Convention Sermon 2021

October 23, 2021

We are Headed to Someplace New

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Acts 15:12-22a

James of Jerusalem

***God is alive and active and working in our world and our call as people of faith is to find that faith, name those occasions of God and join with the people who are experiencing it and be changed and renewed, be transformed just as the early Jewish apostles were changed and transformed by the faith and actions of the gentiles. We keep our eternal truths but we let our temporal sensibilities slide away.***

Come Holy Spirit and enkindle within us the fire of your burning love.

In your blessed name we pray. Amen.

Friends—we are headed to someplace new, a different place and a different way. I don’t know specifically what it looks like and I am uncertain of exactly where it is, but I do have an idea of how we might get there. This is not the first time a community of faithful followers of Jesus found themselves discerning a new way of being. I believe the archetype for this journey was mapped out long ago with those first believers who preached the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Like those first believers our journey will only be successful if we embark on it with people we know and then learn from and join with so many more who we have not yet met.

Let’s go back a couple of thousand years ago. Peter, Paul and Barnabas leaders in the early post-resurrection church are traveling not quite to the ends of the earth, but pretty darn far, to tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth. Sometimes together and other times apart, they tell of Jesus’ preaching and teaching throughout the countryside, they tell of his “*no holds barred all are welcome:”* the poor, the rich, tax collectors and sinners, Roman soldiers, Jewish Pharisees, men, women, respectable folks and those who are not. Jesus greets warmly all who come without guile. He eats with them, drinks with them, he hears them, heals them and loves them. All. All of them.

It is his love, that threatens the powers and the principalities, the government officials Hebrew and Roman alike. The people love Jesus and are hearing Jesus, a movement is forming and those in power live in fear of losing control. So they engineer lies and pay spies and they arrest him, convict him, and crucify him. He dies.

He dies on a cross. A place that had only been a way of deep shame. He dies. Dead. And then he who was dead, he who’d been laid in a tomb, lifeless and rigid as its stone-cold slabs, he rose. He rose from the dead, up from the grave alive. This is the story that Paul and Barnabas and Peter and others begin to tell. They tell of the women who saw him alive. They tell of his appearance to others. More importantly they tell what he said, “That death no longer has dominion, and go and love one another as I have loved you. Go now and care for the poor, the sick the weak, be together as one, and know that God’s ways are not the world’s ways. Be as one and may God’s kingdom come.”

As they tell this story —here’s the thing—people believe—the bridge is crossed and gentiles, pagans and people other than faithful Jews begin to believe. The first time the word Christian is used is in Antioch to refer to the faithful Greeks. The gentiles believe. The pagans accept.

Now the people who began this movement, faithful Jewish leaders are posing the question, the consummate question: *These newcomers, these new ones who now believe, don’t they, shouldn’t they become like us? We have offered such good news, shouldn’t they change and adopt and be like us?* Specifically shouldn’t they too be circumcised like all faithful male Jews?

This is the question posed to the the Apostles and leaders in Jerusalem. Shouldn’t these newcomers be like us? So, a meeting is called and the meeting like many church meetings goes on for quite some time, (some things have not changed dear friends and I’m sure they all talked about it afterwards in the parking lot…)The meeting goes on for quite some time, back and forth with many views being heard, and alternate opinions expressed. But periodically silences happen. People sit still. They reflect on what they have have listened to they pay attention to what they have learned.

And out of a silence..

the apostle James stands and quoting and weaving from scripture he declares that long ago this is what God intended, that many many more may believe. And though they are not believers in the way of the faithful Jews, nevertheless the Spirit is active and they will not unnecessarily burden the non Jewish believers with Jewish traditions. The basics only will be required—and a new way of being is begun.

A way of being, a way of hearing and learning and re-creating is begun. A way, here in this corner of Michigan from which we can learn.

As theologian Willie James Jennings says, we can weave together “Our crucial beginnings with our present endeavors,”(*Acts: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible,* 2017, p 141.)

It’s time friends, for us to do now as our ancestors our early church planters did then. This time, this COVID-19 time is the perfect time for us to rethink how we see ourselves, and see our communities of faith in our world. In these last 19 months we have shown more elasticity, more flexibility than we have in the last 500 years. As wretched as this virus is, our response to it, has permanently altered our chromosomal make-up. We know what it means and we know how it feels to completely re-form our congregations. We know now how to gather in completely new ways. We know what it takes to be transformed.

So I wonder, what if we continued to build on this? What if instead of longing to go back to Egypt where we had leeks and cucumbers, what if we actively moved forward? What if we did as those early leaders did, and began to recognize how alive the Spirit is working well beyond our walls?

God is alive and active and working in our world and our call as people of faith is to find that faith, name those occasions of God and join with the people who are experiencing it and be changed and renewed, be transformed just as the early Jewish apostles were changed and transformed by the faith and actions of the gentiles. We keep our eternal truths but we let our temporal sensibilities slide away.

People ask all the time how do we get them to come join us? If they walked through our doors they would know how wonderful we are. And its true we are and they would know that. But the gentiles didn't’ go to the early believers. The early believers went to the gentiles and then they offered their story and then more importantly they listened and learned from the gentiles. They acknowledged that the Spirit was working in their lives and they honored that work and even more so the early believes changed their ways and together they forged something completely new.

That then is what I believe we are being called to do. To stop waiting for people to walk through our doors—some will and we will welcome them, but mostly friends I wonder what would happen if we went beyond our doors, past our zones of comfort, I wonder if we were to be in our communities, in our neighborhoods listening and learning. And then naming the holiness we see in those places. And rather than saying they must come to us, might we change and go to them and then might all of us like the apostles of old did oh so long ago, might we all create something new. Might we listen and learn, offer our stories and then might we all together create something infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

I wonder.

Amen.