

Sunday 14 February 2016
Otumoetai Baptist Church
The Ten Pillars

Rites of Passage, Peak Experiences, Encounters with Jesus

(BLACK)

I didn't come to any sort of real faith until I was in my early twenties. Sure, during my teenage years I went to a youth group for some of it and I had a bible to my name – which went mostly unread – I went to a Christian school and my mum would drag myself and my brother and sister to church where we would go to Sunday school (And I can only remember there being flannel graph presentations of different Bible stories). But there was no real heart to it, no real foundation for me. Nothing to build on.

Not like here at OBC. I may be a little biased, but I think that our Children's Church is pumping and we have excellent teachers and leaders impacting the children in this church. We also have excellent parents here who do a great job of raising their kids, talking to them about God, talking to God as a family, and doing faith at home together with the church.

Anyway, back to my story, when I came to faith in my early twenties I realised that I needed to change some of the

foundations that I had built my life on – which were pretty much what most typical twenty year olds do and pretty self-centred – so I decided I needed to find a good church that would partner with me to teach me about God, about my life as a follower of Jesus, and how I could grow in my faith.

I found a great church in Auckland International Church up in Epsom, Auckland. This was a very family-based church with caring people, great teaching, awesome discipleship, and lots of fun too. I quickly got involved in the life of the church, helped out in the youth group and started to figure out more of this thing called being a Christian. I realised that just as important as what was coming out in my life was what I was putting into it.

The foundations were what made it work. Allowing people to speak into my life. Learning about the big story of the Bible. Having a relationship with Jesus. Getting together with other followers of Jesus to do life. Serving the community in some way. Experiencing Jesus in my everyday life.

These foundations were pillars in my life, if you like.

(SLIDE 1)

If you were here last week, you would have heard Brian and Jan talking about an organisation called 'Here to Stay' that came up with the Ten Pillars. Similar to the Ten Commandments in that

they are like foundations on which to build your spiritual life.

Listen to Jan's brilliant and passionate sermon online to get a good introduction to what the Ten Pillars are all about, but basically the cliff notes version is that our contemporary 'GIFT generation' of young people (That is, Google, iDevice, FaceBook, Twitter), who are more connected and more isolated than generations before them, are walking away from church and/or faith in their early adolescent years. This is what happened for me and it is happening in most, if not all, western countries.

We are losing young people not only from our churches but also the Christian faith. Why and can we do something about it?

(SLIDE 2)

Here 2 Stay, a community of inter-denominational faiths in Australia, have realised that young people are leaving churches in droves – actually around 50,000 a year - and it is time for the church to step up to this challenge and do something.

(SLIDE 3)

Here 2 Stay came up with something called the Ten Pillars, which are basically foundational principles or markers that are essential for people to grow to become fully committed lifelong disciples of Jesus. (That's a great definition of a true Christian right there)

Discipleship is the key word here and I know we talk about it a

lot in church, but it really is essential. I needed to grow in my early twenties and become less selfish and more Jesus-focus and people-oriented. We all need to grow. We all need these Pillars in our lives.

So very quickly Jan spoke about these four Pillars last week:

1) The importance of Families and Households – we all come from a family and we all live in a household – and this is the primary faith community for all ages *especially children in their formative years and the household needs to be supported strongly in this role.*

2) Generational connectedness. *“Discipleship is about being intentional, relational and holistic in creating a culture of lifelong formation across the ages.”* It is so important for young people to be rubbing shoulders with older, wiser people, and essential for their growth.

3) Mentors and Life Coaches. *We all need other people in our lives who take the time to listen, to be encouraging, to be available, to be accepting.* We need to mentor people and be mentored ourselves.

4) Positive Peer Community. We are not meant to travel alone in this life ... true friends are important! As I've gotten older, I've realised how important peer friendships are but often how hard they are to maintain and keep.

So those are the first four Pillars. And I hope those of you who were here last week have had the opportunity to reflect on them and see how you, your family and us as a church are doing in these four areas.

Today we move on to the next three Pillars. These are respectively Rites of Passage, Peak Experiences, and Encounters with Jesus.

As I talk about these Pillars, like Brian said last week why not think about how they are being formed in your life at the moment.

As we go through each one remember that:

- I am responsible for my own spiritual growth and development, so is in my life is this pillar strong or what needs work

- I am responsible for my family's spiritual growth and development, so in my family is this pillar strong or what needs work

- I play a part in my church family's spiritual growth and development, so in my church family, is this pillar strong or what need work

So you are responsible for your personal spiritual growth, your family's spiritual growth and you play a part in your church family's spiritual growth. We are all in this together, so let's crack into looking at the next three pillars, starting with:

(SLIDE 4)

1) Rites of Passage

This is about Anticipating, honouring and celebrating our 'transitions' and 'rites of passage'.

Many cultures are rich in significant events to acknowledge the rights of passage of the developing young person within their community. Within Western culture our children move through various life stages, each of which brings its opportunities and challenges. How do we best help a young person to navigate through each of these – as a household of faith and as a community of faith? How can we be more strategic and intentional for our kids and create spaces and anchors to help

them in their transformation?

This is something we need to be intentional about, it needs to be public and an event or experience that can become an anchor in a person's life. This anchor can become something that helps them to stay on track with God when times are tough.

(SLIDE 5)

In the church, Baptism is a rite of passage that I think we do very well. This is a significant moment in any person's life. A moment where they get to publicly declare that they believe in Jesus and are happy for Him to be the Lord of their life.

I still remember my baptism. It was March 2004 up in Auckland at Auckland International Church. Family and friends came up from Tauranga and Hamilton to help mark the occasion. People spoke over my life. Two of my friends and pastors baptised me and it was a hugely significant anchor or rite of passage for me.

It was intentional; it was public; and it was something I could and do hang onto, especially when life became tough.

Baptisms here at OBC are a wonderful occasion and rite of passage. Not just the young people or youth either. I'm sure like me, most of you will remember the day that Brett and Gina, and Roanna got baptised. That was an incredibly powerful time for

them and also for us as a church family.

I'm sure that all three of them will have that experience as an anchor in their lives and we as a church family were privileged to be part of this rite of passage for them.

As I was thinking about rites of passage for young people, I think that this is something our culture and the church at large lacks. For instance it seems that the traditional rite of passage for an 18 year old is to go out, get totally wasted, to the point of vomiting, and wake up with a massive hangover.

That doesn't really help anyone does it?

So what can we as individuals, as a family, and as a church family do to mark or anchor certain rites of passage for our young people?

I heard this awesome story about a mum and dad marking the thirteenth birthday for one of their sons. There was a mountain that they as a family would often climb together, it became a sort of ritual thing for them.

(SLIDE 6)

Well when the boy turned thirteen, his mum and him went to the start of the mountain, but instead of walking together his

mum stopped there and said to him, “You’re growing up now and it’s time you can start doing more things for yourself. You’re on your way to becoming a man. So you can climb this mountain by yourself and I will be waiting down the bottom for you.”

So the boy took off a bit sheepishly, and he kept looking behind him for the first few metres, then he would keep going, then look again for his mum, and then off he went.

That would have been a cool enough story in itself, but what had happened is that the mum had organised something else. At different points on the walk, she had stationed a different man from their church to walk with the boy for a bit and tell him about what they had learned in their life and their walk with Jesus. This is intergenerational connectedness in action right here.

So the boy would walk with one of the men for a while, then carry on by himself, then he would meet another man and they would talk and walk and so on.

Then, when he had reached the top of the mountain, there was his dad waiting for him. So proud of him. And his dad and him sat down and talked about life and manhood and growing up.

As a father of three boys, I really relate to this story and hope that I can do things similar for them as they grow into men.

But this is what “Rites of Passage” is all about. It’s about marking occasions for our young people and celebrating them. It’s about giving them memories and anchors that they can return to again and again when life throws them a curve ball.

Rites of Passage are so important in the faith formation process because:

- 1 There are anchor points throughout the Bible for memory and understanding – such as the Feasts and Festivals the Israelites observed*
- 2 They anchor us in our culture – they tell us who we are and where we belong*
- 3 Many young men and women are making up their own rites of passage*

I got my own ‘Rites of Passage’ a few weeks back. My first hunting experience. Getting up early. Carrying a backpack. Being armed with a weapon, a knife (Can you picture me with a knife? Maybe a bread knife). Sleeping in the bush (not overnight, just during the day!). My friend from Auckland made it happen. We didn’t see anything or get to shoot anything with his bow and arrow. But for me this was a “Rites of Passage”. Something that

was intentional, something public and something of a celebration.

I never thought I'd be a hunter.

Our young people are hunting for these 'Rites of Passage' and if we as families and a church family do not see the need and necessity for providing these 'Rites of Passage', they will find them elsewhere. This is important for all of us as we navigate life, as rites of passage tell us who we are and how we belong.

So let's get personal, how are you going in 'Rites of Passage'?

(SLIDE 7)

Is this a strong pillar in your life? Is this a strong pillar in the life of your household or family? Is this a strong pillar in the life of this church?

Let's move onto the next Pillar:

2) Peak Experiences

(SLIDE 8)

This is the mountaintop experience. It is Moses communing with God up Mount Sianai. Noah hearing from God about building an Ark. Samuel hearing God's voice in the night. Peter, James and John seeing Jesus transfigured before their very eyes. Saul being blinded by the dazzling light of Christ on the Damascus road.

Me being knocked off my bed by the power of God.

It happened in 2003. I was reading a Christian novel that my older sister had given to my younger brother. I wasn't a fully committed Christian at this stage but I was very curious.

I remember relating incredibly well to one of the characters in the book. Do you ever do that when you read? You find yourself seeing a lot of yourself in a character? Well that was happening for me.

So in the book this character is about to enter into a potentially very dangerous situation and is quite scared. He's heard a lot about God, He believes that there is something out there, but he doesn't know God in any personal way.

So he prays and asks God to show up. Maybe some of you have prayed that prayer too.

Well, God does show up. He hears the words, "My son I am with you and I have always been with you."

To this day, I don't know if I heard those words audibly or just inside my head, but it was like the lights had been turned on and

God was saying “I’m here, Matt. This is me. I’ve always been here.”

Then the power of God knocked me off the bed and I was in tears. I gave my life to God, the risen Jesus, at that point in time, and decided that yep this Christian thing was real, Jesus was true and God was with me.

What an amazing experience it was! I still get emotional just thinking about it.

(SLIDE 9)

So Peak Experiences. These are a place where God meets you, stretches and inspires you ... and transformation happens.

A peak experience is a vital complement to the regular activities within a faith community.

The experience may be a camp, a concert, a special evening program, and so on. In these contexts, faith is deepened through the mixture of meeting new people with a real faith, being inspired by new leaders with a vibrant faith, living in community, or the ‘wow’ factor of a bigger or special event.

(SLIDE 10)

For our young people we have E Camp and Easter Camp. Young people from all across New Zealand descend on different

camping venues and there is a massive community of young people who are in a position to have a peak experience with Jesus and share that with their leaders and peers.

Both E and Easter Camps are pivotal moments in the youth calendar. And getting as many young people to them is of paramount importance and priority.

Some people in this church are happy to sponsor an intermediate or youth to go to either camp which is such an incredible gift from the church in helping create the space for a peak experience for a young person.

Again, it would be awesome to have your help to do this. If you feel like God might be nudging you to sponsor an intermediate aged or college-aged young person to attend an Easter camp, then please come and talk to me or send me an email. A lot of youth come from families where having the financial backing to go to Easter camp is desperately needed.

And this is an opportunity for you to play a part in creating a Peak Experience for a young person. So come and talk to me.

Last year was an incredible Easter camp for our youth. God was active and creating amazing Peak Experiences for our group.

There were healings, amazing worship, God turning up and saying “I’m here, I’ve got a plan for you ... you matter to me.”

That kind of message for a young person to hear is incredible and deeply needed. And again I say thank you very much for the financial and prayer support that this amazing church family gives to our intermediates and youth ministry.

So a peak experience can be a planned event that becomes a wonderful and positive encounter with God. But a peak experience can also be unplanned, a place where God shows up and something happens that grows and challenges you in your faith journey. Like what happened for me. This is often seen as a positive experience, but sometimes peak experiences also come out of challenges and even tragedy. A place where God meets you, stretches and inspires you, when He comes close to you and you come close to Him and transformation happens.

Peak Experiences are important because they create:

1 mountain tops

2 memories

3 shared experiences

And again, this is not just for young people. This is for all people.

Across the different ages and stages. We all need these Peak Experiences regularly in our faith journey. And let me just say we cannot create these experiences, but we can create the ‘space’ that allows for these experiences to happen.

(SLIDE 11)

So, again, is this a strong pillar in your life? What about in the life of your household or family? What about in the life of this church?

Finally we move onto the last Pillar we are covering today, which has crossovers to Peak Experiences, and that is:

3) Encounters with Jesus

(SLIDE 12)

In an entertainment driven, visually stimulated, “I’m bored” generation there is a tendency to fill our program time with children and youth and adults with lots of activity, noise and busyness so as to maintain attention and hopefully communicate something of value. While we need to be aware of the ‘times and the seasons’ and use all we can to be effective communicators, there is a danger that we fill our spaces so full there is no time for us to hear the voice of God.

Many Christians can remember a time and place where they may have felt particularly close to Jesus – at an event, at a particular episode in their life, etc. These same Christians would testify how

important that moment was and continues to be in their ongoing faith journey. How important it is for us to create the spaces where our we can encounter the living Jesus – not just in words from the front but in the still small voice of the Spirit of God who desperately wants to communicate with each of us.

We can get so busy with creating programs and activities, all the doing stuff, that we neglect the more quiet, reflective and slowed down manner of life, the being stuff.

I am reminded of the story of Martha and Mary. If you've got your Bible, turn with me to or type in your phone Luke chapter 10 verses 38 -42.

Jesus has just sent the seventy disciples out to minister to the people in surrounding villages and He too goes out to minister to the people. Let's pick up the story in verse 38.

(SLIDE 13)

Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house.

And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word.

But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she

approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me."

And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."

I have found in my own life that I used to be a 'Mary' but am now more of a 'Martha'. I am constantly doing stuff to try and please God. Whether it be planning programmes, or ritually reading my Bible or having my quiet time, or just being too regimented in my Christian life, I seem to be always on the go doing something.

I was talking to a friend about this the other day and he too would describe his relationship with Jesus as a ritual. It's like you are just going through the motions, ticking the boxes. Have I done my quiet time? Check. Have I read the bible? Check. Have I prayed? Check. Have I encountered Jesus this week? I'm not sure. Have I taken the time to hear his voice? I don't know or have the time really. I'm too busy.

Sadly I think a lot of us relate to this kind of relationship with God. We want to hear from Him, but we're too busy doing stuff that we don't have the space in our lives to hear his still, small voice. We're like Martha, doing everything that we think He

wants us to do, when all He wants us to do is be like Mary and sit down to listen to Him speak to us. Basically, He wants to hang out with us. The God of the entire universe wants to chat with you. He wants to tell you about Himself and about His plans for your life. He wants to have an encounter with you.

(SLIDE 14)

Just like Mary chose to willingly put herself in a position to have an encounter with Jesus, we too need to willingly create spaces in our lives so that Jesus can show up and have an encounter with us.

Some of you might have read 'The Freedom Diaries' by local author Mark Holloway. I've just finished reading it and it has challenged, perplexed and inspired me.

(SLIDE 15)

The basic rundown of the book is that Mark gets to the end of his rope in life and cries out to God to answer Him. To show up and have an encounter with him. And to his amazement and disbelief, God shows up and starts talking. And talking. And talking.

The Freedom Diaries is a diary account of the conversations that Mark has with God about all sorts of things. And God tells him that he is interested in his life, his relationships, his work, his commitments, his thought life, his finances. Everything. Not just

the religious stuff like his church involvement, quiet times, prayer exctera – but everything. He wants to have a daily ongoing conversation with Mark about all life. Not just about his religious church life.

After all, as Keith Green once said: "Going to church makes you a Christian as much as going to McDonalds makes you a hamburger."

And so Mark writes about these conversations. And encourages readers to have their own conversation with God. To allow that space to connect with Jesus.

That's the kind of life that Jesus is looking for. A willingness to create that space to talk to God and more importantly, allow Him to speak back.

Encounters with Jesus is all about that. In allowing the space to encounter Jesus we discover three things:

- 1) We meet a Jesus who is real
- 2) We meet a Jesus who wants to communicate with me
- 3) We meet a Jesus who transforms lives.

Within our faith community, our household of faith and our

personal lives we need to be intentional about providing spaces to encounter Jesus. To create spaces to hear from God. To encounter Him together and to share our stories and encounters with each other. We feel we are so “time poor” that it is about being intentional and making this a priority in our life.

To become like Mary and put ourselves in a position to hear from Jesus. And to be transformed by Him.

(SLIDE 16)

So, lastly, is this a strong pillar in your life? What about in the life of your household or family? What about in the life of this church?

As we finish today I invite you during the next two songs to reflect on these three Pillars in your life, the life of your family, the life of this church, and the lives of our young people ...

(SLIDE 17)

May we as individuals, families and a church family be willing to intentionally create space for ourselves and our young people to celebrate rites of passage, to have peak experiences, and to encounter the risen Jesus.

I leave you this morning with that challenge. Are you willing?

(Final 2 songs)