**Springfield Presbyterian Church**

**August 21st, 2022**

**Envisioning a Church for Today**

1. **The Lord Works in Mysterious Ways**

The Lord works in mysterious ways – and that was such the

case for me this past Thursday. Some of you know that I’ve been working on getting rid of the bamboo forest in my yard, or at least to clear a path. And as many of you know as well, it isn’t easy work – the branches are fibrous and difficult to cut and I won’t complete the work overnight.

 As I was cutting some of the branches and preparing to cut down the bamboo, my mind went to our Scripture lessons for today. Now, sidebar, I don’t recommend thinking about deep and theological things while you have a sharp object in hand and you are doing intensive yardwork. But, again, here I was – in the midst of creating a path, daydreaming about the Word, thinking about where it might lead us today.

 Part of creating this path is exciting, in the sense that you don’t know what lies behind the next few pieces of bamboo. The same is true for many of the paths we create in our lives. Anytime we step into something new – let’s say it’s a new journey of parenthood, or a new job, or moving to a new location – there’s this excitement, it could be the happiest thing in the world, but it’s natural for it to be mixed with a ‘oh boy, what am I doing – what was I thinking?’ Every path involves a little trepidation, as it should.

1. Scripture

Our Scripture lessons shed some light on this – they reflect two separate but intertwined ideas. Our psalm this morning gives us a sense of deep security within the Lord. Whatever path we might travel down, the Lord is with us, we will not fear, we will not be alone. There is no doubt within David’s words that God’s protection is absolute – you will not dash your foot upon a stone, you will soar, God shall be your shelter. As we think about the message this morning, let us have the confidence and faith of David and his words – his words that point us to a strong, loving, and mighty God who is our Creator, protector, and Savior.

Our second Scripture lesson is from Ephesians. Now, you can go to nearly any one of Paul’s letters to the church and find some helpful pointers on how to live into being the church. Ephesians 4 gives us some clear guidance – speak truth to one another in love, fortify the community, and so on.

There is so much goodness within Ephesians that it is impossible to unpack neatly, but a few phrases I would point you to are the sense that we are of one body – we are one people, though diverse, created and living in faith with the power of the Trinity holding us. We also recognize that we offer different gifts – some will be prophets, some will be apostles, and so on – the same is very much true for the church that is and that is becoming – we are a diverse body with different gifts, bringing a part of ourselves to the table as we come together. And Paul then offers many helpful lines that could be heard more as proverbs – such as the desire for unity, the need to love one another, and if you have anger, do not let the sun go down on it. Alongside other letters, Paul clues us in to what our communities of Christ can look like and ways of life together that are beneficial to us and to the church.

But have you looked around the pews? Have you noticed something critical? The Christian community is changing for a multitude of reasons. The church struggles – and it doesn’t matter who you are, no one is immune – the big churches, the small churches, the evangelical, the main-line protestant, the Catholics, and so on – everyone has seen a drop in membership and in volunteerism. You could take a deep breath but still take a dismal view – is this it, is the church done, is our story over?

II.

 Wouldn’t it be awful if I just sat down and let the sermon end there – but no, my friends, I’m here to tell you that the story is far from over. You could say, “Wait, what about all those factoids.” Yes, they are the reality. I can’t deny those things and I won’t – you can read it in our newspapers and on religious polls - but I genuinely believe we are on the cusp of something new. Maybe it doesn’t feel like it because the reality is - the ways we have been doing things for years and years, simply doesn’t work anymore. We are in the trenches of doing the hard work of forging a path ahead, one that we can’t necessarily see, but we know is important and worth the fight.

 We are at the time of a re-formation of what it looks like to be church together. This reformation or re-formation, is going to ask us hard questions, “What do we need to do differently? What are we willing to let go of and what are we willing to embrace?” In the forging ahead, we trust in the underpinnings of the Psalm we heard, as well as Paul’s basic framework that, even though all this time has passed, still dynamically pushes forward as we rediscover the church.

1. Who is Vulnerable

Let me be clear in saying again that we are all in the midst of this

re-formation. Springfield, Northminster, yes – but also the entire Presbyterian church, as well as every single church of every single denomination needs to start asking some important questions. The churches that aren’t willing to ask the questions are the ones I worry about.

 Here’s a very practical example. It’s easy for us to blame Sunday school numbers dipping because of Sunday sports. Trust me, it gets under the skin of ministers as well. But the culture has shifted – Sunday isn’t considered sacred in the same way it was and for some folks, it’s the only time they can play sports. We can point to the outfield or the football field and say, “It’s your fault!” Sure, we could do that – but it’s not going to get us very far. What if we asked ourselves, “This is a reality in our culture, instead of seeking to ‘beat them’ – what if we join them? Or what if we do something different to meet the needs of those who can’t make church happen on a Sunday morning? What if we had our own baseball team, what if we held a worship service on a Saturday instead?” And as we come together, a people of many diverse gifts, we can find many solutions to a question like this. Can we fix it all? No. But the first step to true re-formation is facing the truth of our world, pushing past the denial, and asking – what’s next.

1. This Sermon bums me out

You could come up to me and say, “Pastor Becca, this sermon

really bums me out. It’s very doomy-gloomy.” Maybe you’re right, but again, I need to name the conflict before we go further into the future. You have to be real, you can’t turn a blind eye – but once we start asking the questions, that’s where it gets exciting.

 If you know me, I’m not a ‘give-r-upper’ – no. The church that formed on that Pentecost morning is still here, it just looks different and it’s again taking on a different shape. Here’s the cool part – we get to be part of the story. We each hold a significant piece of the puzzle as we look at the future – we all are part of the body, we bring something important to the table – and when we combine our ideas, questions, solutions, and more, we get to sneak a peek down the path ahead.

 This sermon must have been predestined, a favored word in Presbyterian circles, because on Thursday night, I met with our session. We spoke about all the different happenings of the church and as we were closing out after prayer, we had a few different conversations rolling. One of our elders was sharing that he has started to play these new kinds of board games – where there is no winner or loser. The outcome only has two options – either everyone wins and everyone loses.

 And I looked at him, tilted my head, and said, “That’s what I want the church to look like, isn’t that what it should look like? A place where we all can win?” And my elder looked at me and smirked with this knowing smile of, ‘you got it.’ It’s such a vital point though, what if we could create a future church where everyone is involved, everyone is welcomed, everyone is invited to join, no matter what. I don’t know exactly how the future needs to look, but I would say it’s one where we are all somehow winners – where we are all somehow able to worship in freedom, love, and we meet our culture head on and embrace the challenges.

 My friends, as I said…I don’t know the answers to the questions. I don’t even know all the questions we need to ask – but we know that the church is changing and morphing and this isn’t a one-sermon easy finish line conclusion. So, what I want you to consider this week, whether you write it down or think about it while you are crafting a bamboo path – I want you to start dreaming. This is my question to each and every one of you, “If you could look at your grandchildren sitting in a church, what kind of church would you want for them – what, do you, from your experience and faith, envision the church becoming?” Amen.