

30 Years and Counting

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, August 20, 2017, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

On this Sunday, we celebrated Pastor Jeff's 30th anniversary of ordained ministry.

Scriptures: [Psalm 46](#) and [Luke 15:11-32](#)

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“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” is a hymn written by Martin Luther about 500 years ago. He wrote the lyrics in German, of course, so we sang a translation. The original music was probably a pop song in his day, a tune he might have picked up in a tavern being sung by the crowds, a tune he repurposed for his hymn. The original tune swung a bit more and wasn't so squared off to sound so pomp and circumstance-y. Still, it's a good hymn, one that I've liked since I was a teenager, one that was in the running for my ordination service thirty years ago.

It's based on, rather freely, on Psalm 46. I don't know my Luther well enough to know why he liked this Psalm and decided to write a hymn based on it. I do know why I like this Psalm.

Just this week, I read two different ways of analyzing the Psalm based on its form. I won't take you down the road of the first of these, though this is the kind of stuff theology nerds like me geek out on. This analysis points to two points (and yes, I enjoyed writing that sentence). The first point is the song's refrain, that *God is our refuge* – the song starts with and concludes with this, and it is an anchor point in middle of the song. The second point, the central points of the song's two sections (as this particular analysis divides the song): God is in the midst of the city; it will not be moved; and be still and know that I am God. I would summarize these two points as, “God is God and you're not.”

The second form analysis of the Psalm sees three stanzas, each three verses long. The first stanza “juxtaposes the steady and secure image of God as “refuge” with the image of the earth and seas in uproar.”¹ Rolf Jacobson says, “The image of ‘earth’ shaking and ‘sea’ roaring is an image of creation itself in rebellion against God's creative order. This image is a reminder that the fallen condition of creation goes beyond mere human disobedience. The fallen condition encompasses all of creation, all of nature. Thus, the ‘law’ that the psalm names is the reality that creation itself is broken and in rebellion against the Creator.”²

I disagree with his assessment that creation is in a “fallen condition.” Yes, earthquakes and floods and tsunamis happen. Yes, disease and disability strike not just humans, but other species as well. Yes, we are all going to die. But I don't see these as signs of any “fallen condition” of creation. Rather, I see them as part of the ongoing creative energy of the universe. This stanza's point is that because God is a present help in trouble, even natural disaster, we do not need to be engulfed with existential angst.

¹ Rolf Jacobson, “Commentary on Psalm 46,” *Working Preacher*, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1110 (accesses 19 August 2017).

² *Ibid.*

Stanza two moves from nature being in an uproar to the nations being in an uproar. I'm not reading the political into the Psalm. The Psalm itself gets political. I don't know what the political threat to Israel was when this Psalm was written – Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome – and it doesn't really matter now. What's important now is the witness of the Psalm – that when the nations are in an uproar, when kingdoms totter, God is still God. And the sun will come up tomorrow. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Stanza three points to the power and purpose of God – and our response. God is working out the kin-dom in our midst. God is making wars to cease, breaking the bow and shattering the spear. And our response – to be still. Be still and know that God is God (and that you and I and principalities and powers of our age are not God). The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

I've preached before about how I think we are in the midst of a great church rummage sale (and, no, I'm not talking about the flea market happening next weekend). Though she points to the Anglican Bishop Mark Dyer for the genesis of the idea, Phyllis Tickle articulated the theory most clearly for me – “that about every 500 years the church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale.”³ There really wasn't a church for the first rummage sale, 2,000 years ago. Tickle called it “The Great Transformation” and it took place when a man was recognized by his disciples as “Emmanuel, God With Us.” Five hundred years later, the Roman Empire collapsed and the church entered an era of preservation with the advent of the monastic tradition in abbeys, convents, and priories. Five hundred years later, the church split in “The Great Schism,” creating the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches. Five hundred years after that, “The Great Reformation” shook up the church once again. And five hundred years after that ... is today.

Tickle said that in each of these times, the church was wrestling with one key question: What is authoritative? And in each of these great rummage sales, a new authority emerges. Obviously, for The Great Transformation, Jesus was the new authority. I couldn't find my copy of her book *The Great Emergence* this week, and I don't remember what the new authority was that emerged from the second rummage sale, but I'm pretty sure it had something to do with monasticism. At the Great Schism, the new authority was the bishop of Rome, or the Pope, as he's typically known. At the Great Reformation, the new authority was scripture.

Tickle thought that the Spirit is likely going to be the new authority in whatever this new church that's emerging will turn out to be. I wonder if it might be Nature. Or some combination of Spirit and Nature.

In any event, I had no idea that I would be pastoring in the midst of a rummage sale when I answered the call to become an ordained minister. When God's call got through (I realize in retrospect that God had been calling my whole life, but there was too much static on the line) in 1982, we were just beginning to experience the end of Christendom. I had no idea it was happening. I grew up in a time when the default assumption in American society was “Christian.” In fact, the default assumption was “Mainline Protestant.” Yes,

³ Phyllis Tickle, “The Great Emergence,” *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/magazine/august-2008/great-emergence> (posted August 2008; accessed 19 August 2017).

there were Catholics and Jews around, but the default assumption was Mainline Protestant. All the members of the Supreme Court were either Mainline Protestants or Jews. All the Presidents except for Kennedy were Protestants, and almost all of them Mainline Protestants. School vacation schedules considered the church calendar as they were being designed.

And all that has disappeared during my time in ordained ministry. This shift, along with the explosive growth of computer technology and post-modernity taking root, have contributed energy to the great church rummage sale we're experiencing now. And one of the reasons I'm really glad to be fulfilling my call to ordained ministry here at Niles Discovery Church is that you are a church that is willing to try new things.

If you look at each of the great rummage sales the church has had in the past 2,000 years, while something new always emerged from it, whatever used to be also remained – though smaller, often healthier because new things made the old thing into some self-examination. I don't know if Niles Discovery Church will emerge as part of whatever the new things is or if we will be part of the stronger, smaller, faithful continuation of Progressive Christianity. But I do know that we will be faithful as we seek to fulfill *our* call as part of the body of Christ.

"30 Years and Counting," I titled this sermon. Perhaps a bit self-indulgent, but it you'd permit a bit of self-indulgence. This is the fifth ministry setting I've had in those thirty years. The first three were completed in under ten years. Short ministries or long, I always learned things in each setting.

Working as a chaplain at the juvenile hall, I learned about the urgency of now and the difference I could make in a moment. I also learned that I have to be willing to let go of long-term results. I could plant seeds, but I would never know if they would produce fruit. I typically didn't even know if they would take root. So I learned to be faithful to my calling and to leave the results to God.

At the church in Spokane where I served as Associate Pastor and then Interim Pastor, I learned how important congregational buy-in is on projects. The bigger the project, the more important getting this buy-in is. And that typically means slowing down so people can catch up to the leaders.

I learned about the importance of integrity when I served the church in Richland, Washington, as an Interim Pastor.

And at the church in Carnation, Washington, where I served as pastor for a decade, I learned that my leadership doesn't matter if I'm leading in a direction the church doesn't want to go. I also learned how important it is for the members of a church to nurture their friendships and to create a safe space for each other.

And here in Fremont, where I've served for a dozen years (at Niles Congregational Church and at Niles Discovery Church, as the first merged into the second), I've learned how important it is for a church and a pastor to be willing to risk in order to stay faithful. That's where I think we're going in the years ahead. I think we're going to keep stepping into risky ministries in order to stay faithful.

I picked the Parable of the Good Samaritan to be read at my ordination because it answers a profound question. What must we do to live in the kin-dom of God? Love God with our whole being and our neighbors as ourselves. It really is that simple. And it really is that risky.

Loving that radically will mean crossing boundaries – like the Samaritan crossed when he saved a Jew. Loving that radically will mean inviting people we don't know (like an innkeeper, say) to help us heal the brokenness in the world. Loving that radically will mean handing over what we have to others so that all might experience wholeness and justice.

bell hooks once said, “The moment we choose to love we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others.”⁴

I think that is why Jesus calls us to love, to take the risks of love. For loving builds the kin-dom of God. And here's a bit of good news. We can take those risks – though the mountains should shake in the heart of the sea, though the nations are in an uproar – we can take the risks to love. For the Lord of hosts is with us. God is in the midst of the city. Amen.

⁴ bell hooks, quoted by Diana Butler Bass on her Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/Diana.Butler.Bass/posts/10155129096928500> (posted and accessed 26 July 2017).