

In 1803 President Thomas Jefferson commissioned his private secretary, Merriwether Lewis, to form and lead a team of explorers through the vast Louisiana Territory the Americans had recently purchased from the French. The object of the mission was “to explore the Missouri River, and such principal streams of it, as by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific Ocean, whether by the Columbia, Oregon, Colorado, or any other river...” The team was called The Corps of Discovery. When The Corps of Discovery set out on their journey, they had high hopes, but little understanding of the delights, discoveries, and hardships that would characterize their journey. None of them could have known how it would change their lives—or how it would change the lives of others who would come after them.

It’s the same for us, especially as we raise the question, “*Why Church?*” I believe that participation and involvement in the life of a healthy church, is a **journey of discovery**. It can yield unexpected adventures, unforeseen fruits, and open the door to breakthroughs that can change our lives—and the lives of those who come after us. Admittedly, the church is full of hypocrites and broken people, **but the church can help us to discover God**.

“I can find God anywhere,” Jamie told his friend and coworker Ben. He shared a cubicle at work with Ben and they had talked about many things, including God and church. Ben was a committed follower of Jesus; Jamie had always been skeptical of his friend’s faith. “I can find God in nature. In the stars and planets. I think I feel closest to God when I’m on horseback. I don’t need a church to find God,” Jamie said. Ben nodded. “I agree.” “You do?” “I do. In fact, the Bible says something similar.”

“Psalm 19 says that God’s attributes are displayed in nature. Since the beginning of creation, God’s beauty and power have been plain to anyone who bothered to look.” “All right, then.” Jamie replied. “It’s called natural revelation, but it has its limits.” As their conversation continued, Ben explained that **a person can discover all sorts of things about God through nature**. It

reveals his beauty and his imagination, for example. But there is much more to be discovered than we can possibly learn through nature—like God’s wisdom and God’s love. Otherwise, God would not have sent his only Son Jesus to live, to die, and to rise again from the dead.

After his resurrection, Jesus met his closest followers on a mountain and he told them, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:19-20). Soon after that, Jesus gave birth to his church by sending the Holy Spirit to energize and equip his followers. In the days, weeks, months, and years ahead, the church began to do what Jesus did, helping people of all kinds **to discover God and his ways**.

On one occasion, two followers of Jesus named Paul and Silas were spreading the news and talking about Jesus in a prosperous Roman town called Philippi. They were arrested for disturbing the peace, beaten, and chained in a local prison overnight. Undaunted, Paul and Silas prayed and *sang out loud* and were even joined by the other prisoners. Sometime after midnight, the ground started to shudder. An earthquake shook the prison to its foundation. The chains broke free from the walls, and the cell doors clanged open.

In the strange silence that followed the tremors, the jailer appeared at the entrance to the prison and saw the heavy outer door lying atop rubble. He peered into the dark confines. He saw no one. He heard nothing. Supposing that his prisoners had all escaped, and knowing the penalty for his empty jail would be death, he drew his sword. He turned its point on himself. But Paul’s voice pierced the darkness: “*Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!*”

The jailer dropped his sword and found a nearby torch. He ducked into the prison and examined the cells. No one had escaped. He dropped to his knees before Paul and Silas, shaking with relief—and awe. He led them out into the moonlit night and turned to face them. “*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*”

They answered, “*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household*” (Acts 16:12-34).

That Philippian jailer discovered the way to God that day. The path to deliverance, to salvation, to new life, and to the kind of power that can open prison doors and set prisoners free. The jailer didn’t have to go to church to discover those things. He found God through the church, nonetheless, because the church came to him—in the persons of Paul and Silas.

It is the same today. Some people discover God and experience salvation through Jesus Christ during a church service. They may have walked down the aisle after a sermon, knelt at an altar, and experienced forgiveness, healing, and salvation while musicians were playing. Others, however, discover God while watching a television show. Some do so at their kitchen table or at a concert or even on a street corner or in a jail cell. However, in all but the rarest of instances, the church still played at least a small part. They may have come to church...or the church may have come to them. **We all have much to discover about Jesus and about ourselves.**

Another truly fascinating story of **discovery** is found in Acts chapter 3. There is a man whose name is not even known who makes a **profound personal discovery**. He never walked; never ran; never jumped or skipped or danced. He was lame since birth and was a familiar sight outside the Beautiful Gate, the entrance to the magnificent courts of the Jerusalem temple, where he sat, begging. His poverty and misfortune contrasted sharply with the dazzling brass and rich colors of the archway. On this day, he watched the approach of two Jewish men who probably dropped money into his hands before. He called out loudly and begged them for alms, a donation that would not only help him, but would also constitute a mitzvah—an obligation to do a good deed—for the two Jewish men. They stopped. He lifted his palm into the air but humbly looked away from the men in front of him. One of the men spoke. “*Look at us.*” He looked up. “*Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.*” He then reached out his hand,

inviting the beggar to grasp it in order to stand. The beggar hesitated. He searched the man's face for a sign of mockery or anger, but there was none.

Temple goers paused and watched as he gripped the strong man's hand. The man pulled him up, and as he did, the beggar felt something in his legs—something he couldn't remember ever feeling before. For the first time in the beggar's life, he took a step! He looked at the two men, who were both smiling broadly. Then he laughed, and when the men turned to go, he entered the temple courts with them, walking and laughing and leaping and praising God!

The beggar's first encounter with Christ's healing power came through the church—through two men he met outside the Beautiful Gate. They were Peter and John, who had only days earlier experienced the intoxicating birth of the church on the Day of Pentecost. **Through the act of believing, people often not only discover something about God, but about themselves.** The church is here to help ordinary people like us experience Jesus in all his extraordinary glory and grace—to grow in faith and in how we can put our faith into action.

In Philippi the magistrates saw Paul and Silas' actions as violating another man's property and disturbing the peace, so they ordered swift punishment. They were beaten with rods and afterwards thrown in jail for the night with their feet locked in stocks. The beating would have no doubt left them bruised and bloodied. Because they were shackled by their feet they could not move and were forced to sit up all night in the prison cell. What would you and I be thinking as we sat in a prison cell that night in pain? I suspect many of us would be disappointed with God, or angry with God. Paul and Silas committed themselves to proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ, yet they were humiliated, beaten, and now imprisoned for the night.

But listen to what verse 25 says Paul and Silas were doing: *“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”* How could they sing hymns to God at a time like that? Many of us would be complaining, “Why me, Lord?” and perhaps doubting the very existence of God. But Paul and Silas knew that their beating

was not God's doing. They also knew that God doesn't typically stop people from doing evil things and that our faith does not keep us from suffering. But our faith certainly changes how we face suffering.

Steve Saint wrote an article for *Decision* magazine years ago, titled, *God's Purpose in Our Suffering*. Steve says, "My father, a missionary pilot, was one of five missionaries killed (with Jim Elliot) when they tried to reach out to the Waodani Indian tribe in Ecuador in 1956. I was five years old. A lot of people believe that when bad things happen, God merely allows them. But God didn't merely tolerate my dad's death, and I don't think He turned away when it was happening. In His sovereignty, God was orchestrating events for His glory and ultimately for our good. This was a hard realization for me, but then I read 1 Peter 2:21 which says, "*To this [suffering] you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*"

When she was finishing college Steve's only daughter Stephenie died of a cerebral hemorrhage. Long before she had died Steve says he prayed, "God, please let me have your heart for the hurting world. Oh, be careful what you pray for! Through the loss of my daughter, God did change my heart. He broke it. He shredded it. In the process God helped me see what He sees. From God's perspective, as I was separated from Stephenie, our loving heavenly Father is separated every day from those He desperately loves. And He may never be reunited with them again. I don't know what role God has for you, Steve says, but I know He has made us His ambassadors." Suffering gives us credibility with a hurting world and demonstrates God's sufficiency to meet our needs.

If you have suffered, let God use you to serve others in their suffering, because people who suffer want to be cared for by people who know what it's like to suffer as they have. I sincerely believe that's why in his life Jesus knew suffering even as we know suffering in our lives. Bottom line? As followers of Christ **we will also discover that we are called to suffer**. Just ask Paul. Why not join the Corps of Discovery here at Ken Mawr Church **to discover and grow with us** in ways that none of us could do alone? Glory to God in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.