things go into building a solid foundation. Why? Because God created you that way. That’s how he made you.

So we may not be in control of much right now. That’s what 2020 has shown us. But what a perfect opportunity to say, “You know what? Now is the season when I am going to start building a solid foundation.” And Jesus says the way you do it is you listen to what I have to say and then you apply it.

Let me give you four questions as we wrap up today. And you can take a screen shot of this, you can write it down, I want you to give some thought to this, talk about it with others.

Here's the first question:

What is God saying to me?

That's just where you begin. Can I just tell you that God is speaking on a daily basis into your life? And that is a promise. The question is: Are you listening? That might mean that you need to get off of social media for a while, not because we're trying to hate on social media but because it's too much noise and you're reading everybody else's perspective.

You open up your phone and you just automatically flip open a social media app and you just start scrolling. All of that is dead time. I don't have time to pray, but I'm scrolling.

And we start hearing all of this commentary and it starts feeding stuff. And maybe, just for a time, you need a fast from it. Just shut it down and you just say, "Everybody else just needs to be quiet right now so I can listen to the voice of God. What is he saying?"

And God is speaking. Right now he speaks primarily through his word. He speaks through the voices of trusted people in your life. God speaks through nature. Can I just say that yesterday was amazing? Wasn't yesterday amazing—the weather? It was like, I just really think that was a gift from God, like, "You guys have had just such a hard year. Here you go." God speaks.

But here's the next question:

What do I need to do?

What do I need to do with what he is saying to me? What do I need to do right now? And I don't want you to get hung up on this, because oftentimes we look at the long game and God is like, "No, no, no. Just look at the short game." What are just the one or two steps right in front of you that you need to take?

What do you need to do right now, today, this week in your finances? Just to create a little bit of margin and honor God with it. What are you going to do?

Like right now what is one thing you could do in your marriage to enrich it and to deepen it? Because maybe the two of you have been distancing and God simply wants you to make a decision to come together.

What's the one thing you need to do to just work on your spiritual growth or your emotional health? What do you need to do right now? Make it simple. Make it tangible. Make it clear.

Here's the third question. And this is what often makes or breaks us:

When am I going to do it?

When am I going to do it? And I know that there may be a number of you who share my spiritual gift of procrastination, but it doesn't get us anywhere, right? We know what we need to do, we've known it for years. So we just keep kicking the can down the road. One of the best things you can do is just say, "This is what God is saying. This is what I need to do. And I'm going to put a date on it." And then share it with someone.

Oftentimes I will go to just a trusted friend and say, "I really feel like God is calling me to do this, and I don't really want to do it. I'm not looking forward to it. But I know I need to do it and

I'm going to do it by next Monday. So can you please call me and ask me if I did it?" And then I just don't answer the call, alright? But I feel convicted. I'm reminded.

And that will help you to stay on track. Here's the fourth question:

What is my next step?

And it is a step. Did you know one of the most common analogies in the Bible for spiritual growth is walking? It's not sprinting. It's not pole vaulting. It's not the backstroke or anything super technical. It is just a walk. And I think that is for a reason. God just wants you to take your next step.

It is so much better than just standing still and saying, "When I'm ready to sprint, then I will sprint." Likely, you never will. But if you start walking, it's amazing how much ground you will cover.

And I think that when you're caught in a bind and you don't know what to do and you're in a crisis, the best thing that you can ask of yourself is, "What is the next best thing that I can do? What is the step that is right in front of me that I need to take? God, would you please make that clear?"

So this last week I was out in Colorado Springs for a couple of days with some other leaders from all over the country in just what is a leadership co-hort. We just got together and we're talking leadership and principles and encouraging each other and praying together.

And on Tuesday morning at 7 a.m. eight of us went out to hike the Manitou Incline in Colorado Springs. I don't know if any of you have ever heard of it. I actually had never heard of it before. But it is a one-mile hike on these little railroad tie things. And it travels up to the very top. Actually there is a faux summit, and you get up there and you see that you've got more to go, which was fine.

And the Manitou Incline is an elevation of about 2,000 feet in less than a mile, a grade of about 60 to 68 percent in some places. I have an image of it from about three-fourths of the way up. Can I tell you that our group of eight all started out together and then quickly we started to put distance between ourselves?

Some of us were over achievers and were leading the pack and some of us were coming at the rear of the pack and some of us were in the middle. I won't tell you where I was. And we sort of spread out and we were huffing and puffing because of the elevation and our lungs were burning and our calves were burning, and our quads were burning. It was like the StairMaster that never ended.

And there were multiple times when I would stop and I'd be like, "Man, this was a stupid idea." And I'm looking behind to see how far I'd come and I'm looking up to see how far I had to go, it was almost crushing to my soul. I was just like, "Is there a trolley, is there a cable car, an elevator somewhere to get me up there?"

And there were a few moments... Honestly it was more mental than physical—I was all by myself at one point. We were just all distanced. And it was just this thing where God was like, "Aaron, this is a lot like 2020." And I was like, "I just want it to end." He was like, "I know you do."

"How do I get up there?"

“Just take your next step.”

And if I had gotten too overwhelmed thinking about how far I had to go, I probably would have just sat down and been done with it. But I stopped looking up and I just started looking right in front of me. And I started counting it out. I was like, “One, two, three, four... breathe. One, two three four... breathe.” And I just started eating away at it little by little by little.

And the group of us as we were going up, the guys up front turned around and were like, “Hey, you guys have got this. Keep going. You can do it.” And at times it was their encouragement that kept me going, until we all were able to reach the summit together.

I just so desperately want to encourage you today to keep walking. If we look at the summit, we think, “Look how far we have to go. When is this going to end? Where’s God at? And what’s happening in the world?” Can I just tell you, stop looking at how far you have to go and just start looking at the few steps in front of you and just take your next step.

Before we end our time together today, in the quietness of the moment, could you just simply ask God, “God, what is my next step? And would you give me the courage and the strength to take it?”

For some of you that next step is something financial. For some of you that next step is your marriage, your relationships. Some of you, that next step is your emotional health. Some of you are like, “Okay, I’ve cried ‘Uncle’ I need to go get some counseling.” If that counseling doesn’t work say, “Okay, I’ll find a different counselor, because I can’t do this on my own.”

I just want you to keep walking and keep taking a step and know that you’ve got friends and family. We might be a little bit distant right now from one another physically, but not emotionally and spiritually. You keep going. You keep going, because eventually you’ll turn around and see how far God has brought you.

Beginning today, your next step may be to simply reach out and say, “I want to know more about what it means to follow Jesus?” Oh, man, if that’s the case, you just simply text Jesus to 87221 and fellow climbers would love to come around you and help you take that next step.

Would you stand to your feet at all of our locations and if you’re comfortable, at home stand to your feet just in solidarity and unity with the rest of your church family and let me pray.

Lord God, we come to you right now and thank you so much for your goodness and your grace. Forgive us when we forget that you are sovereign over the kingdoms of this earth and you give them to whomever you please.

And, God, you are in control of pandemics and you are in control of the economy and you are in control of government and you are in control of all of the social division we see around the world. And we desperately need you to heal us and bring unity among us. God, we understand now, so clearly, that we are in a storm. Storms don’t last forever, but they are inevitable. So, God, we want to build well.

God, help us to take the next step that we know we need to take by listening to your voice, drowning out all of the others, and then actually taking a step of obedience to do what you’ve told us to do.

God, would you please encourage us. Would you please bring hope into our despair? Would you please strengthen us to do what we know that we need to do today by the power of your Spirit?

So now we lift up our voices as we cry out to you, the only One who deserves our recognition on earth a grace. We ask this in Jesus' name and fellow climbers said together: Amen.