

“Temptations in the Wilderness: Holding Onto The Past”

Exodus 14:10-14; Isaiah 43:18-25 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – March 20, 2022

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might follow Jesus faithfully into the future, whatever it may hold. In Jesus' name, Amen.

You may remember that back in February, as we were preparing to move into Lent again, for the third time – or more precisely, the second-and-a-half time – since our lives were upended by the coronavirus, that we announced this sermon series and asked for your input. We had determined that the last two years were well reflected in the biblical metaphor of wandering in the desert, and that we were experiencing how certain “temptations” had become harder to resist, given how much this wilderness wandering had worn us down. Today’s installment of this series is probably the most crowd-sourced of the five you’re going to get. I will admit, I am a highly unnostalgic and unsentimental person, so the allure of “holding onto the past” didn’t seem obvious to me at first. But as we put it into conversation with Week of Compassion, it began to make more sense.

So let me begin with a poll. There are no right answers, and if you don’t have a chance to raise your hand at all, think of this as a history lesson. Please raise your hand if you remember the Great Sanctuary Flood of 2019. On the night of June 10, 2019, water was discovered (by our friends from Gamblers Anonymous, let us remember) emerging from a closet at the back of that storage room there. It was also discovered that the floor in this room has an ever-so-slight downward grade toward the front here, so all that water came this direction. By the time it was shut off, there was probably over an inch of water

covering the floor of the whole room. More than 100 gallons were sucked into the clean-up trucks later that night. It was kind of a big deal, and I remain grateful to everyone who helped out that night. But here are some other questions for you.

Raise your hand if you knew there was wallpaper in this room before the flood. Now raise your hand if you already knew there is wallpaper in here right now. It's true: that's not paint; it's wallpaper. If you go up really close, you can see the design on it. So here's a little story about that wallpaper. The day I picked out the new wallpaper, I later went to visit Mary Ann E'Golf in her home. And I was explaining to her that I had just picked out a subtle design that was pretty much exactly like what had been there before. Our goal, after all, was to get the room re-done as quickly as possible, without long debates about how to re-decorate. Churches are notorious for getting bogged down in debate about the color of furnishings, and I was determined we weren't going to do that.

And it was then that God pulled an Isaiah 43:19 on me, using Mary Ann as a divine vessel. She expressed that she certainly understood my interest in getting the job done efficiently. But... what if... would I maybe consider considering... and it was then that this glorious ramp up to the second level of our chancel was conceived. Now, that ramp definitely did slow down the process, because numerous things had to be re-shaped to make it work. And it cost us big bucks that we wouldn't have had to pay, because while the insurance company didn't care what shape the new chancel floor was, they weren't going to pay for a railing that wasn't there before, especially one with a corner. But I'm guessing not one of us thinks it wasn't worth it. Even if you don't know what it used to look like!

There were other hiccups, of course. I was on vacation in Michigan when I got the word that the carpet they'd managed to salvage on the main floor was discontinued, so I had to choose something new for the chancel here, based on pictures of the limited options that the contractor texted me on my phone. Do we love it? No. Does that bother us? Not usually. I give thanks to be part of a church that doesn't major in the minors by worrying too much about the carpet.

Does our flood qualify as a disaster? Not really. It was more of a minor *disasteriño*. It took 5 months to finish the recovery completely. At the time, five months felt like quite a while. We went through a number of different adaptations of our worship space in that time. But from our present vantage point, two years into a pandemic, five months seems “short as the watch that ends the night” as the song says. But those three material things – the wallpaper, the ramp, and the carpet – can serve as analogies for us of how we approach the future. If we take a wallpaper approach, we will work as hard as we can to put things back exactly like they were. If we take a carpet approach, we will recognize the ways in which we can't have things like they used to be and settle for something else. But if we take a ramp approach and open ourselves up to God's creative leading into the future, things could be better than we ever imagined.

If we've seen God improve the future before, why is it so hard to open ourselves up to visions of ramps, and so easy to prefer picking out wallpaper and carpet to match our memories of the past? In some ways, it comes down to timing. As I mentioned, our flood took 5 months to recover from. The family in the video we just saw was 2 years into the

recovery of their home. They'd been through a lot of false starts, being swindled by contractors. You might have expected them to lose hope and not trust that anyone offering help would really come through. But did you hear what they said? "They fixed things we didn't even know were broken." Things did finally improve. One of the things I love the most about Week of Compassion, our denominational disaster relief & humanitarian development fund, is that they stick around. They don't just show up with water and blankets the day after a disaster (although they do that too). They stay and keep walking with folks, long after the unscrupulous contractors have left town. They're still there when people are ready to give up. And they do what it takes to find those folks who have fallen through the cracks and still need help.

Timing makes a big difference. But so does fear. That's clearly what was happening with the Israelites. Moses had led them out of slavery; you'd think that would make him a hero! But the Egyptian army was on their tail, so what were they saying instead? "Why the heck did you free us from slavery just to bring us out here into the desert to die?!" They were so terrified, even slavery felt like a better option. This became a theme, actually, whenever they were scared; whether because of approaching armies or hunger or thirst, they would complain to Moses about dragging them out into the desert when they could have been perfectly happy remaining slaves in Egypt. At least they would have had something to eat!

In many ways, timing and fear and disaster have all come together in the wilderness moment we're sharing right now. And here's a deeper nuance on what it can mean to let

go of the past. Much of the time, when we're struggling to let go of the past, it's because we're having a hard time letting go of an idea about who we were in that past. Before the bad thing happened, we thought of ourselves as independent, competent, even self-reliant people. And then the bad thing happened, and the unthinkable forced its way into our lives: we had to ask for and receive help! And now we have to accept the reality that we are people who are only making it through life with the help of others. The horror!

Except that if we can accept help, sometimes we learn that our lives are better that way. Sometimes it changes us in ways we eventually recognize as good; we become humbler and more grateful and more generous in offering assistance to others. Eventually, we look back at the illusions of self-sufficiency we once prized and wonder what we were missing out on back then.

Here's another poll for you. Raise your hand if you've heard of Tesa Hauser. Now raise your hand if you've heard of George Bailey. Now raise your hand if you remember what was happening the first time Tesa Hauser visited Vista La Mesa Christian Church. It was the day of George Bailey's 100th birthday party. What more poignant convergence of this church's past and future could we have devised? I bring this up because Tesa has been central to my learning through this pandemic about how working together is the best way to open ourselves to how God is shaping our future. In the first six or seven months of the pandemic, we were using an emailed, a la carte worship kit every Sunday. Or at least, I can say that's what we were providing you. I'm still not sure how many folks were actually using it. But it's what we had, and if I'm honest, it was what felt possible to me. Our

limited technical skills, combined with the value we place on worship leadership being shared between ordained folks and lay leaders, made it hard for me to imagine anything more. And I felt overwhelmed and maxed out. That email kit seemed like a way to hold on until we could put things back like they had been.

But the longer things went on, the clearer it became that putting things back like they'd been was further away than we had hoped. Had we kept going that way, that low level of engagement was going to become a problem. So God pulled another Isaiah 43:19 moment, this time using Tesa as the divine vessel, and Zoom worship was born. Zoom worship that I could not have pulled off as a solo pastor. Zoom worship that I wouldn't have dared introduce because I still wasn't used to relying on anyone other than myself. Two years into this pandemic, we are a different church, because – together – we managed to open ourselves up to the New Thing God is doing in our midst. We are learning – together – how to faithful instead of fearful. We are learning – together – how to let go of the things that can never be again and embrace the new things God is providing.

We don't have to be like the Israelites, scared into clamoring to return to slavery. We may be wandering, but if we can open our eyes to the new things God is doing in our midst, we will find rivers in this wilderness. Whether we're walking together or even just keeping still together, God will be our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home. Thanks be to God! Amen and Amen.