

The St. John's Pulpit

St. John's Baptist Church 300 Hawthorne Lane Charlotte, NC 28204
704.333.5428 www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org

LOSING SIGHT OF THE SHORE

Jeremiah 29:1-3 and Matthew 4:18-22

Sixth Sunday in Kingdomtide, October 8, 2017

Sermon 1 of 3 in Series: 'On Being a Sent People – Exodus, Exile or Exploration?'

The Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister



We pick up today's sermon on the way toward the future. Like young children in the backseat, we ask, 'Are we there yet?' On your travels into the future, you may be asking: 'Where is there?' 'Will we know when we arrive?' 'Are we sure we even want to go?'

Living into the future has always involved change. And, I do not need to tell you the speed of change is increasing exponentially. One friend compared her busy life in this age of rapid change to riding on a plane during turbulence: "I keep thinking the bumpy ride will cease but it doesn't."

Today's sermon is the first of three focused on how St. John's can make a difference in a rapidly changing world. One thing is clear; the world as we knew it just a few years ago is gone forever. Those who invest their lives in reconstructing yesterday live in a land of fantasy.

In his latest insightful book, Brian McLaren discusses The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian. He writes about Christians like you who are shaking your heads and asking, "What happened to Jesus and his beautiful message? We feel as if our founder has been kidnapped and held hostage by extremists. His captors parade him in front of cameras to say, under duress, things he obviously doesn't believe. As their blank-faced puppet, he often comes across as antipoor, antienvironment, antigay, anti-intellectual, anti-immigrant, and anti-science (not to mention pro-torture, pro-inequality, pro-violence, pro-death penalty and pro-war). That's not the Jesus we meet in the Gospels. That's not the Jesus who won our hearts," writes McLaren (p 6). He points out that if our world is to migrate from violence, we must offer a God to the world who is anti-violence. His book traces the wind of the Holy Spirit of God moving among followers of Jesus today in ways that seek a deeper life while expressing the loving message of Jesus. He sees this as necessary in the future.

Tomorrow, is an important date in human history; on October 9th, 1492, 525 years ago, Christopher Columbus left Spain on a journey that ended up giving the world a different world. Columbus is partly responsible for the world you know. Nobel Prize writer, Andre Gide wrote, “*You can never cross the ocean unless you have the courage to lose sight of the shore.*”

By serving God every day, as Ministers in Daily Life, you serve people who feel like refugees in this fast-changing new world. You hear them express fear, anxiety, stress, frustration and confusion. You deal with their lack of health, their break downs, their social and relational dis-ease and the ways they create dissonance and distance between themselves and others.

Beloved, while you live among these refugee people, you are not refugee people. You are in the world but you are part of the People of God sent into the world as children of Light; witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus and the active Presence of God as Holy Spirit.

As you lose sight of the shore of yesterday, you sail into the future relying on God. You are building your spiritual life together trusting that God goes before you. You are building your life together on this trust while you practice the scientific method; you trust God while asking relevant questions. You build your life together on an ancient Truth older than concepts of infallibility or inerrancy. You build your life together on Trusting God to guide you rather than on rigid credal or doctrinal statements that become outdated in a changing world. As you lose sight of the shore of yesterday, you take with you what gives your lives meaning and depth.

Consider some other times when our ancestors in Trust lost sight of the shore of yesterday.

1. As the Hebrews lost sight of the shore of Egypt, it was called an Exodus. They lost sight of the shore of the familiar, The Lord went before them and was with them. This was true then; this is true now. You will never know a day when God does not go with you and before you. Since you are following the Lord, he must be going ahead of you to prepare your way.’

2. When Babylon separated the Jews from everything familiar to them, they called it Exile. Some prophets said they would be back home very soon. ‘*Don’t worry,*’ they proclaimed, ‘*this is just a temporary interruption. Soon, we will return to yesterday.*’ This morning, we read the first words of a letter from Jeremiah calling the Jews to spiritual renewal. He challenged the people to develop new spiritual strength and resolve during Exile. They learned how to sing in a strange land. They Trusted in God and discovered what was truly of value in their faith.

3. When those first followers of Jesus were emerging as communities of faith, they were losing sight of the shore of yesterday. Their theology was changing; they were expelled from the Temple; their understanding of who God accepted and included in faith community was in flux. They learned how to

love one another across lines of race, gender, economics, language and culture. How often do you think they craved a return to a simpler time? The Book of Acts and Letters to the Churches are filled with stories and references where the first Christians were experiencing a sea change with no anchor except trust in the God whom Jesus revealed to them. Their journey was not an exodus or an exile; they were exploring a new perspective. They were exploring how to move from the legalistic God they had been taught to the loving God of Jesus.

Anthony Robinson, in his book, *‘What’s Theology Got to Do with It?’* points out the word, ‘perspective,’ means ‘to see through.’ Beloved, Jesus doesn’t just offer a perspective about God; Jesus gives us a whole new perspective to see through God, as we view anything and everything. We now see every dimension of living – including rapid change – through the perspective of Jesus’ teachings and resurrection. Just as Jesus asked Simon Peter and Andrew to leave their boat and fishing nets to take up a cruciform life of servant discipleship, Jesus calls you to follow him. Some days, you will follow Jesus on the solid ground of the shore. And, some days, Jesus will say to you what he also said to Simon Peter and Andrew on occasion, *“Come on, get in the boat; it’s time to leave this familiar shore behind.”*

The best way to live into the future is to be purposeful. We can learn from those who fled the paths of hurricanes last month. They knew their future was going to be different; they had to make choices. What they valued most was revealed. One young adult wrote, *“I was clear about my goals until someone asked me about my values.”* In *Lady Windermere’s Fan – A Play About a Good Woman*, Oscar Wilde has Lord Darlington quip that a cynic is a person *“who knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing.”*

St. John’s, what do we value? As a local church, what must we take with us into the future? What commitments, visions and experiences of our congregational life and ministry do we value most? In next Sunday’s sermon, I will offer four values that I challenge you to take with you into the future: your relationship with God, your commitment to God’s message, your relationships with one another as the people of God; and your involvement together in God’s mission?

Next Sunday, following lunch, we will gather for CONVERGE. Your perspective of how you see God at work in this changing world is essential as we consider the perspective of Jesus.

Yes, I know, from time to time, along this exploration into the future, our Trust is challenged; some people want to return to the shore of yesterday and familiar. Yet, beloved, when the wind blows and the waves rise and the boat sways, I remind you that on this boat With Us is the Lord of our faith; the one who promises, *“I will never leave you nor forsake you;”* the one who says, *“Fear not;”* and *“Peace, be still.”* Amen and AMEN!