



“Are We There Yet?”

Texts: 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11, Acts 1:6-14

a sermon by Jerusha Van Camp

Sunday, May 21, 2023

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

The disciples did not know or fully understand that with Jesus’ ascension, their work as followers of Christ had just begun. They were witnessing the birth of a revolution that would continue to unfold for thousands of years.

Theologian Phyllis Tickle, in her book, *The Great Emergence*, uses the analogy of “The 500-Year Rummage Sale” to describe the repeating historic change we have experienced in the world of religion and society over the last 2,000 years. She contends that the church “cleans house” roughly every 500 years, then holding what she calls a “giant rummage sale,” the church decides what to dispose of and what to keep, to make room for new things.

If we look back over the past 2000 years, we can see the pattern that Phyllis Tickle is describing and each catalyst that marks its beginning. This pattern begins with the coming of Christ, then the collapse of the Roman empire and the beginning of the Dark Ages; 500 years later it was the split between the Eastern and Western Church, known as “The Great Schism”, and in the 1500’s, it was the great Reformation. 2017 marked the 500th anniversary of the last great “Rummage Sale” and the beginning of the next religious and cultural transformation.

I wish we had Google maps for this moment in history, like we do with our smartphones. Google maps can tell us exactly where we are, how much longer it will be until we reach our destination, and if we want to grab a Starbucks drink, the GPS can even find all of the Starbucks locations along our route, allowing us to get our white chocolate mocha frappuccino and get back on the road in record time.

We may not have a GPS to tell us where we are in the scope of this story, but there are indicators if you look for them. In 2021, Gallup, the global research organization, found that religious membership dropped below 50% of the US population for the first time in 80 years. Another source notes that young people do not return to church after high school graduation. Some do not return because they have moved away and lost their connections, but others have chosen to leave the church because of the judgment and hypocrisy they have seen or experienced. Some young people say they can't really connect to people in their church, or they disagree with the church's stance on political/social issues. These numbers continue to drop at an alarming speed.

Theologians and prophets alike are coming to understand and acknowledge that we are now living in a post-Christendom world. The Rummage Sale has begun. Protestantism, in the form that we have known it, is coming to an end.

I know this is heartbreaking to those of us who love the church as we know it, for those of us for whom church has been a positive place, and for whom our traditions and worship have added so much meaning and wholeness to our lives. As challenging as facing the unknown may seem, it is important to go into the future with our eyes open about what is happening in the world and what mark we will make on the generations to come.

It is most important to note, that this decline in Christianity does not indicate that people don't want or need to find peace and communion with God. It does mean that the universal church has failed to faithfully reflect God to the world. The universal church has been complicit in oppression and corruption.

When I was a small child, it was an 8 hour drive from Carmi, IL to visit my maternal grandparents, in Harlan County, Kentucky. This was a very long trip in my memory. My siblings and I didn't have much to do to pass the time. Inevitably, boredom and restlessness would set in, and we would begin asking my parents, "Are we there yet?", or we might ask, "How much longer?"

Just as the disciples were at the starting point of a journey that would continue long after they were gone, so are we as a congregation here in Evansville, Indiana. Beginnings can be exciting, but they can also harbor anxiety and fear of the unknown. I know that we feel the uncertainty and discomfort of this new beginning mingled with grief after Pastor Kevin's death, after living through a pandemic and so much upheaval all around us, but we are not alone as we face our challenges.

The Protestant church as a whole is sifting through the junk drawers and jam packed closets, trying to decipher what has to go and what will stay. We must fully examine the construct of our faith, our worship traditions, and our doctrines so that we can toss out anything that hinders our witness to the extravagant inclusive love of God for ALL people.

We are a people who are walking towards a new opportunity, a new understanding, and new ways to practice our faith. We are pioneers paving the way for a new form of Christianity that is authentic, meaningful, just, and radiates with love. We are the changemakers, who are following Christ to a new destination worth looking forward to.

I don't know what challenges await us as we follow Christ into the unknown, but I do know that if we open our hearts and our ears and are willing to let go, make space, and trust God, we will be the greatest champions for a world in which all human lives can flourish, where exploitation and greed are vanquished, where the sacredness of the earth and all of creation is honored and revered. I do know that if we follow Christ with our whole hearts, we will work for a world where all human cultures and individual expressions are celebrated, where we value one another based on our sacred humanity rather than how we look or what we own. This is God's kingdom come and God's will on earth as it is in heaven.

None of us will be around in 200 years to see how we did and how it's all going to fall into place. In a lot of ways, we get the most difficult part of this journey as the world is shaken and shifted. Even though we won't be around to see the full end result of this transformation, we must continue to work with God as we move away from what is easy and familiar, and continue to preach with our lives that God's destination is worth living and dying for.

Our text from 1 Peter begins by acknowledging the “fiery ordeal” that we are going through and acknowledges the strangeness or unfamiliarity of the times as we leave what we have known behind and walk into a new way of life that the Holy Spirit is guiding us into. God understands that, and God cares that this is hard for us. God is aware of our needs.

How are we to respond to this time and this season in the grand scope of God’s renewing work in the world? Our instructions come to us in 1 Peter 5:6-9: First, humble yourselves before God. Be aware of our limitedness and God’s unlimitedness. Second, Cast all your anxiety on God, because God cares for us. Third, discipline yourselves, keep alert. Now is not the time to fall asleep. Fourth, resist evil in all its forms, be steadfast in your faith. God’s self will restore, will support, will strengthen, and establish our path. God is taking care of us.

Are we there yet, no, we’re not, but we’re on our way to a glorious destination where love, grace, justice, and mercy will reign. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.

First Presbyterian Church Staff:

Pastor
Director of Music
Children and Youth Ministry Coordinator
Parish Visitor/Administrative Assistant
Office Administrator

Anna von Winckler
Robert Nicholls
Carrie Aiken
Jerusha Van Camp
Lora Blaylock



609 South East Second Street
Evansville, IN 47713
(812) 423-6297
www.firstpresevansville.com

First Presbyterian Church
is a partner congregation with
the Covenant Network
of Presbyterians.

