



January 3, 2024
A Note from Pastor April

Dear Friends,

2023 was filled with life lessons.

Some of these were lessons that I was focused on from the start of the year.

I learned a lot about what it means to listen to my body and the valuable wisdom she brings.

Renewal leave allowed me the space I needed to slow down and move at a pace that felt healthy and healing. (A lesson I'm still learning after coming back from leave.)

Some of the lessons caught me completely by surprise.

My time on renewal leave was the first time in a very long time that I had been able to set down all of my vocational responsibilities.

I tend to be a person who starts by looking outward at those who rely on me and asking, "What is it that you need from me?"

But with no one other than my family looking to me for leadership, there was finally space and room for me to ask a newer question:

What is it that I am longing for?

At first, the question felt a bit indulgent. Here I was having a four-month renewal leave — hadn't I already been given what I had longed for?

I started paying closer attention to the things that were bringing me joy and filling my heart with life.

On the list were time with people I love, time alone to think, and the chance to see parts of the world I'd never experienced.

When I arrived in Spain on the first day of September, something else began to emerge.

I was seated on the train to Burgos next to Alberto, who was in all measures the friendliest Spaniard I met on my trip. He also spoke absolutely no English.



I had been practicing my Spanish in the weeks leading up to my trip but was certainly feeling rusty. For the next two hours, Alberto became my teacher. He was patient with me and repeated himself multiple times (*muy despacio!*).

As the train proceeded north, I found myself more and more able to understand him. We talked about his girlfriend, who worked at the library in Madrid, his beautiful children, and the politics of Spain that were leaving him frustrated and without work. Alberto shared with me all the food I should try while I was in Spain, and he told me about his journey as a lapsed Catholic.

By the time we arrived at my stop, we were both grinning from ear to ear, equally delighted by this chance encounter and the connection we had experienced.

Over the next few days as I walked the Camino, I tried to speak in Spanish as much as possible.

Each time I did, I found myself growing in confidence... AND joy.

I LOVED speaking this language.



The Spanish language has always been a part of my story. Both of my grandmothers immigrated to the United States as young women from Latin America (Panama & Chile).

My mother was born in Bolivia. My father spent a good portion of his childhood in Panama. Growing up, my mother and grandmothers would sometimes sing songs to us in Spanish. My mother loved to tell her favorite joke (entirely in Spanish), even though she was the only one who found it funny.

Over the years, I had studied Spanish in school. I had taken trips to Chile and to see my extended family in Panama (including my cousin who pilots boats through the Panama Canal).

My Spanish always improved when I was traveling or in school. Yet, despite all the opportunities I had to become fluent, I could never seem to stay with it over time.

When both my grandmothers passed away five years ago, the missed opportunity to converse with them in their native language was certainly something I regretted.

This trip to Spain was awakening something within me.

On the phone with a friend that first week, I heard myself say it out loud...

I want to become fluent in Spanish.

The more I said it, the more I realized how true it was. This was something I had been longing for. What better time to begin than now?

Over the course of the next few weeks, I practiced every day for thirty minutes. This helped keep the momentum going after arriving back home.

I also knew I needed someone to practice with. Before I left for Spain, I had posted something on a Hilliard Facebook group. What I really wanted was to find a native Spanish speaker who wanted to practice their English, so we could both help each other. Perhaps even get to know each other! I hadn't had any luck over the summer.

Two weeks after I returned, a message showed up in my inbox.



"I saw your post from several months ago. I've been looking for someone to practice my English with. I can help you with your Spanish. Shall we meet up?"

The next week, Christelle and I met at the library.

It only took a few minutes before we were fast friends. A native of Peru, Christelle has lived here in the states for twenty years. Her family owns their own business, and she works from



home. Her English is fabulous, but she still wants to improve. She was happy to help me with my Spanish, which has a long way to go before we would start using the term “fabulous.”

Our time together was utterly delightful. The two hours FLEW by. Finding each other felt special.

As we were walking out, she shared, “I’ve lived here in the States for a long time. I have a lot of American acquaintances, who are all lovely and friendly, but none who have had an interest in the language that is so much a part of my culture. I’ve been looking for something like this for a long time.”

As I drove home that night, I couldn’t stop smiling.

As it turns out, when we start to tune in to the longings of our own hearts... it’s never just about us.

Since then, Christelle and I have been meeting most weeks at the library, or coffee shop, or even at church after enjoying a restful yoga session! She’s picked up a few English phrases that she loves, and my ability to understand her Spanish is slowly improving each time we gather.

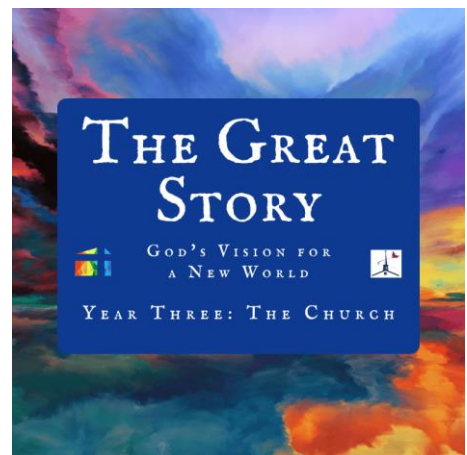
Perhaps more importantly, our friendship is growing, and we are having so much fun together. My improved Spanish has also made it easier for me to talk with Spanish-speaking families that wander into our office during the week. (I like to think my grandmothers are a little proud.)

It’s been a beautiful reminder to me that God often shows up in these places of joy and delight, when we start to listen and trust what is on our own hearts.

This week, we will begin our journey through the book of Acts with our Sunday message series, The Great Story Year Three: The Church. We’ll be following the journey of the disciples, who were learning to listen to their own hearts and to the call that God was nudging them toward.

Of course, it wasn’t just about them. God was doing a new and wonderful thing as the church was born out of their own faithfulness.
(<https://hilliardumc.org/current-message-series/>)

As we start this new year, I wonder what is on your heart for 2024.



How might listening more fully to your own longings bring more light and love and joy? Both into your world and into the lives of others around you?

I look forward to seeing what unfolds this year, as WE together seek to be a people who are both listening and bravely following where God is leading!

In love,

Pastor April



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P.S. We'd love some help this Sunday putting away the Christmas decorations in Warehouse 839 after the service, around 12:15 or so. If you can stay or come back and lend a hand, we'd be grateful! It's a great opportunity to get to know people and serve the church together.

