

“A New Thing”

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Isaiah 43:18-21 and Mark 1:32-39

Some years ago, there was a sign outside a roadside convenience store. The store was on the Texas border on the highway leading out of the state. It was one of those portable advertising signs with flashing lights along the top meant to catch the eye of passersby. At the top of the sign it read, “Last chance: Lotto Texas, clean restrooms, snacks.” Then, at the bottom of the sign, almost like an afterthought, it read, “Jesus is Lord.”

One pastor notes “It’s like, on the way out of Texas, whatever you need, they have it. A little snack? A place to freshen up? A place to do a little gambling? A little bit of Jesus? Whatever you need, they’ve got it.”

It reminds me of a couple of signs I used to see in my home state. I would see one of the signs in a rural portion of on my commute back and forth from seminary. The sign was in front of a small place that seemed to sell a bit of everything. One day, the sign read, “Church of Jesus Christ Straw.” I really wondered exactly what kind of straw that was. Another time I drove by, the sign said: “Do you know God? Straw Dog House”

And then, there was the sign on an auto parts store. It said, “God is Love CV Shafts Rack & Pinions”. I knew that God is love. I had no idea that God is also a few auto parts.

Even with the humorous juxtaposition on the signs, I at least applaud these store owners for speaking out for their faith. It is a *good* thing that they proclaim a bit of what they believe. And

just maybe somebody driving by has received some inspiration from such a sign; someone who was seeking God just might have found Him.

The truth is that we are *all* seeking God. Some are just beginning to understand our need for God and others are further along on their journey, but all of us are seeking God.

An image of Jesus appears fairly often on the covers of magazines like Time and Newsweek. Someone once asked the religion reporter for the Washington Post why that was. His answer was that every time Jesus is on the cover of these magazines, they see a spike in their sales. Jesus is commercially attractive. He is still popular with lots of people, at least superficially. People are still seeking.

There weren't magazines in the days in which Jesus walked the earth, but He was pretty popular, for a time, then, as well. Mark tells us in typical Markan hyperbole, that, on one day, *the whole city* was gathered around the door, waiting to see Jesus. I've waited in some long lines – lines at fun places like Disney World and not-so-fun lines like at the Driver's License station. Those lines had little in common with the crowd gathered to see Jesus. I imagine that the line outside the door to be with Jesus was quite a sight to see with so many people who were sick or afflicted seeking out Jesus, because they knew that He could help them.

Early the next morning, Jesus sought a little time away for prayer, but the disciples came out to find Him. Our translation this morning says they “hunted for Him,” but I like another translation which says they “tracked Him down.” Presbyterian pastor Gary Charles points out that there is an implicit strong, hostile sense to this tracking down of Jesus¹. Peter and the others are

¹*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1*, page 337.

here to get Jesus back to what they believe he is supposed to be doing, but Jesus tells his disciples that, instead of going back to where he had been, he would go on to the neighboring towns. The Common English Bible has Jesus' reply as "Let's head in the other direction, to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there too." Everyone was looking for Jesus to come back, but He chose not to head back to where He had been. Instead, He headed out for another town.

Can you imagine the people that this upset and disappointed? He was there, healing people, and then He takes off in another direction and refuses to come back? What about all of the other people who came to be healed? What about those who were still waiting for a touch from Him? Why *didn't* Jesus go back? I imagine it must have been tempting. Everyone was looking for Jesus. He was healing the people. They must have been excited to have Him there and even more grateful that He was healing them. He was a local celebrity. If He just went back, they would honor Him and praise Him for all that He was doing. Why do something new? Why go somewhere else? What He was doing was working – just stick to it. The crowds would love him for it. It's kind of like at a concert. Generally, bands tour when they have a new album out. They tour to promote their latest project, but when the crowds gather, *they* want to hear the old classics. They don't know the new songs; just keep giving them the old ones to make them happy. Jesus could have stayed right where he was and made the crowds happy, but Jesus wasn't called to just one place. He wasn't called to take care of only one small town. He was called to be the savior of the whole world, and so He had to move on to the next town. The disciples are calling Him back to where He was, and He says, "No, let's go to the next place. *That's* what I am here for." And so He

left to go to the neighboring towns, and eventually throughout Galilee, so that He could spread the Gospel as far as possible.

There's a lesson in that for all of us. It's easiest to keep doing exactly what we've been doing, particularly if it's going well, but, honestly, even if it isn't. It's easiest to keep only performing the old classics that the crowd came to hear, rather than bringing out the newest creations. But we never grow if we do not stretch ourselves in new ways. We cannot live into the mission that God has for us if we close our ears to the call of God in each new day. God calls all of His children into new areas, new ways to minister, new ways to be the body of Christ.

Today, we enter into a new season in the life of this historic congregation. Today, we welcome our new senior pastor, Rev. Matt Matthews. It is a day of joy, it is a day of hope, a day which we have looked forward to for nearly three years. It is a wonderful day of rejoicing! At the same time, it is a day of uncertainty, of the unknown. Our Pastor Nominating Committee worked diligently and prayerfully to seek the person God had in mind for our congregation, and I fully believe they indeed heard God's call for us in the ministry of Matt Matthews. Still, most of us do not yet know Matt. We do not know his leadership style, his preaching style, his way of walking alongside each of us in ministry. I would guess that Matt comes to us with the same kind of questions about us, not yet knowing *our* ways of ministry. We will spend time getting to know each other, discovering each other's gifts for ministry and discerning how God wants to use each of us to further the kingdom through this congregation. And with that will come change and growth. We will be stretched to move in new directions. We will learn new ways of being the part of the body of Christ called First Presbyterian Church.

God will lead us on this exciting new path. We trust that God has led us to call Matt as our pastor, while we also know that the ministry of this church is not built on any one person. As I said the Sunday after Pastor Chuck's retirement, "The church is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, and will not fall! Jesus has promised us that He will be with us, through it all. Jesus is our rock and steady foundation!" So, with joyful anticipation, we begin this new chapter in the life of First Presbyterian Church. We are ready to grow together in exciting new ways, as God uses us to reach out to an ever-changing world. And we are reminded that God always goes before us as we follow Him.

That is true, whether we are talking about the work of the church universal, our denomination, our local church, or each of us as individuals. God is always calling us out of our comfort zones so that we can more and more become what God created us to be and so that we can better fulfill the Great Commission. So, may we go forth to spread the name of our gracious God. May we together seek God and be a refuge for others who are seeking God. May we listen for the call of our God, in this new season in our church, and in each of our lives. Amen.