

Zechariah 4:1-6 and Ephesians 4:11-16 "Moving Forward Together"- Sermon for June 2019 Presbytery Meeting

"COME SING O CHURCH IN JOY! COME JOIN O CHURCH IN SONG! FOR CHRIST HAS LED US THROUGH THE AGES LONG! IN BOLD ACCORD COME CELEBRATE THE JOURNEY NOW AND PRAISE THE LORD!"

CELEBRATION AND JOURNEY ARE NOT ALWAYS COMPLIMENTARY. THIS IS ESPECIALLY TRUE WHEN WE DO NOT KNOW WHERE WE ARE GOING, AND ARE NOT SURE IF WE WILL LIKE WHERE WE END UP. IN OTHER WORDS CHANGE CAN BE DIFFICULT, CHALLENGING, AND A LITTLE FRIGHTENING, AS WELL AS EXCITING AND JOYOUS.

THINK ABOUT THE BEGINNING OF OUR FAITH. JESUS APPEARS AT THE RIVER AND IS BAPTIZED BY JOHN. THEN AFTER TIME IN THE WILDERNESS HE BEGINS HIS MINISTRY. DISCIPLES AND OTHER FOLLOWERS ARE GATHERED AND THEY WITNESS THE CHANGE GOD BROUGHT THROUGH JESUS.

THERE WERE HEALINGS, THE RAISING OF THE DEAD, OTHER MIRACLES, ALONG WITH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE TEACHING. ALL POINT TO CHANGE, TO GLIMPSES OF THE PROMISED MESSIAH AND KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM WHERE JESUS FINALLY ACCEPTS PUBLIC ACCLAMATIONS OF KINGSHIP SURELY WAS A TIME OF CELEBRATION AND JOY. BUT THEN ON THURSDAY THERE IS THE UNEXPECTED ARREST OF JESUS AND HIS EXECUTION THE FOLLOWING DAY.

THESE CHANGES BRING GRIEF AND FEAR AND CONFUSION. AND WHILE THOSE WHO LOVE JESUS ARE STILL TRYING TO RECOVER FROM THE SHOCK OF IT ALL, JESUS IS RAISED TO LIFE AGAIN. THE JOY AND WONDER OF THIS CHANGE IS WITHOUT WORDS TO PROPERLY DESCRIBE. AND YET, WHILE JESUS IS BACK AMONG THEM ALIVE AND WELL, HIS PHYSICAL BODY HAS POWERS NOT PRESENT BEFORE.

THEN THERE IS THE FACT THE LORD DOES NOT APPEAR IN PUBLIC BUT ONLY AMONG HIS DISCIPLES, HIS OTHER FOLLOWERS, AND FAMILY. YES THE LORD IS ALIVE, BUT HE IS NOT YET BRINGING IN THE EXPECTED KINGDOM, HE RETURNS TO THOSE WHO LOVE HIM AND BELIEVE IN HIM BUT THINGS ARE NOT THE SAME.

AND IF THAT IS NOT ENOUGH, BEFORE THEY CAN ADJUST TO THIS NEW WAY OF FOLLOWING JESUS, HE ASCENDS INTO HEAVEN, LEAVING THEM WITHOUT HIS PHYSICAL PRESENCE ONCE AGAIN. THE ASCENSION ITSELF, JESUS TELLS HIS FOLLOWERS, IS FOR THE PURPOSE OF INITIATING EVEN MORE CHANGES. SO THOSE WHO WITNESS THIS EVENT STARE UPWARDS AS JESUS VANISHES FROM THEIR SIGHT.

THEN THEY ARE SCOLDED BY ANGELS ASKING WHY THEY ARE STARING TOWARDS THE HEAVENS. WELL ISN'T IT OBVIOUS? FROM A HUMAN PERSPECTIVE THEY ARE TRYING TO COME TO TERMS WITH YET ANOTHER CHANGE, AND HARDLY BELIEVED THEIR EYES WHEN THEY SAW HIM LEAVE THEM ONCE MORE.

AND JESUS LEFT WITH THE PROMISE, OR PERHAPS IT MAY HAVE FELT MORE LIKE A WARNING, THAT GOD WILL SOON MOVE THEM FORWARD TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL. STILL, JESUS FOLLOWERS ARE PROMISED AN EXCITING AND FULFILLING JOURNEY, AND ONE THEY WILL TAKE WHETHER THEY WISH TO OR NOT.

FINALLY, THE PROMISE IS FULFILLED IN THE RUSH OF WIND AND TONGUES OF FIRE AS THE HOLY SPIRIT TOUCHES AND FILLS THE MEN AND WOMEN FOLLOWERS OF JESUS ON PENTECOST. IT IS THEN THE MINISTRY JESUS BEGAN, BEGINS IN A NEW WAY AS THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT AND THE STIRRINGS OF PERSECUTION DRIVE MANY CHRISTIANS OUTSIDE OF JERUSALEM. THEN THE CHANGES MULTIPLY ONCE MORE BEYOND THE IMAGINATION OR POWER OF THE CHURCH.

THE SCENE FROM THE BOOK OF ZECHARIAH GIVES A HINT ABOUT HOW SUCH THINGS CAN HAPPEN. THE CONTEXT IS THE CALL FROM GOD TO REBUILD THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM, AND THE UNCERTAINTY OF THE KING CONCERNING WHAT SEEMS TO BE AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK. IN THIS VISION THE LAMPS ARE FED NOT BY HUMAN RESOURCES BUT BY THE TWO OLIVES TREES, WHICH PROVIDE OIL TO THE LAMPS ON THEIR OWN.

THUS, THE WORD OF THE LORD AND THE PROMISES IT BRINGS ARE SHOWN TO BE UNDER DIVINE NOT HUMAN CONTROL. WE ARE TOLD THE MIGHT OF HUMAN RESOURCES, AND THE STRENGTH OR RESOLVE OF PEOPLE'S ABILITIES AND WILL ARE NOT ABLE TO COMPLETE THE TASK TO WHICH WE ARE CALLED.

BUT THE GOOD NEWS IS WE ARE NOT RELYING ON OUR POWER AND MIGHT ALONE, BUT ON THE SPIRIT OF GOD. IT IS THE HOLY SPIRIT WHO WILL ENABLE GOD'S PEOPLE, CHRIST'S CHURCH TO LIVE AND GROW AND MOVE FORWARD.

THE SECOND VERSE OF THE SONG I QUOTED FROM THE PRESBYTERIAN HYMNAL, IN THE OPENING LINES OF THE SERMON SAYS THIS:

"LONG YEARS HAVE COME AND GONE, AND STILL GOD REIGNS SUPREME.
EMPOWERING US TO CATCH THE VISION AND DREAM THE DREAM! IN BOLD ACCORD COME CELEBRATE THE JOURNEY NOW AND PRAISE THE LORD!"

THERE IS HOWEVER, AN IMPORTANT REMINDER IN THIS-AS WE IN THE PRESBYTERY OF NORTHERN NY SEEK TO MOVE FORWARD TOGETHER-SCRIPTURE REMINDS US, INDEED INSTRUCTS US TO INCLUDE THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE WORK WE DO.

THE SPIRIT WILL GUIDE US AND EQUIP US TO USE OUR VARIOUS GIFTS AND CALLINGS TO GLORIFY GOD AS WE SHARE CHRIST'S LOVE IN WORD AND DEED. HERE GOD REMINDS US ALL THAT BEYOND REFORMED THEOLOGY OR CHURCH STRUCTURE. WE ARE UNITED AS THE BODY OF CHRIST ON EARTH EMPOWERED BY THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD.

BUT BEFORE WE JOIN HANDS, SING "KUM-BA-YAH" AND SKIP HAPPILY FORWARD TOGETHER-THE REALITY IS THINGS MAY NOT GO AS SMOOTHLY AS WE HOPE. WE NEED ONLY TO LOOK AT THE EARLY CHURCH AND HEAR THE WORDS OF THE APOSTLES WHO ADMONISHED AND ENCOURAGED CHRISTIANS IN THEIR LIVES TOGETHER, TO BE REMINDED WE ARE STILL SINNERS.

TRUE, WE ARE SINNERS WHO ARE FORGIVEN AND MADE NEW IN CHRIST, WE ARE NOT OF THE WORLD, BUT STILL ARE IN IT. THIS MEANS THE MODEL OF A FULLY FUNDED AND SUSTAINED STAFF MAY NEED SOME ADJUSTMENT IN THE FUTURE. AND COMMUNICATIONS, WHILE IMPROVING WILL INEVITABLY BREAK DOWN FOR SOME OF US FROM TIME TO TIME.

WE WILL NOT ALL AGREE ON HOW TO IMPLEMENT OUR EXPRESSED DESIRES CONCERNING MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER IN STAFFING, STRUCTURE, MISSION AND OTHER THINGS.
AND IT IS POSSIBLE THERE WILL BE DECISIONS MADE THAT ARE NOT THE BEST ONES.

BUT SUCH IS LIFE IN WORLD, IN THE MIDST OF OUR HUMAN IMPERFECTIONS. IT IS AT THOSE TIMES HONEST COMMUNICATION WILL BE NECESSARY, WITH SCRIPTURE'S REMINDER TO SPEAK OUT OF LOVE AND NOT ANGER. HOWEVER, WE MUST NOT LET FEAR OF WHAT COULD GO WRONG OR AT LEAST NOT GO AS RIGHT AS WE HOPE -TO STOP US FROM MOVING FORWARD.

THE THIRD STANZA OF THE SONG PROCLAIMS: "LET COURAGE BE OUR FRIEND. LET WISDOM BE OUR GUIDE. AS WE IN MISSION MAGNIFY THE CRUCIFIED! IN BOLD ACCORD COME CELEBRATE THE JOURNEY NOW AND PRAISE THE LORD!"

REMEMBER THE OLD TESTAMENT READING TO TRUST IN THE HOLY SPIRIT. WE AS CHRISTIANS HAVE AN EVEN GREATER ACCESS TO THE SPIRIT THAN GOD'S PEOPLE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT TIMES. THIS MEANS WE ALSO AS INDIVIDUALS AND AS CHURCHES CLERGY AND LAY PERSONS ALIKE, HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO LISTEN FOR AND FOLLOW GOD'S CALL TO US.

AFTER ALL THE MOST PERFECT PLANS AND THE BEST POSSIBLE WAYS TO IMPLEMENT THEM WILL NOT BEAR FRUIT UNLESS THERE ARE THOSE WILLING TO WORK. FOR WE PROCLAIM CHRIST CRUCIFIED AND RISEN NOT JUST IN WORSHIP AND WORDS, BUT WITH WORK.

INDEED, WE NEED TO WORK TOGETHER IN AREAS THAT ARE POSSIBLE, FOR US TO DO SO. AND WE NEED TO PRAYERFULLY LOOK AT WAYS IN WHICH WE CAN HELP AS INDIVIDUALS AND CONGREGATIONS-WITH THE DESIRED PLANS AND PROGRAMS.

YES WE HAVE THE HELP OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. BUT JUST LIKE THE SPIRIT OF GOD DID NOT DO THE PHYSICAL WORK OF REBUILDING THE TEMPLE-SO ALSO GOD EXPECTS US TO DO THE ACTUAL WORK OF REBUILDING THE PRESBYTERY.

SOME OF THIS REBUILDING INVOLVES SUPPORTING OUR CHURCHES AND THEIR LEADERS AND CONGREGATIONS.OTHER WORK IS THE NEED TO SUPPORT FINANCIAL AND OTHERWISE OF THE STAFFING AND MISSION WORK OF THE PRESBYTERY.

THIS MAY INCLUDE INDIVIDUAL VOLUNTEERS, CONGREGATIONS, AND YET UNSEEN PARTICIPANTS WORKING TOGETHER.SHARING THOUGHTS AND IDEAS, AS WELL AS ENGAGING IN PRAYER, AT PRESBYTERY, IN OUR CHURCHES, AND AS INDIVIDUALS IS ALSO NECESSARY IN THIS PROCESS.

SO ALSO WE AS A PRESBYTERY WILL BENEFIT FROM A WILLINGNESS TO MOVE FORWARD TOGETHER, THAT IS WITH ONE ANOTHER AND WITH GOD.THIS MAY NOT BE EASY FOR ALL OF US. AFTER ALL SOME HAVE SEEN MANY CHANGES IN THE PRESBYTERY OVER THE YEARS-AND CHANGE, AS WAS POINTED OUT EARLIER, CAN BE DIFFICULT.

INDEED, PICKING UP ON THE THEME OF WHAT TO PACK TO TAKE WITH US AND WHAT TO LEAVE BEHIND, WILL MOST LIKELY BRING A MIXTURE OF THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS AS OUR PLANS ARE IMPLEMENTED. THIS BRINGS US BACK TO PRAYER, TO SEEKING THE HELP OF THE SPIRIT, BEING FLEXIBLE, LISTENING FOR AND HEEDING GOD'S CALL.

IT ALSO BRINGS US TO THE LAST LINES OF THE HYMN:"COME SING O CHURCH IN JOY! COME JOIN O CHURCH IN SONG! FOR CHRIST HAS TRUMPHED O'ER THE AGES LONG! IN BOLD ACCORD COME CELEBRATE THE JOURNEY NOW AND PRAISE THE LORD!"

LET US PRAY: LORD, IT IS OFTEN SAID YOU MOVE IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS, AND YET NOT ALL OF US ENJOY MYSTERIES.WE AS A PRESBYTERY SEEK YOUR GIFTS, YOUR WISDOM, AND YOUR GUIDANCE AS WE MOVE FORWARD TOGETHER IN SERVICE TO JESUS CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH.EMPOWER, WE PRAY, PRESBYTERY LEADERSHIP, COMMITTEE AND COMMISSION MEMBERS, EACH CONGREGATION AND INDIVIDUALS TO DISCERN AND DO YOUR WILL.WHERE WE ARE IN ERROR MAY THE HOLY SPIRIT CORRECT US AND GUIDE US, WHERE WE ARE FEARFUL OR HESITANT MAY WE BE INSPIRED, SO THAT WE CAN INDEED CELEBRATE THIS JOURNEY AND PRAISE YOU.THROUGH OUR LORD AND SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST WE GIVE YOU THANKS AND PRAISE.ALL GLORY AND HONOR ARE YOURS-FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD FOREVER AND EVER, AMEN.