

### **“Moving Forward” – Mk 3:1-8 – Nov 18/12**

If you’ve been here the past couple of weeks you’ll know that this is the third in a three-sermon series on worship. Two weeks ago we looked at the ‘why’ of worship and discovered that in addition to worship being both called for by God in scripture and an appropriate response to God’s covenant with faithful people worship also provides us with the fulfilling opportunity to give and receive the mutual benefit of support in community. Last week we examined the ‘what’ of worship, recognizing that when the elements are put together in a thoughtful way the result is a pilgrimage of faith in which we approach God reverently, hear God’s word, respond to that word, and are sent back into the community refreshed and revitalized, ready to again carry the love of God to our neighbours.

This week we’ll take a look at the “what next?” of worship. Just asking that question in front of you causes you some alarm, I’m sure, because lurking behind the question is a monster that many if not all of us fear – a monster called ‘change.’ Most of us are resistant to change, and that is perfectly understandable – we don’t like change, we fear change, change causes disruptions in our comfortable routines and regimens. We have worked hard to establish our ‘comfort zones’, thank you very much, and we are not easily willing to move even one centimeter out of them.

Well, friends, I have good news, and I have bad news, and I have good news for you. The first good news is that we – the Session and I – are not planning any change for change’s sake. The bad news is that change is coming – some form of change will be forced upon us both as we move into a temporary location during construction of the new building and then as we move again into the new building. The ultimate good news is that change is an inevitable part of life and faith, and God will be solidly with us through all of the changes in life – including in worship.

Let’s take a brief look at the history of the relationships between God and people outlined in scripture to see if I can support that last claim. Beginning with Abraham and Sarah, God was present with them as they journeyed far, far outside of their comfort zone in response to God’s urging. They encountered different lands, different peoples, different cultures and yet in all of that God was with them and helped them not only to survive but to thrive, becoming the founders of a dynasty of faith that endures to this day in at least three major religions. Noah and his family endured a relocation that could not have been pleasant, and yet as promised God delivered them into a new place where they prospered.

And of course we also note that defining event we know as the Exodus in which the lives of the Israelite people were changed profoundly. Like most significant change that was not an easy time for them, and during the transition through the wilderness they did complain, and moan, and grumble. “Why did you drag us out here to die?” they cried to God and Moses and Aaron; “we long for the fleshpots of Egypt!” Time and again they protested the effects of the changes being wrought in their lives, but time and again God sustained them until they were eventually delivered into the promised land, there to flourish and prosper for generations to come. (You know where I’m going with this, right?)

And then there were the faithful Jews who had been taken into exile in Babylon some six hundred years before Christ’s walking the streets of Israel. They sat by the rivers in Babylon and wept as they reminisced about the good old days in Zion, asking “how can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” They were devastated, because they had been cut off from the Temple, the place they believed God resided and was the only place where they could encounter him in worship. But they were gone, relocated (temporarily, although they didn’t know that at the time)

to another place. Moreover the Temple was gone, torn down stone by stone by the conquering invaders. No longer could the priests enter the Holy of Holies to intercede for the people with sacrifices and offerings. They were devastated, and yet in that and through that relocation came a new and deeper and more profound understanding that God was not confined to one Temple, one city, one place on earth. They discovered that God was still with them even in Babylon (in their temporary facilities, so to speak!) And it was there that a second Isaiah spoke God's words of comfort, telling them they had suffered enough and an easy way was being prepared for them to return to their homeland, this time to new places of worship.

In time the Temple was rebuilt, old documents were rediscovered and new liturgies were established, and life was relatively good for many years, until once again dramatic change came to them from God.

That dramatic change was a new covenant between God and people, a covenant established in the sacrificial blood of Christ Jesus. This new covenant in Christ was founded on grace and mercy and redemption, in sharp contrast to the call for vengeance that came forth from the exiles in Babylon. But major changes such as that new covenant come with major disruptions, and Jesus tried to warn his disciples of the troubles and turmoil into which they were about to be immersed.

We see Jesus warning them in our reading from Mark, with a portrayal of the disciples as the ultimate tourists, fresh from their small town, now visiting the big city for the first time, gaping with mouths wide open as they admire the Temple. The expression quoted in scripture could have come from any school trip: "Look, teacher, what big stones and what large buildings!". Their amazement at this building is curious when you consider these are the people who while walking with Jesus for some three years have witnessed miracle after miracle. They have been present when multitudes were fed, the lame walked, the blind could see and the deaf could hear, and sinners were redeemed. And yet here they are, going "Ooh!", "Aah!" like any tourist from a tiny hamlet in the big city for the first time. Just for a moment they seem wonderfully human, just like any real people, just like you and me. (Indeed, the current version of this expression is still heard in many churches today, with sentences that often begin with, "our beautiful church.")

But Jesus spoiled their moment of awe, pointing out to them in graphic and dramatic terms that not one of those big stones would be left standing upon another, that even these big buildings were not invincible, that like any of the works of man's hand they would eventually crumble. The disciples have just been terribly impressed with the might of the temple architecture, and now their teacher gives them the terrible prediction that the whole thing would be utterly destroyed. Can you imagine how they must have asked each other the burning questions, "When?" "How?" "Why?" "What's he talking about?!"

We don't have Jesus' answers to all of their questions, but he did begin to describe the troubles about to beset them: false prophets, wars and rumors of wars, nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes and famines. A simple question about how the temple will be destroyed, and here he goes talking as if the end of the world is about to happen! The disciples were quickly moved from awe to angst.

Our answers to those same questions that are now being asked here at Central – "when?", "where will we go?" are also somewhat vague right now, although we are moving rapidly closer to having clearer answers. However, the angst is pretty much the same. Change is coming (yes, there are still a number of hurdles, but it's looking more and more certain that change is coming) and the very stones that we look at here in this sanctuary will also be torn down until not one is

left standing. This is disturbing, because we will also head out for a time into the wilderness. We don't know exactly when, and until we do we can't begin to determine where. There will be times of anxiety and hardship, and some of us, perhaps all of us, will moan and complain that we would rather be back in the fleshpots we knew in Egypt. We can, however, be absolutely certain that God will be with us, Christ will be walking beside us, the Holy Spirit will be blowing new life into us as we make that journey through temporary spaces and they will deliver us safe and well into the new facilities. There we will also face giants and giant issues, but have faith, we will thrive and flourish in that new land for generations to come.

However, back to the specific issue of worship, or more specifically what changes will we experience in our worship as we transition through temporary space into the new building? For starters, we'll be more crowded in temporary spaces – at least, I think so – and those spaces will not, at least at first, feel much like a church. Will our worship be in a storefront? Perhaps a hotel convention room? An old theatre? By the rivers of Babylon? Wherever, it will be different, and different doesn't always feel good at first.

Secondly, we won't have our organ with us, as it will be in storage, and this will affect the music. And then when we move into the new building we'll have the organ back, and the music will or may change again – trauma after trauma!

Sound systems will change; seating arrangements will be dynamic; lighting issues will arise as the seasons change – hopefully all issues that will be successfully addressed in the new building. Parking will be even worse than it is now. We will have to scramble to “make do” for breakfasts and food bank and bread distribution and visiting groups. Changes upon changes – oh, mercy!

But be reassured – the basics of our worship will remain the same. The same elements, the familiar order, the constant messages of God's presence with us, God's grace in Christ at work in us, God's Spirit alive in all that we do, and in the new life that we will live. We hear Jesus' message - “do not be alarmed” – for we know and believe that Christ will be with us, and give us the victory.