

WPC AND THE FUTURE

Isaiah 2:1-5

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 23, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In days to come

*the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.*

*Many peoples shall come and say,
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'*

*For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.*

*He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.*

*O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the Lord!*

Last Sunday I was in Chautauqua, New York, on the last day of a week of study leave. For only the second time since COVID, I was able to return to my pattern of planning sermons six months in advance, January through May of next year.

On Sunday morning, I walked to the small, historic Methodist church on the grounds to attend worship. There were about 35 people present, including several children. Two men and a woman served as song leaders. About halfway through the service one of the men brought his guitar to the pulpit and announced that the minister had called in sick, and that he would sing a couple of religious songs he had composed and share what they meant to him as a substitute for the sermon. After the service people who knew one another talked together in the Sanctuary, as no volunteer had been found to host the fellowship hour. I left through the narthex and one person greeted me.

I normally find it pleasant to attend worship services in small, rural churches like this when Maggie and I are away. The services are usually different enough from the way we worship at Westminster that I am less likely to act as if I am a food critic at a restaurant or a drama critic at the theatre. We simply worship. And that is always refreshing.

II.

As you may have read, since the early 1990s, the portion of Americans identifying as Christian has fallen from over 90% to just above 60%.¹ Coupled with the challenge COVID has presented to churches and other religious congregations all over the country, every congregation is asking questions about its future, and many are questioning their ability to survive. While I have not been too worried about Westminster's survival, I have been worried about COVID ushering in a period of decline from which – given today's religious climate – it would be hard to recover.

But as I said last week, my sense is that we are coming back with strength. As we look to the future, I believe:

- If we continue to conduct our worship and music, congregational life, mission, and Christian Formation with the best care and quality we can muster,
- If we provide a clean, accessible, and well-designed spiritual home for our ministries, and
- If our buildings and grounds communicate to the community both a sense of hospitality and a sense of identity as a congregation of the Christian faith,

We will do well. I believe:

- If we conduct our business affairs with integrity and efficiency so that they support our ministry,
- If we continue to choose committed and competent lay leaders working in areas of church life that match their gifts and their interests, and
- If we continue to have committed and competent clergy and staff working together with our lay leaders,

We will survive COVID. I believe:

- If our location at Cameron Mills and Monticello remains conducive to a congregation that is educated, mission-oriented, worshipful, music-appreciating, friendship-generating, friendly to children and youth, elderly and middle aged, single and married, politically astute and engaged with one another across ideological differences
- And if we are willing to *change* the things that need to be changed and enrich the things that continue to be enriching,

Then we will have a *strong* ministry *decade* after *decade*, *generation* after *generation*, *embodying* the Christian faith as best we understand it, *reaching* out and *inviting* others of similar inclination to become part of our church community.

¹ "How U.S. religious composition has changed in recent decades," Pew Research Center, September 13, 2022, available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/>.

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As I understand some of Alexandria's history, what I have described was true of Westminster:

- In the 1940s when we were chartered almost one year to the day before Pearl Harbor,
- In the 1950s when people returned home and began to build communities like ours all over the country,
- In the 1960s which brought tremendous social changes, some of which we are still working our way through,
- And in the 1970s when we weathered bringing the troops home from Vietnam, a constitutional crisis, and a period of economic downturn.

And what I have described of Westminster has been largely true in the years since:

- Before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and after it,
- Before 9/11 and after 9/11,
- Before COVID and will be true after its final taming,
- Before January 6th and will be true after the resolution of all that has led into it.

During COVID, we have continued:

- To preach and teach
- To express beauty and joy through our music
- To welcome new members
- To baptize infants
- To visit the sick
- To reach out to the least, the last, and the lost
- And to celebrate the resurrection and the life to come in memorializing those in our midst or in our neighborhood who have passed away.

III.

For two-and-a-half years I have experienced my share of worry, sadness, frustration, and anger over what COVID is doing to churches and to many other institutions in our society. But my heaviness has been relieved by the way our congregation continues to be who we are in bearing witness to the God who created us, the Christ we seek to follow, and the Spirit who guides and sustains us along the way.

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But I have a few thoughts about the future:

First, some things will change. This is inevitable. We have already seen some of these:

- We do many more things electronically or virtually than we did before COVID.
- Like most workplaces, we vary in the number of hours many of us are in the office versus working from home.

- We have meetings via Zoom and conduct business in this manner, but mostly in conjunction with relationships we have formed and continue to nurture in person as well.
- We dress a little more casually.
- We use less paper and presumably less utilities, but I am sure we occupy more of cyberspace (a term I don't claim to understand!).
- And for the most part, when people come to our worship for the first time, many of them know who we are because they have been following aspects of our congregation's worship and life online.

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Second, some changes will need to accelerate as well:

- For many years, we have been able to attract new members by following up with visitors, most whom
 - Have heard of us by word of mouth
 - Have noticed us as they walk, bike, or drive through the neighborhood
 - Have participated in one of our groups that have a lot of non-members, such as our scout troops, preschool, or craft ministry
 - Or have searched for a church online.
- Sometimes they became aware of us through attending memorial services for members of Westminster or for people in the community who have not had a church home.

I think that because of the continuing decline of a portion of the population in America that identifies as Christian, we will need to intensify our efforts at drawing people into our building and grounds so that they can begin to sense who we are and what we do and believe, and so that they can experience our genuine hospitality.

- We have done this more recently with concerts and recitals to which we invite friends and community members.
- We are doing this with a children's community chorus that meets in our building and that staff members and volunteers from our music ministry lead
- We do this now that we ring our church bells at the conclusion of worship (from which we have received letters of thanks from neighbors).
- And we do this when we invite friends to any event we have or when we share a worship service, a class, a sermon, or concert with them from our website or YouTube.

In other words, going forward, I believe we need to be *more intentional* in our outreach, as *individuals* and as a *congregation*, to continue to attract people to the gospel who respond appreciatively to the way we *interpret* and *express* it.

III.

A few statistics.

- The average worship attendance of Presbyterian congregations in our denomination is 77. Ours is quadruple that.
- There are only 175 PCUSA churches over 800 members.
- Thus, with over 1000 members, we are larger than 98% of the congregations in our denomination.²

As a congregation, we have a much better chance of being *open* and *strong* in the next several decades than many of the smaller churches ravaged by COVID and other factors.

Thus, I personally believe that we have an *obligation*, a *responsibility*, indeed a *calling* to spread the Gospel, to proclaim and live out the Christian faith as we *understand* it, to carry the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments into the *future* in a world in which increasingly only the church can be the regular carrier of that sacred book and wise literature. I believe we should accept this claim and live into this calling.

IV.

Early in the book of Isaiah, the Word of the Lord comes to the prophet concerning Judah (the largest of Israel's tribes) and Jerusalem, its capital and Holy City. The Word is so powerful that in addition to hearing it from God, Isaiah actually *sees* it.

*In days to come [Isaiah is told]
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.*

*Many peoples shall come and say,
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.*

*He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.*

² <https://church-trends.pcusa.org/churches-by-size/search/>.

This prophetic oracle is a phenomenal picture of the people of God, and of what God can do through God's people:

*The Lord's house.
Nation's streaming to it.
Instruction going forth from it.
Arbitration among many peoples.
Even the promise of swords into plowshares.*

Westminster Presbyterian Church:
Post-COVID,
Post the decline of Christianity in our country,
The Word of the Lord is being spoken to us.
That Word is close and clear enough that like Isaiah,
We can virtually see it:

*O house of Westminster:
come, let us walk
in the light of the Lord!*