

A Light to Our Backyard

"Light of the World, Part 1" Series, May 23 & 24, 2026 | Philippians 1:3-18

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Where are we going together as a church?

I started praying about that question six years ago when I became pastor here.

Vision is a crucial part of leading, so it was natural for me to pray. But Valley's 50th Anniversary was already just a few short years away, and that is an important time for any church. I knew that such a big anniversary would lead us to ask who we are and where we're going. That's never something that one person should do alone, so I asked a group of people to join me.

A group of leaders here at Valley began thinking deeply about that question two years ago.

I reached out to Scott Ridout, the former President of Converge Worldwide which is our network of churches. He has an outstanding reputation for leading long-range planning processes. I worked with our Church Chairman and our Executive Pastor to identify four Elders, four staff members, and four congregation members who would participate in a two-step process. First, we worked together on the question, "Who are we?" Then, we asked, "Where is God leading us in the future?"

This is Valley's 50th Anniversary, and that's like half-time in a football game.

Halftime is more than a chance for the team to rest while the band plays or you get nachos. It's time for the players and coaches to look back at the first half. They ask what's working and what's not working. And they make new plans for the second half. A 50th Anniversary is like that. It's a time to look at our history, reassess who we are, and ask what the game plan is going forward. That's what we've been doing.

I'd like to spend the next four weeks sharing that vision with you.

All the Elders have seen and endorsed it. The senior ministry leaders are on board as well. We had a retreat in the Fall where we examined it in detail and prayed together. We literally stacked our hands one on top of the other to say that we were "in" and that this was what we heard God saying. Then we prayed for God's blessing and have continued to pray. Today and over the next four weeks, I get to share with you where we hear God leading us. We believe that this vision is grounded in who we have always, been but looking forward in new and fresh ways.

Our vision is to advance the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and my hope is that we will all take ownership of that vision. That's the beginning and the big headline.

Ownership means saying, "This vision is my vision." When this vision is yours, it means doing your part (not every part and not someone else's part) to make sure it happens. It means saying, "This is of God. And by God's power at work within me, I will do what I can to make it happen." Right now, I'm just asking you to keep your mind open to the possibility. God is on mission, advancing the Gospel of Jesus Christ and building His Kingdom. He's working, and He's inviting us to join Him in that work.

Imagine being in the Holy Land in the first century and a rabbi walks up to you. After just a few minutes of conversation, He says to you, "Follow me!" Imagine thinking to yourself, "I don't know. I've got fields to plant. I'm not ready." Imagine walking away from the opportunity to walk the hills of Galilee and Judea with the Creator of the Universe, seeing Him work and teach and lead people to Himself. Imagine missing the power of God at work. That is no less true today than it was then. The Spirit of God is working, and the Creator of the Universe is inviting us to join Him. Let's see how it happened before.

God advanced His Gospel in and through the Philippians.

Paul thanked God for his history with the Philippians.

In Philippians 1:3-5, Paul mentions their shared history, which was significant. He started the church in Philippi. He led people to Christ, baptized them, and started discipling them. He supported them from a distance repeatedly. He watched the church grow. And they stood by him. They sent financial support and even sent people to help him and provide for his needs when he was in prison. Paul called it a "**partnership in the gospel**". There he was, with his life on the line, thanking God for them.

He prayed that God would advance His Gospel in the Philippians.

In **Philippians 1:6** he started the prayer,

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

That's the advance of the Gospel in the Philippians themselves. What does it look like? It looks like God Himself filling them with His love and righteousness and sending them out to make more disciples. Paul wanted God's work to "**abound more and more**". He wanted God to advance His Gospel in his beloved congregation.

Then he shared how God was advancing the Gospel because of their partnership.

Paul was in prison. He was likely being held in Rome by the Praetorian Guard. The Praetorian Guard was Caesar's security detail, and members of the guard were essential military advisors to the emperor in that day. As a prisoner, Paul had to pay his own expenses while in their custody, and the church in Philippi helped. Paul wanted them to know what had happened as a result. He had the opportunity to spread the Gospel. In **Philippians 1:12-13** Paul described it,

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to **advance the gospel**, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

People in high places were hearing the Gospel. Rest assured that some came to faith in Jesus. The Gospel was advancing through this partnership.

He added how God was advancing the Gospel through other people, flawed and faithful alike.

Paul was in jail, so some disciples took that as a cue to start preaching and making disciples themselves. Some did it because they wanted Paul's work to continue. Some did it because they were ambitious; they saw an opportunity to grow their influence and even to undercut Paul. Paul didn't mind. He closed these verses saying, **Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice**. The Gospel was advancing on many fronts!

History is more than a scrapbook.

Paul didn't treat his story with the Philippians as an album filled with dusty memories to be enjoyed with a dose of nostalgia; instead, it was a springboard. Paul called on their history as a reason to keep advancing the Gospel in their own lives, in their own city, and around the world. And that's how I hope we will look at our history here at Valley. Our first 50 years are memories that motivate us and propel us into the future where God keeps working faithfully and we keep saying "yes" to joining Him in His work.

May God advance His Gospel in us.

God advances His Gospel in us as the Holy Spirit transforms us.

Before we are Christians, the Holy Spirit convicts us of the ways we have disobeyed God and that our lives really aren't working without Jesus. When we accept forgiveness in Jesus, the Holy Spirit rushes into our lives like a mighty wind, cleaning out things like greed and lust. Then the Holy Spirit remains with us, reshaping our character so that we become more and more like Jesus. We want the kinds of things Jesus wants, we love sacrificially the way Jesus does, and we respond to people the way Jesus would. The Holy Spirit even gives us gifts so that we can serve God and build the Church.

God advances His Gospel in us when we engage.

We can either resist God's work in us or lean into it. When we engage, we make God's work easier. What does engagement mean? That means worshipping regularly—being fully present in worship and open to what God will say and do in us. It also means being in a group where we can be transparent with each other, apply God's Word to our lives, and care for one another. It means using the gifts God has given us to serve; it means sharing the Gospel with others locally and around the world. And it means giving generously of our time, talents, and treasure. When we do these kinds of things, God works to advance His Gospel in us. It's like we're getting into a spiritual-exercise program—we're lifting spiritual weights and running the distance. And when we don't do these kinds of things, it's like we're sitting on the couch, binge-watching television, eating potato chips, wondering why we are spiritually flabby.

Imagine families, marriages, and lives that are being healed and focused on Jesus!

When God advances His Gospel in us, it has real-world consequences. We get rid of the sin that's ruining our closest relationships. The Holy Spirit is making us better husbands and wives; shaping us into better parents, better children, better siblings; giving us better ways to work and better ways to love our friends and neighbors. There is an epidemic of hurt in all our lives. The Gospel advancing in us won't make all the hurt go away. But it can prevent some self-inflicted wounds, and it can heal some of the wounds we've all already suffered. Isn't that what we want? Here at Valley and across Hartford and Litchfield Counties?

I know what this looked like in my own life.

In 2007, Tammi and I moved to the Twin Cities of Minnesota along with our children to plant a church. We also sensed that God was giving us a new start. We were both tired and worn down spiritually. Our spiritual tank was dry. Spiritual dryness shows up in the real world. It shows up in conflict. Discouragement. We read Jesus' statement in **Matthew 5:13**,

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.”

That teaching scared us because we had lost our saltiness. And Jesus said that once we lose our saltiness, it can’t come back. But it struck me that Jesus was speaking humanly. If we have lost our saltiness, there is nothing we can do to restore it. But all things are possible with God. So, we prayed, “God, make us **‘salty again’**”. And He did. He advances His Gospel in us, and, in that new season of life, we became salty again.

May God advance His Gospel through us.

“Apatheists” like Neil show us what lost people look like in this area.

Neil grew up in the Washington, DC, area. When he was a child, his family went to Mass occasionally. When he became a teenager, they went rarely. Only on big days. His family was comfortably upper-middle class, so he had everything he wanted and did everything he wanted. He was an athlete, a soccer player, and well liked. He just didn’t think about his faith or need it in any way that mattered to him. He wasn’t an “atheist” who didn’t believe in God; he was an “apatheist” who didn’t care. He played soccer at Virginia Tech and majored in mechanical engineering. Neil says that he had it all—he was taking care of his mind and body and enjoying what he calls “the joy of sin”. But then things began to change. He struggled for the first time in life and started asking questions. Like, “What am I really here for?” By the time he finished college, he was certain that he didn’t know the answer. A friend started pressing him to read the Bible and go to church. He said he didn’t have time. But check out his friend’s response, “... if God is really true, then there's nothing more important than knowing about Him and you do that by reading this book ...” That came from a non-believer who was also curious! It was during that season that he was confronted with the Gospel. The Gospel came with a choice between God and self, life and death. He ended up on a retreat with Fellowship of Christian Athletes. By this point, the only thing holding him back was hanging on to his comfortable life and control. But something told him that the life he was hanging onto was empty. So, he gave his life to Christ.¹ “Apatheism” probably describes many of our neighbors. They are separated from God but comfortable and unconcerned about Him. Thankfully, God is concerned about them!

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who goes searching for the one lost sheep.

In Luke chapter 15, Jesus tells a story about a shepherd who has 100 sheep. One wanders away and gets lost while the other 99 are safe. The shepherd goes in search of that one lost sheep. When he finds the sheep, he comes back rejoicing! He’s telling us something about God’s nature. God cares for the lost, for those who are separated from Him. He is searching for the lost, and He rejoices when they come home to Him. Searching for the lost is God’s mission!

Jesus invites us to join Him in seeking the lost.

Sometimes we go after the lost ourselves, personally. We build relationships and share our lives and our faith with a lost neighbor, co-worker, friend, or family member. Sometimes we work with other Christians to do things like open an outreach to homeless people so that they can hear the Gospel. And sometimes we start new churches because new churches reach new lost people. In all these ways, we are joining Jesus, the Good Shepherd, as He searches for His lost sheep!

¹ <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/the-side-b-stories-neil-placer/>

Your spiritual backyard is where you live, work, and play.

If your house has a backyard, it's the place where you are comfortable, and your backyard is your responsibility. It's yours to care for. Our spiritual backyard is similar. It's the place where we're comfortable and which we are responsible for. You have a literal, physical neighborhood. That may be your spiritual backyard as well. You may have a team of people at work—some are friends, some are connected to you. They may be your spiritual backyard. There are probably also places where you play—it could be the families of your kids' sports team, it could be your gym, it could even be a club where you hang out. The people there may be your spiritual backyard. Jesus is in your spiritual backyard, seeking His lost sheep. And He's inviting you to join Him.

Valley's backyard is Hartford and Litchfield Counties.

We made this choice years ago. I went to a meeting recently of people working to multiply disciples, leaders, and churches. The leader of the meeting asked each of us to walk up to a map of New England and circle our backyard. That was easy for me. I walked up to the map and circled Hartford and Litchfield Counties. This is our home; it's the place where we are responsible. Years ago, we heard God calling us to work to complete the Great Commission in Hartford and Litchfield Counties. That means giving everyone in our backyard access to the Gospel. We have been working on that task for years now. We are not done yet, and we are not going to quit.

Let's light up our big backyard.

It may be hard to believe, but WE are the light of the world.

Jesus is the Light of the World. Jesus Himself makes that clear. He's like the sun, radiating light. But He adds that we, too, are the light of the world. He says it in **Matthew 5:14**,

"You are the light of the world."

Then He tells us what that means in **Matthew 5:16**,

"... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Jesus, the Light of the World, shines in the darkness and shines on us. He really shines IN us. Then when we serve Him and share Him, it's like we are reflecting His light out for the world to see. He's like the sun, and we are like the moon. We, too, are the light of the world, reflecting His glory and His love to the world.

Love like Jesus' means we can't leave lost people behind.

The Good Shepherd's heart breaks for His lost sheep because they're separated from Him. They're separated from us. They're wandering around in places where there are dangers and they can get hurt. They're missing out on everything Jesus would do in their lives now. And they are going to miss out eternally. That breaks Jesus' heart, and if we have Jesus' love, then it breaks our hearts as well! Our hearts break for the Neils all around us. Our hearts hurt for the people in our own backyards who are lost and without Jesus. Our hearts ache for the million plus lost people in Valley's big backyard. That ache is the love of the Good Shepherd in us.

The Split Rock Lighthouse was built so more lives wouldn't be lost.

In the early 1900s, the north shore of Lake Superior was the most dangerous piece of water in the world. Ships went up and down the coast carrying iron ore to satisfy the country's hunger for steel. In 1905, a storm on Lake Superior damaged 29 ships. Two wrecked and sank on the coastline. Three dozen sailors died. In 1907, Congress funded a lighthouse. In 1910, the Split Rock Lighthouse opened to shine out 22 miles onto Lake Superior warning ships of the danger below and saving lives.² What a beautiful image of what a church like ours exists to do. We're like a beacon in the dark, proclaiming the Gospel and inviting the lost to find salvation.

May we be like lights on a string, crisscrossing our great big backyard.

Many of us have strings of lights crisscrossing our own backyards. They light up the darkness; they welcome us and invite us to sit and stay awhile. The Holy Spirit is stringing up lights across Valley's great big backyard. They, too, light up the darkness here and hold out hope in Jesus Christ. There are many, many bulbs on these strings of lights. You are one of those bulbs. May the Light of Christ shine brightly through you.

² https://www.mnhs.org/splitrock/learn/history?utm_source=perplexity