

Matthew 16:1-3 (NRSV): *The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus^{2a} they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. ²He answered them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' ³And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.*

II Chron. 20:12b (NRSV): *"We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."*

In the last two months the way the Church is Church changed dramatically – and we, the leaders and churches of Yellowstone Presbytery, asked good questions, adopted possibility thinking, adapted quickly and kept pace. For the intense Covid-19 season, at least, the disciple community/*ekklesia*, was forced from its building-centered, ways-we-are-used-to-doing-things life for worship, relationships, growing disciples, ministry and mission. We are learning about being a more scattered church (like the church in the Book of Acts), experimenting with technologies and ways to worship virtually, to cultivate our love for and relationship with God, to grow as disciples, to communicate and stay connected, and to serve in ministry and mission in new ways with new forms. We *had to, we did*, with the help of God and others within and outside *our* churches, and we *will continue to!* To do so is both essential and a gift.

Now, and In the near future, we are exploring, discerning what are realities and facts, safe ways, timing and phases to return to gathering with others in the body of Christ within the buildings with which we are familiar. Great will be the celebration when we can!

But, now we all are understanding better that only Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever! Change and being flexible, open, innovative and adaptive is the new normal. (How did we assume life was NOT this way? Hmmm.)

Ways we are responding and growing, what we are grieving and letting go of, as well as what we are learning and innovating, will help frame our faith, our understanding of Christ's mission for THE church and for our congregation. As we explore and discover our way forward, All of these will shape our life together both as a body of Christ gathered within a building, the body gathered in little groups and the body sent/deployed outside the building.

The changes and accompanying problems and challenges we are facing are of 2 types and it is important to understand the differences:

Technical problems. These are usually solvable with what we already know. A combination of money, time, and expertise should improve or resolve the situation.

Example- Our steps to move to virtual ways of gathering, learning, worshipping... are mostly in this category. We took an existing practice, looked to available, known practice or technology (perhaps not too well by us at the moment, but existing and learnable!) and shifted how and where we did a known, regular practice, with a variety of tweaks.

Adaptive challenges are situations where there are many new or unknowns one is dealing with, no proven, or known "solutions," or perhaps many possibilities but no clear choices. Since these are, BY

NATURE, adaptive, this also means they are fluid and change with circumstances. Imagination, creativity, experimentation with various outcomes, risk, breakthroughs...are all part of this journey.

So, what we are now facing and learning include both technical and adaptive challenges. A few may include:

- The shift to virtual church changed many things, including the way we relate to God, to one another, to those outside the church.
- Love can be virtual. Most congregations reached out to isolated members and non-members alike.
- Small and large churches saw the gifts of various members drawn on to help create and participate in new and more participatory and interactive modes of worship, learning, dreaming,
- The web is an essential path for information and helpful connections and interactions. Webinars, ZOOM conferences, social media, kept us connected, informed and encouraged within the presbytery and with the larger Church.
- ZOOM and other platforms are helpful, occasionally preferable modes for meeting as Leadership Cabinet, Pastoral Ministry Team, and sessions. While we all value and generally prefer personal contact, ZOOM meetings economize time, travel, money and energy when used appropriately. Further, ZOOM meetings, while wearying in themselves, can be crafted to be quite personal and connective.
- Asking deeper questions, listening and refocusing on what is truly MOST important in life and relationships, in our faith, in our spiritual rhythms ...

How do we -

- 1. Continue practices of discerning God's opportunities ongoing learning, unlearning, adapting and following Jesus in uncharted territory as a way of life?***
- 2. Bring these discoveries forward, to transform and enriching ALL aspects of how we understand and live out our mission and ministry, in the life of our churches, communities and the presbytery?***

When George talked with Waine Milmine last week as the Hysham Church considered re-gathering on Sundays, Waine noted that the Facebook Live ministry of the Church was now reaching far beyond the local congregation. "We have people in Texas who watch us on Facebook Live. When we re-open, we aren't going to forget them. We will worship in the building and keep going with Facebook, too."

Across the presbytery, Waine and many others understand that God is showing us new opportunities and ways. . The church is changed for good and for good. Let's admit it. The old ways many of us have been following and being church in our country have been fading, bearing less fruit, having less impact, for years. God is allowing the church to be disoriented, shaken up. God is giving us new opportunities to rethink, reframe and re-envision the Church, to experiment, and to cooperate with and be filled with and guided by the Holy Spirit. Time to dream God's dreams together.

And Our Job has Changed Dramatically, too. In the past two months we have:

- a. **Sought to listen to, pray for and learn with and from** you all in our Presbytery family, wise leaders around the nation, to reflect and seek the mind and ways of Christ as leaders amidst enormous challenges, unknowns, grief and loss, opportunities and blessings.
 - b. **Engaged almost weekly with the leaders** of the United Methodists, the Episcopalians, the United Church of Christ, the Disciples of Christ, ELCA Lutherans, the Roman Catholic and Glacier Presbytery judicatories across Montana for far more collegial work and relationships than we ever have.
 - c. **Kathy, particularly has, ZOOMed weekly with Presbytery Execs in national meetings discussing** best practices, resources and trends, both gaining and offering insight and support.
 - d. **Kathy has worked extensively with the Leadership Cabinet and it's presbytery planning team** (primarily Susi Ennis, Julie Boksich, and Russ Kline) to listen, adapt create the first all virtual presbytery meeting for May, building upon what we had already planned for the year and shifting.
 - e. Both of us have helped craft and been significantly involved in the scheduled and now more **frequent Leadership Cabinet and PMT ZOOM meetings.**
 - f. **Prayerful and asking God for ways to address, help or speak as the body of Christ as this crisis magnifies many challenges in our society and communities such as economic, social, relational, racial injustices and racial violence, and food and housing crises and inequities.**
 - g. **Kathy** has worked hard with Susan Seibert in the office to research, listen to you all, update and **maintain a whole new section of the presbytery web page to resource churches and leaders about Covid-19 regulations, best practices, vital new learnings for grief, leadership and ministry...** . Please check it out: Yellowstonepcusa.org at the dedicated link in the center of the page
- An important new article for NOW just added this week under Leading is:** [Strategies for Winter: Redemptive Leadership in Survival Times](#) - by Andy Crouch others, in *The Praxis Journal*
- h. **George has focused more on the individual pastors and some churches,** trying to encourage and enable their transition to virtual worship. But this season has also given him the opportunity to use his pastoral gifts more extensively with pastors and leaders struggling, like we all are in *these times.*
 - i. **George has been crafting worship and preaching for the Jordan** Church on ZOOM for the last four Sundays. This has enabled him to gain precious (and sometimes) experience for new ways of bringing worship to the local church, as many of you are doing. Additionally, both of us have taken the opportunity to catch many of the worship services you all are offering on Sunday mornings.
 - j. And the Montana denominational leaders **asked George to convene a ZOOM gathering of Montana clergy who were interested in pursuing spiritual discernment** to ask questions like, "What might God be trying to work into me during this Coronavirus times?" Or, "What might God be doing in the local church I serve?" George, as a spiritual director, was asked to do this. As of this writing the second such gathering has happened and a third is planned.

George's thoughts on discernment of what God is doing include:

- i. *God is always "doing more than we can ask or imagine" (Jude 20).*
- ii. *God always invites God's vulnerable-feeling people to "return to me and I will return to you,"(Zechariah 1:3; Malachi 3:7) in periods of chaos and crisis.*
- iii. *Generally, we return by repentance, recommitment and receiving or being filled again with the Holy Spirit anew (Acts 2:38)*

- iv. *Life patterns are shaking up old rut-rhythms and ways we have related to God, bringing new patterns and disciplines.*
- v. *Even as our ways of worship are being disrupted, God is coming close in unexpected ways. How are we, or might we, find this to be true?*
- vi. *Feelings of vulnerability increase the sense of need for God and others... but can also increase our fear and shrivel our faith, tempting us to close our hands and hang on tightly to what we have, rather than choosing to boldly trust God and generously open our hands to God and the needs of those around us. May we follow God with open hands into a deeper faith.*

Presbytery Prayer Concerns include:

- a. **Cathy McLean:** Cathy's health is declining. She has been awarded disability status by the Board of Pensions. The presbytery will vote on her status as Honorably Retired and honor her at this meeting.
- b. We are saddened by **the death of Paul Cousins** in Philipsburg 2 weeks ago. He was a member of the search committee who called us to serve the presbytery 16 years ago. We are grateful for Pastor Debby Schmidt there and for Paul's longtime friend Rusty during the season of decline. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions, no memorial service has yet been planned.
- c. With many of you, we are grateful to God for bringing **The Rev. Chuck Carlson to interim pastor First Presbyterian in Butte.**
- d. **Wenda Fry's** (Pastor for the Yoked Parish of White Sulphur Springs) **sister Aprille, also a pastor, has suffered a brain aneurism** and is being surgically treated in Spokane

Personally:

- a. While there has been much to learn, breaking developments to keep up with, we have also benefitted from the slower, non-travel pace. **We are trying to use the small windows of free time for some rest, reflective reading and conversation, connecting with family via zoom and calls, and exercise.**
- b. **Both of our aging Moms** continue to concern us, especially as we cannot easily visit them now. Many of you, too, have family in isolation elsewhere.
- c. While we have east coast friends who have contracted the Coronavirus, all have recovered, as far as we know. And to date, none of our family has contracted it.