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Isaiah 42: 1-9

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“God’s Future Is Now”

Recently, I read an article online about emerging trends that are shaping the future direction of the church. We can probably name some of these out of our own experience but I want to share a few that were noted in the article. First, is the way we culturally think about worship attendance. We’re here this morning, which indicates there is still a deep value for many in gathering for the worship and praise of God. We’re not alone in this faith and being together affirms that. This being said, it is a fact that for a growing number of folks coming to a church building at a set time for a formal worship service is less important than it once was. Being a “regular attendee” is no longer the idea of going to church weekly but much less frequently. There are studies that say attending church regularly in today’s culture means once a month. This is sombering when you think about it. What used to be 40 or 48 or even 50 times a year in worship has become 12. Why this shift? Well, culturally there are many more options on a Sunday morning than there used to be. I was on vacation last Sunday, and I’m going to come clean this morning and let you know, I did not go to church last Sunday. There, I’ve said it. Why didn’t I go? Well, I had options. I slept a little later. Kelly and I had a big breakfast. It was a vacation day for me. Our schedule was free and open, and the hour for going to church came and went, and we didn’t go. Saying this feels like a confession because I have some guilt about it. The idea of going to church as a “duty” isn’t there the way it used to be. Let me be quick to say, I’m not suggesting we should attend less. In fact, you’ll understand why I encourage us to come to church as often as we can, but I also realize it’s my job to be here on Sundays. I love being here but I also know folks have all kinds of options on Sunday mornings. I’ve told the story before of what my dad shared with me after he retired from 44 years of ministry as a pastor in the church. He said, “Son, your mom and I didn’t go to church last Sunday. We ran some errands instead, and now I know where all the people have been all these years. Walmart!” We laughed about that but the fact is, the trend has shifted. Sharing this, I’m also reflecting on conversations I’ve had with some of you. You’ve said, “When I don’t come to church the flow of my week just doesn’t feel the same. I need this in my life,” you say. So, our patterns have changed but we are still a community of faith no matter what the future holds.

Another trend shaping the future of the church is the way folks increasingly find religious inspiration by way of the internet and social media. We’re part of that trend here at Powell UMC. We regularly offer on-line classes and we have a growing presence on media platforms like Youtube and Facebook. When I began in local church ministry over 35 years ago, I never would have imagined that one day I would be inviting people to subscribe to our Youtube channel, and to give us a “like” or a “share.”. Digital media is where it’s at and congregations that want to stay relevant have to find ways to be a part of the digital world

Another wave in the future for the church is a decreased reliance on denominations. Our own denomination knows this well. Many of us are aware of the on-going issues around human sexuality that continue to challenge The United Methodist Church. Most of us have heard the recent news about proposals that will come before the General Conference meeting in May, one of which puts forward the path for strongly conservative congregations to leave the denomination. How all of this will shake out we won’t know but many congregations, including our own, don’t wait for the institution of the church to define the scope of our ministry. For years, Powell UMC has put forward the mission of “Sharing Christ’s Love with Everyone.” The statement is on the front of our trifold cover each week. This undergirds the way we speak and the way we treat one another. Regardless of sexual identity, or to whom one gives their heart, or the color of one’s skin, or the economic or educational position of one’s life, or any other category or association that separates one person from another, we are here to share Christ’s love with all. Whatever the future brings the core of our mission is to share Christ’s love with all people. The trend suggests less reliance on denominations. We care what our denomination will look like in the future but we will not be limited by it. Through it all, what matters most is God’s ever constant love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is the focus of the Bible’s message for us today. No matter the trends impacting our future, God’s future is what ultimately shapes us and gives life to our faith. We’ve dipped back in the Old Testament this morning where God’s future was critical to God’s people. The prophet Isaiah brought a forward looking vision centered in what God was doing. A quick summary of the historical context is helpful. In Isaiah’s time, the Hebrews were coming out of the difficult period we call, The Exile. For a generation, the people were held captive. The holy city of Jerusalem was destroyed. Their way of life was smothered by the military might of Babylonia. Isaiah’s message comes in the period of time when the people are returning to their homes and surveying the ruins of their former life. They are overwhelmed by a sense of hopelessness. Isaiah brought the message that God would rebuild and make the future possible again. How would this happen? One sent from God was coming. This coming one would be a servant, said Isaiah, and this servant would lead the people in the renewing of their faith and lives.

The way Isaiah described this servant of God provided great encouragement. First, this One from God would lead with a gentle hand. God's servant was going to recognize the tender and vulnerable place in which many found themselves and gently lead them along the path God was preparing for them. Think about the models of leadership we often see in our world, the assumption that leadership has to be harsh or combative, some assuming that leading means being critical or partisan or antagonistic. Isaiah says the One sent from God will not only work for justice but do so with mercy. As we began today, we highlighted the coming study that will provide ways to discuss hot-button issues in a loving way. The spirit of this program is directly in line with the spirit that filled the servant-leader God sent the Hebrews. Further, Isaiah says God's servant will remain steadfast and embody the creative power of God to bring new things into being. Isaiah reminds the people that God has created all things, including them, and the One sent from God will bring that creative power to their lives and world. The future belongs to God because God never stops creating all things new.

As Christians, we see Jesus as the servant leader God has sent into our world. It wasn't long ago that we celebrated Christmas, God's gift in Christ. This is the ultimate gift that keeps on giving because Jesus is not just a gift given to us but leads us to participate in the new thing God is doing. Jesus does this with gentleness, and with the assurance that he will prevail, and he brings the creative power of God to make all things new. It's a tough world out there: fires in Australia, our country flirting at the brink of war with Iran, political rancor across every spectrum, and our own denominational insecurity. It's hard for us to know which way the future is trending but in the way Isaiah gave hope long ago, Jesus gives hope to us today. Christ not only saves us, Christ sets the path before us, and the lead of Christ is love.

In the gospel story there is a moment when Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River. At his baptism Jesus hears the voice of God say, "You are my son, the beloved..." There are two ways to hear this. First, Jesus, the One sent from God, is loved by God. No question. A second way to hear it is that Jesus, the One sent from God, is to be love. This is the mission Jesus took on, to be love in the world. We are called to share in that mission, to be love and to participate in God's future now.

I want to close with another confession of sorts. There is a person close to me in life with whom I am having some difficulty. I'm struggling with my opinions about this person and I'm not doing a very good job of holding back harsh judgements. Has this or anything like this happened in your life. It's hard for me to project the path of the future for this relationship but I'm reminded today of Christ's lead in this situation and in every other experience. As one Christian teacher has put it, "We either see Christ in everyone or we hardly see Christ in anyone." We don't know exactly what the future holds, but we do know this. The next step, in fact every step for us who follow Jesus, is love.