

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 21, 2010
Lessons: Isaiah 43:16-21 and Philippians 3:4b-14

STRAINING FORWARD TO WHAT LIES AHEAD

Six years ago, we formed a Visioning Team for the future of our life together as a church. Presented with a diagram showing the life cycle of a church from birth to death, our officers located us, First Presbyterian Church of Bridgeton, on the beginning of the downward slope, somewhere between vibrant ministry and nostalgia. If they were accurate in their assessment, we started visioning at a good time, because below nostalgia lies “blaming,” where frustration leads to finger pointing and a church divides self-destructively against itself. Nostalgia recalls the “good old days” fondly, enjoying the memories. Blaming is nostalgia turned angry and resentful. *We must be doing something wrong*, it says. In those good old days, the pews were filled (with chairs in the aisle on Easter), the youth group large, the offerings sufficient, and the church prestigious in the community. *We must be doing something wrong, and it must be someone’s fault*. Once a church starts finger pointing and descends into the mode of blaming, it can recover only with the greatest difficulty, because the blaming church poisons its own well, and soon no one cares to drink from that well any more.

What is the purpose for having a visioning team, especially after its initial work of gathering information, bringing people together to hear each other, and drawing out from the congregation a vision of faith and hope for the church’s future has been accomplished? What ongoing service does a visioning team render the church and, more importantly, Jesus Christ?

I have a second question, also. How does the interplay in a church between visioning and nostalgia parallel similar struggles in people’s lives, including yours and mine? There’s nothing wrong with looking back to appreciate the way we have come, enjoying pleasant memories, thanking God for all that has been good or was turned from bad to good, and learning from the lessons of our past. Trouble comes when looking over my shoulder means looking forward because I have turned back and I’m now facing the wrong way. Glancing back is helpful, and sometimes it’s just plain fun. How could I not enjoy recalling good times, especially with friends and the people I love most? But does glancing back make me eager to go forward? Does remembering feed life or depression?

Churches, being made up of people, can become depressed in much same way as individuals. Although, to be sure, some very good things happened in it, the year 2009 was

rather depressing for this church overall, and I think we are still feeling some of the aftereffects. The current recession has not helped. But I believe the Visioning Team has helped and can continue to encourage us to look forward in anticipation of the future to which Jesus Christ calls us.

Will we recover the “good old days”? No, such a return is not likely; neither is it clear that we should. The whole society has changed, and faithful churches can no longer attract large numbers of people because cultural Christianity is passing away in North America as it has already in Europe. People will no longer be Christian by default. So to be faithful to Jesus Christ now that church is no longer “the place to be,” we need to rediscover and re-envision the life, ministry, and service to which Christ calls us.

The Jews exiled in Babylon had good reasons to believe their best days as a people lay behind them. Their covenant God had withdrawn from them in anger they now realized was justified. Their religion had become one of unshakable security in itself – in its own forms and practices – which leads inevitably to complacency and corruption. They had taken God’s presence and favor for granted but had refused to seek God’s will for their future or allow God’s steadfast love to govern and shape their personal relations or their societal responsibilities for justice and provision for the disadvantaged. Then the unthinkable happened, knocking down the pillars of their stability and sweeping away all their securities. The holy city now lay in ruins, its royal dynasty cut off and its Temple burned to the ground. For the exiles, there was no way back into the pleasant and life-favoring conditions of their past and no way they could see forward into a promising future. They were stalled out, and could only make the best of it and survive from day to day.

In such a mood, with such a bruised and battered spirit, the exiles were not open to a message of new hope, but God sent a prophet to speak that message to them, anyway. Their life was not over. Their God had not given up on them. “Do not,” God calls to them, “remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” The time for living in the past has ended. A new day is dawning. So start packing to leave your exile behind and go forward with your God. There is life to live, work to do, and a people loved by God to be.

God has not given up on us, but sometimes it seems we have to feel our securities slipping away before we can get ourselves ready to go forward again in faith. God is not done with us. Moments are not made to last forever, holding us in their grip and keeping us from answering Christ’s call to follow him and walk with him into his future of God’s redemptive love for the world.

We do need to be careful here about the tone in which we speak the truth of God's steadfast, ever forward-looking love and of Christ's call to follow him. The prophet is not berating the people for their discouragement; he feels it, too. Neither is he denying or belittling the griefs of their life in exile. He is announcing that their God has come to give them a future even better than the past they have lost. God has sent the prophet to encourage not scold, to enable not blame, to energize life with new hope and challenge not crush the people with judgment. Yes, the exiles must learn from their past mistakes and sins, but God is calling them forward, and the shame of their past will be left behind.

In these days of assessment and pressure, more assessment and increased pressure, when accountability has come to mean blame rather than empowerment to meet the challenges in going forward, we need as Christ's church to be careful not to become the religious voice of blame. The apostle Paul sees much in his past that could oppress him with guilt and shame, but by the grace of God, his past has been transformed to give him hope and determination rather than weigh him down. When Paul says he presses forward, forgetting what lies behind, he clearly does not mean he no longer remembers his past — of course he remembers it, and he has just finished talking about it — but rather he means that his past can no longer oppress his mind and hold him back. He has caught a glimpse of something far better, and he will pursue it.

Let's be realistic. Does there not come a time when going forward means passing the torch to a younger generation? Yes, of course that time comes, but if we take seriously our role as teachers and enablers, it comes naturally and gradually as we fulfill our generational responsibility to our children and grandchildren in the faith. Indeed, this generational responsibility is what our Visioning Team is working on right now.

God's call is to us and for us. There is no need to dwell upon the past because God is doing a new thing, and we can anticipate its coming even before we see it spring to life. So, forgetting what lies behind, we strain forward toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Are we fewer in number? God told Gideon to send some home because he had too many. Are we hesitant because we don't see what lies ahead? Do we ever see what lies ahead? Do we not always walk in faith, once we let drop the delusion that life will stay as it is and not change? One thing we might wish to change for the better. At the risk of swiping a line from a former U.S. president, I suggest we might wish to stop asking what the church does for us and ask instead, not merely what we can do for the church, but rather what Christ calls us to do *as the church* for the world God continues to love so much.

We are not people of the past. We follow and serve the risen Christ who lives, and so we live with a hope that nothing in life or death can take from us. Let us go forward and see what God has in mind for us. Amen.