

Liquid Church

Ezekiel 47:1-9, John 4:7-14

First Presbyterian Church

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Ezekiel 47:1-12

Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. 2Then he brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and the water was coming out on the south side. 3Going on eastward with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. 4Again he measured one thousand and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep. Again, he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was up to the waist. 5Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed. 6He said to me, "Mortal, have you seen this?" Then he led me back along the bank of the river. 7As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on the one side and on the other. 8He said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. 9Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes.

John 4:7-14

7A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." 8(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 9The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) 10Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." 11The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" 13Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Sermon¹

Back in the day... and I am definitely old enough now to say, “back in the day,” it would have taken me two weeks to stop writing 2021 when dating a check. Anybody remember checks? But now it just happens on my keyboard: 2021... no, backspace - 2022. I don’t know about you, but I really thought that by the end of last year we would be talking about our “post-pandemic era as a church. After all, we re-gathered for in-person worship last Easter Sunday. Early last summer, I remember saying I thought we would be eating Wednesday Night Supper together in the Fellowship Hall in September. I was wrong, of course, but not completely. We can all agree that things were definitely better last year thanks to the vaccine and our expanding understanding of the virus. We have not had to completely shut down again... at least not yet. Still taking precautions, we have continued to worship and meet in person... we have developed some new tricks (like fully hybrid Bible studies and committee meetings) ... we have come up with creative ways to communicate and connect... and we have learned a lot – about ourselves, each other, and about our church.

And since I am so good at predicting the future, I’m going on record this morning to say that I NOW believe that 2022 will be what I thought 2021 would be... that these next 12 months will serve as sort of a threshold year which leads us into whatever our “post-pandemic” life will be as a church. Though there may be another variant coming down the pike... and we will continue to need to be agile and flexible, let’s hope that this is the year when the dust begins to settle, and we can begin to move into whatever our new normal will be.

I’ve given that a lot of thought, by the way – what our new normal will be. Our church staff has, too... and I imagine the same is true for you. We’ve pondered how our church will emerge from the pandemic... how our church will have changed and how we will NEED TO CHANGE so that might continue to be a witness to Jesus and be a force for good in Hickory. Well, this morning I want to make an entry into this conversation that most of us are having anyway. And I want to do that by exploring two realities I think will mark the church moving into the post-pandemic era. And then I want to offer an image that might help us picture it. The first, and perhaps most important reality is that the church is changing. I know by now that sounds trite, but it’s true – one model of being church is giving way to a new model. Though it’s not at all clear what that new model will be. What was... is gone. This is NOT to say that the church itself is giving way... but that a particular approach or way of doing things is giving way. Every church has a model for its ministry and mission. Our model has its roots in the Presbyterian branch of the Reformed tradition... our model in this congregation has developed over almost 150 years of ministry in Hickory. But perhaps even more important, our model is based on certain assumptions... assumptions that when no longer true, render the model less and less effective.

¹ This sermon draws upon a series of annual blogposts by Carey Nieuwhof in which he identifies disruptive trends both in and facing the church. I have found his insights particularly helpful during the pandemic. His work can be found at careynieuwhof.com

For example – an old assumption is that if we just have a nice building and beautiful music and a cracker-jack youth program and a charming pastor that people will beat down our doors to join us. It's the "Build it and they will come," assumption. And it worked for a long, long time. But that time has ended... this assumption is no longer valid. Which means that year after year this old model of Church proves to be less and less effective.

Another example... the old model of church was built around a particular day and a particular building. It was built around people coming here to this building on Sunday morning. Again, don't get me wrong - Sunday worship IN this church building is extremely important, both for Biblical and practical reasons. However, it also makes us like a restaurant that says if you want to eat, we're open this one hour in this one building... and if you miss it, you miss it.

Well, for all kinds of reasons this "Sunday-and-building-centric" model is giving way to a new model that understands there are 167 other hours in a week... and that worship and spiritual formation and fellowship can and do take place outside of this building. The new model of church adjusts the focus from only what happens here on Sunday morning to what happens out there... where we all live seven days a week.

One final example of how the church is changing is that "hybrid church" is quickly becoming church. Hosting church online and in-person is just how we do church now. No doubt we will continue to debate the "experience" of in-person vs. online worship, because those experiences are very different. But it is now clear to our staff that if we want to reach YOU when you are in the mountains or at the beach or somewhere caring for your grandkids... and especially if we want to reach younger generations... online church needs to be a very high priority. Hybrid church will simply become church.

So, whether we like it or not, the church IS changing.... and you might be surprised to hear me say this, but it is changing because WE are changing it... you and I are changing the church because of who we are... and because of who the people we would like to attract are. As pastor, Mark Sayers, has said... the model of church is actually being rebuilt right now as you and I decide what the church means to us... as we decide how and when to engage with church... and as we do our best to reach others with the love of Jesus. As I said, we don't know what the new model will look like, but we sure know it is "under construction."

The second reality we will face in what we might call the "post-pandemic" church is actually the continuation of a reality we've been dealing with for a while now. It is that we are called to be the church of Jesus Christ in a very polarized culture. And that's hard... it's hard to BE the church... and it's hard LEAD the church at this time. For some, their positions on divisive issues of our day (and there are plenty of them!) have moved from being a matter of thoughtful opinion which might be debated and refined... to a matter of identity... to expressing who they are at the very deepest level. Well, as hard as it is to be church in this time, I still believe we can witness to others that there is another way because of two things.

First, is that as Christians we know that our identity is found not in race or nationality or class... political party any issue... our identity is found in that water that Heather poured into the font a few moments ago. We are children of God, created in God's image. We are disciples of Jesus – forgiven by his grace and sent out to embody his love. We are vessels of his Holy Spirit – empowered to live lives that are pleasing to him. And allowing any other loyalty to usurp this identity IS, as our Reformed tradition teaches us, idolatry.

The second thing is that in this hyper-polarized culture, the church (this church) must be a safe, welcoming place. This is a message that comes not only from folks who are already inside the church, but from countless interviews with people who are outside... who say that they are not looking for the church to echo of the culture, they're looking for the church to be an alternative to it. Unchurched and de-churched people aren't looking for politics or ideology... they're looking to experience the God that transcends the tribalism that seems to mean so much to us... they are looking for Christ... and for Christians who look, live, and sound more like him. In a divided culture, church must be a place where we can disagree, but still be agreeable... where we can focus on the mission which unites us, not on what divides us. In a divided culture, Christians should be the hope, not the hate.

I want to leave you with an image which was first given to the prophet Ezekiel... it is an image of what we might call a "liquid church." It started with a trickle... a stream so small that Ezekiel almost didn't see it at first. The angel pointed, and the old prophet bent over to get a better look. Sure enough, there it was – a small, but unmistakable flow of water from under the threshold of the temple. The angel then showed Ezekiel that the water was flowing from the inner sanctuary, out the door, and down the steps. Walking away from the temple with a measuring cord in his hand, the angel led Ezekiel into the water. After walking a distance of a thousand cubits, he measured – it was ankle deep. Another thousand cubits, it was knee deep. Another thousand cubits, it was waist deep. Finally, Ezekiel's tour guide led him another thousand cubits where the trickle had swollen into a river that could only be crossed by swimming. The angel reached down, plucked the prophet out of the water, and planted him safely on the bank. "Do you see this?" the angel asked. The river was transforming everything it touched – fruit trees grew on the riverbanks, schools of fish swarmed in the waters. In the distance, the river poured into the Dead Sea bringing even its water back to life. Wherever the water flowed, God's healing and blessing followed.²

Well, Ezekiel 47 is a vivid and powerful picture of what God once promised to Israel... that life-giving water would once again flow from the temple out into the land... and that as it flowed out, it would get deeper and wider and more powerful...literally saturating the land with God's healing and hope.

² Tim Lucas and Warren Bird, *Liquid Church: 6 Powerful Currents to Saturate Your City for Christ*, (Zondervan,2019), p. 23-34 and *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* Vol. VI, p. 1595-1596.

Well, might we imagine that this is also God's promise to the post-pandemic church? That Jesus' life-giving water might flow out of the church – out of this church – bringing with it hope and healing to our land? Might we imagine that? If so, it will take disciples who are willing to get a little wet – up to our ankles, our knees, our waist, even up to our necks – disciples who know that EVEN if we build it and build it well, though some will come...many won't... (at least not at first). So, it will take disciples who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, are willing to wade out into this life-giving water to meet people wherever they are... not waiting for them to come to us or to come to this place... but meeting them wherever they are.

I understand that this is a new model of church for us... it certainly isn't the church I was trained to lead. So, I get it that this is a new model for us. But as someone said to me yesterday, when you read the Gospels and especially the Book of Acts, it really is an old model of church... maybe even the oldest model of church... in which his willing disciples... filled with his Holy Spirit... took his good news and met people wherever they were... and when you think about it, that's the only reason you and I are here today.

Charge

So, yes, the church is changing. The old model is giving way to the new... what was is gone... what will be is still emerging. But isn't that how it has always been? Inspired by the spirit of Jesus, his followers have always found ways to spread his word and his love in their particular time and place. I mean isn't that at least part of what it means to be "reformed and always being reformed by the Word of God?"

The church of Jesus Christ is not giving way... nor is the mission to: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them everything I have commanded you."

Nor is the promise – "and remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."