

## **“The State of the Church”**

Exodus 13:17-22; Matthew 25:1-13 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – June 14, 2020  
Annual State of the Church Sermon for Congregational Meeting Day

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might keep our eyes on you,  
even as we wait and wander in the wilderness. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

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So here we are on the second Sunday of June, and we're going to have our annual congregational meeting, so it is traditional for me to give a sermon on “The State of the Church.” This address is intended to sum up our current situation and set the scene for the business that follows worship, for the Leadership Planning Retreat that usually happens a week later, and for the new ministry year that will start on July 1<sup>st</sup>. I trust that all of you appreciate how absurd it feels to try to sum up a situation or make plans right now. Nonetheless, we shall endeavor to make the best of our circumstances and do what we can.

Let's start with the good news, because there's a lot of it. In the area of growth and sustainability: We celebrated 10 new members and friends at our now annual New Members & Friends Potluck in January. Congratulations again to Flock 1 for winning the trivia competition! I am grateful to announce that our giving has held steady during these past 3 months of remote worship. You all have been amazingly faithful about mailing in your contributions and giving online. Getting our online giving platform up and running this past January is another celebration that will lead

to greater sustainability. Thanks to Andy, Larry, and Cathy for all their work with that! Throughout the year, we have also continued to work at maximizing our facility as an asset, by adding new tenants.

In the area of spiritual growth: Our small group ministries continue to grow and have adapted well to stay-home orders. Engagement with Bible study and now Michael's new bi-weekly Bible reading emails has been wonderful. Before stay-home orders, our Partnership Youth Group was having its best year ever. And now that we're on Zoom, our VLM youth are meeting more often, and we've even got a Young Adult group going. Additionally, while we know that remote worship is not ideal, I have heard from some of you that having the opportunity to pause and discuss or reflect on the various parts of worship as you move through them has been enriching for you.

In the area of outreach ministries: In 2019, the amount of money we dedicated to outreach ministries was equal to 11% of our total offerings. We received an award from the Interfaith Shelter Network for our many years of collaboration with them. We held our first "Welcome Saturday Sunday" in October to celebrate three years of our life-giving homeless ministry. We heard from some of our regular guests and shared a wonderful meal with them after worship. More recently, we only missed one month of Welcome Saturday before we were able to adapt to current limitations and offer modified services for our guests. Our profile within the community continues to grow.

If I may digress for just a moment from the good news, I will also say that in addition to being a good year for outreach, 2019 was also a year of extraordinary levels of bureaucratic hassle. Much of that was related to the flood that happened in the sanctuary last June. But there were also issues with copier contracts and copyright suits and fire inspections. The main reason I'm bringing this up is because I want to give a special shout-out to Helene Sisneros, who is completing her third term as our Trustee this month. Helene put in way more time and energy than anyone should be expected to give, to help me wade through these various convoluted and high-stakes problems. Thank you, Helene! (Y'all may applaud now!)

Bringing up the sanctuary flood, though, brings us back to the good news. Over the last year, this congregation has made a number of important investments in our future. For me, these investments are both signs of hope and inspirations to follow through on what we've committed to. When the sanctuary flooded, we discovered what a blessing it is to be well-insured, with a company that understands churches. Our deductible was only \$1000, and that plus a \$200 plumber bill to fix the offending pipe might have been it. But instead, we made the choice to install the ramp on the chancel, and in doing so, made a statement about how important it is for everyone to have access to leadership in our sanctuary, including those with mobility challenges. The symbolism of that ramp is just as powerful as the experience our leaders have using it.

A few weeks after the ramp was completed, we dedicated a new grand piano in the sanctuary. The piano was purchased with funds from a gift given by Dick Bailey & Greg Hunt, in memory of George & Elaine Bailey. Choosing to replace our piano instead of just socking that money away was, again, a sign of our hopes for the future.

An even bigger investment happened later in the winter, when we made the decision that it was time to replace the HVAC system in the sanctuary. Our willingness to invest funds in the major needs of our facility is a sign of our hopeful expectation that we will be worshiping and serving God here for many years to come. The new system is more efficient and easier to manage, but most importantly, it works!

Some smaller investments are probably less noticeable, but also contribute to strengthening our future. Funds have been committed to ensure our website is secure (making potential donors more comfortable giving online), to keep our electronic sign in working order so we can continue finding more creative ways to connect with the community with it, and to provide our online meeting room on Zoom, so we can stay connected during this strange season of stay-home orders.

All of these infrastructure investments give me hope, but the most exciting investments we have made have to do with staffing. We have just hired an Administrative & Communications Coordinator to replace our retiring church secretary. When the Board approved the new job description, there was an increase in pay included, because it's become clear that the requirements for this position are

more involved than used to be true. Alicia has just been working for two weeks now, but her experience and skills are going to mean our office will eventually be run more effectively and less by me than has ever been true before. I cannot tell you how that energizes me!

And of course, the other major staffing investment we've made has been having Tesa Hauser as our Ministerial Intern this past school year and hiring her to become our Ministerial Assistant beginning in July. I know that you have as blessed and gratified to watch Tesa's development as a pastor as I have. She has gifts and perspectives to offer us that, I am convinced, are part of how God is leading us into the future. Tesa will be keeping her full-time job during this season between graduation and ordination, so her hours will be limited, and our expectations must correspond with that reality. But you have seen, as I have, how her presence and ministry have already changed us, and I know you are as excited as I am about what is to come from this new position.

That is a lot of good news when you put it all in a pile like that. We are officially two years into our commitment to cultivate vitality and growth in ministry and membership, and there is much to celebrate. But as we are all painfully aware, it feels like the pause button got pushed a few months ago and that when we press play again, there might be an entirely different show on. We said this campaign we started back in 2018 would be at least three years (knowing there wasn't really any way to guess how long it would be). Do we get bonus months at the end of three years, for

every month we were in quarantine? We had finally gotten some momentum going, with deep conversations about our guiding values and discussions about the strategies that might be most fruitful. Will it be possible to pick up where we left off, or will the energy have shifted? Will we need to spend time re-assessing the whole landscape of what church looks like in a post-pandemic world, whenever such a thing finally emerges? What do we do in the meantime?

I hope it will come as no surprise that I do not have any answers for you. What I do have are some metaphors from scripture and some questions for you to consider. I wonder, did you feel it in your gut when I read those first lines from Exodus? “God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer. . . . God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness.” I know most of us haven’t left our houses much, but hasn’t this, at some level, felt like wandering around lost in the wilderness? Nothing is recognizable, the days all run together, full of tedium and uncertainty, and we have no idea when we’ll get where we’re going or even where that is. It’s very “roundabout”, this journey we’re on. There is no shortcut. Even as things start opening up, the knowledge that re-opening is more about arriving at the limits of our patience with quarantine than it is about the virus dissipating looms in the background. Re-opening is not the end of this journey. It might be better compared to the episode with the golden calf!

So what does our scripture lesson offer us? How can we ensure we’re following the right path? It’s that pillar in the sky. A pillar of cloud during the day

and a pillar of fire by night, so that the Israelites would know it was God that was leading them on this journey. God is going out ahead of us. When we feel lost in the wilderness, we need to turn our eyes back to God. So here are the first two questions for you to consider: What are the best ways for you to make sure you're keeping your eyes on God? Have you been doing those things? The most risky thing about stay-home orders for our faith community is the lack of accountability for our own spiritual growth that not gathering weekly for worship creates. You get emails from church at least five days a week now, but if you don't read them, it's like we don't exist anymore. How do you keep your eyes on God? I invite you to pause this sermon right now, and write down some answers to that question. When you are done, see if you need to pray for renewed commitment to those spiritual practices.

Here's another question about that fiery pillar: What signs have you seen that assure you that we, as a congregation, are following God through this wandering in the wilderness season? Maybe some of the good news I shared earlier helps you believe God is leading us. Maybe you have seen other signs. It would be nice to just have a pillar of fire in the sky so we could be sure, but that seems unlikely at best. But there are signs that are just as powerful. The way some of you have been diligent in making sure others are taken care of. The way you have repeatedly reached out to me, to make sure I know you appreciate my efforts and that I'm getting enough rest. The way you have taken steps to make sure our outreach efforts were fully funded and supported so we wouldn't have to abandon our neighbors in need. The way you have

considered the multitude of issues and possibilities thoughtfully and faithfully as different groups have deliberated about what our next steps might look like. It's easier to trust that we're following God when we don't charge ahead following our own desires, without regard for the consequences.

Most importantly, we simply need to remember that whether we see that pillar of fire or not, God is with us. You had better believe that not every Israelite had their eye on the pillar in the sky the whole time. There were many hours of just watching the feet of the person in front of you. That's the beauty of community; we bring each other along on the path of faithfulness. Yes, we are wandering, but God is with us and God is faithful.

Then again, maybe you don't feel like you're on a journey at all. Maybe you just feel stuck, waiting. Fear not! There is a metaphor for you too. Because we can't afford to just wait. We need to make sure we're staying prepared while we wait. The question of how to be a wise bridesmaid in these times is perhaps harder than the ones we posed before. What do we need to be doing to make sure our lamps are trimmed and burning? And that they will still be trimmed and burning when the time comes that we need them? Someday this will all be over. How can we ensure that we'll be able to tell a story of preparation and good stewardship and connection and spiritual deepening when the time comes? I'm pretty sure it will be easier to come back to church if you haven't completely given up your church habits in the meantime. There are so many ways to engage with our faith community right now,

but no matter how many emails or texts I send you, I can't make you connect. Each of us has to attend to our own lamp. This is one way in which it really doesn't work to try to borrow oil from your neighbor. There is going to be a great celebration, and I want you to be able to make it! But each of us has to stay attentive to keeping our lights burning while we wait.

Pandemic heightens the temptation we always have to turn inward, both as individuals and as a congregation. But if we keep our eyes on God, and keep our lamps burning for the sake of God while we wait, our hearts and our souls will turn outward as well. If we use this time to learn more deeply what it means to rely on God, we will be able to follow God into the future more easily. If we hold ourselves accountable for the practices that help us keep our eyes on God and help keep the lamps of our hearts burning, we will be better able to welcome the bridegroom when the wilderness journey ends. This is faithfulness. This is fruitfulness. This is what I hope and pray is the current state of our church. May it be so. Hallelujah and Amen.