

SERMONSECOND
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

460 East Main Street

Lexington, Kentucky 40507

“God All Over the Place”

OT: Isaiah 43.1-7

NT: Acts 8.14-17

January 13, 2019

Rev. David Holden

In two days, we will begin a new era with a new Senior Pastor John Leggett. Other than that, not much going on this week! In the meantime, in the midst of a lot that might not seem very clear, I have something I want to say very clearly to you, and I will readily say to John when he and I get a chance for some conversation: I see God in this place.

What do I mean when I say this? Remember back to when we engaged those “Envisioning the Future” conversations at the end of Dan Hans’ tenure? We identified sources of concern, but we also found even more to celebrate. Following that, I hope you heard what Tom Groome said as his time with us ended: “You are a great congregation with a bright future.” I see God in this place when I recall those words. And that gives me great hope as we begin a new season of ministry.

Even in a time of transition, I have seen abundant evidence of the Spirit moving in our midst—animating our congregation and our community. Although we have faced some particular challenges, Second has met them with resourcefulness, ingenuity and goodwill. After all of that hard work we should allow ourselves the luxury of resting, if only for a week or so, on our laurels. We deserve a ceremonial pat on the back. We have until Tuesday. OK, break’s over!

Truly, I have a hunch we won’t dwell in our restful moment for too long. I suppose that is fine, too. We are a restless and in our own way ambitious bunch. With the turn of the year I am already hearing discussions not only about maintaining our current ministries, but also inventing and collaborating on new ones. The fact that we feel enough stability and strength to do that bodes well, I think.

It also begs a question: Why? Why do we spend so much time, talent and treasure in this shared endeavor? What compels us, through good times and hard times, sometimes against what seem like long odds, to keep this place up, running, and open to the public?

As we have learned during the search and call process, there are a variety of answers. Some of us come for spiritual nurture. Some come to learn. Some come as a matter of conscience. Some come to serve. Some come for the emotional uplift of worship. Many of us come because frankly this is, for us, literally a sanctuary. In a time when more and more damage occurs between people in the public square this is a place and people where we find safety and healing.

That's no small thing and feels very real to me. Truly, most people who visit observe almost immediately the bonds of faith and friendship among us. If they had any doubt, they would merely need to observe the passing of the peace each Sunday, or the conversations in the hallways between services, or the crowd that shows up for potluck. Ties of affection, history, principle and a shared sense of calling bind us together. We have what anthropologists call a "dense culture." By "dense," by the way, I don't mean clueless. I mean substantial.

That density of culture both blesses and curses us. The blessing consists of the emphasis we place on cohesiveness which counteracts the climate of division that tears other places apart. That said, make no mistake—we are a diverse people with diverse points of view. Yet we find a way to love each other in the midst of that.

The curse, if you can call it that, of this "dense culture" is that we have gotten so used to our sense of togetherness that we may sometimes find it hard to acknowledge our separateness. We may lose track of how faith calls to "care for one another" in a much broader sense than the "one another" who already gathers under our roof Sundays and weekdays throughout the year. In faith "one another" places a priority on "other"—meaning individuals and groups who may *not* already be here and places and ways where we don't always agree.

Meeting a new minister and his family, beginning a new season of ministry together, gives us opportunity to reflect and, I think, to shine. We can embrace that which holds us together and we can engage with what moves us forward. Even as we continue to take care of ourselves, we can reclaim our calling that we are *not* here merely to serve ourselves. We are here not only to *receive* comfort, but to *convey* it in accordance with God's call. That call strengthens us from within, but it also sends us out. It challenges us to constantly expand our community, to spread our strength, to share the Good News.

Contrast the two readings we heard this morning. Isaiah calls Israel inward—promising a homecoming. What welcome better suits a people in transition than the assurance that though they pass through the rivers, though they walk through the fire, God will protect them from all harm. For God will be with them. Despite how history and her neighbors have treated her Israel remains precious in God's sight. They continue as a chosen people for whom God would willingly ransom other peoples. No matter what it takes, God will gather them from the east, the west, the north and the south and bring them home.

We resonate with that sense of connection. We have journeyed together with sisters and brothers who have come here every Sunday not only from various neighborhoods in our community, but even from adjoining counties- Jessamine, Bourbon and Woodford—right off the top of my head. Beyond that we have gathered from different life experiences, successes and failures, dreams fulfilled and hearts broken. We gather people from the four corners to do praise God and the good work as we discern it in this congregation through seasons of change and challenge that not all churches or individuals successfully navigate.

At the same time, as much as we have sustained and as broadly as we constitute ourselves, we achieve nothing beyond what the early church achieved and like that church we too might consider our community blessed yet incomplete until we take the next steps. When Jesus gave the Great Commission, he sent them forth into "all the world." The book of Acts reminds us that they took that commission very seriously.

In the midst of a Christian diaspora prompted by the martyring of Stephen and persecution by a notorious Pharisee named Saul, the church journeyed on. When Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they immediately sent Peter and John out, to give them the added gift of the Holy Spirit. They had heard that call to constantly expand their community, to share their strengths, and to share the good news.

So today, I give this charge as we journey from a rich past to a promising future: Let us indeed give ourselves credit where credit is due. Let us thank God for this community gathered from the east, the west, the north and the south—a particular, chosen people whom God has called out to strive, to overcome, to not just survive but to thrive in ministry to each other and the world around us.

Reinforced in that way, let us not settle for leaving that world at our doorstep. Let us renew our commitment to serve not only ourselves, but others whom we have not yet met. Let us rejoice in the blessings we know in this place and then share them with *every* place where God calls us.

I celebrate that I see God in this place. And I lean toward people and places yet to come. I look forward to exploring our call with our new pastor John and entering a season where we find new ways to see God not just in this place, but all over the place. Amen.