

## **“The State of the Church”**

Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – June 12, 2022  
Annual Congregational Meeting Sunday

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might grow in faith and trust  
that our future as a congregation is held in your hands. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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‘Tis that time of year again, when we gather after worship to conduct the official business of the congregation, and so beforehand, I share this sermon with you audaciously called “The State of the Church.” Unlike some people who give “State of the...” addresses, I don’t have a staff of researchers or an archivist, or even a very good handle on the passage of time anymore, so pretty much every year, I am prodded to offer merely my impressions, what it feels like from my perspective, with some scriptural reflection undergirding the whole thing. It is still a sermon, after all!

I did do a little research though. Well, I went back and read the letter we sent out with your end-of-year donation receipts. That’s sort of like research, right? There was a phrase in there that struck me. We were trying to remind everyone of all that had been happening, because of and in spite of the pandemic. And one of the things we noted was that we have upheld our commitment to our “long-time traditions of love and hospitality.” That seems like a good thing for a church to be known for, doesn’t it? Indeed, it has been hard to keep churching during the pandemic, even as the circumstances have shifted every few months or so. But we have maintained our

traditions of love and hospitality, as shown through Welcome Saturday, Trunk-or-Treat, our growing roster of community group tenants, the amazing Camp Not Leven we held last summer, and just the way we've been caring for one another through thick and thin over the past year.

We're not rolling in dough, but I feel confident saying that we are fiscally steady, which is huge for a congregation our size. And we've continued learning together, through Sunday morning Bible study and few different online courses and groups. And as the pandemic has weakened its grip, we've even returned to our tradition of celebration! It felt so good to share in our Easter potluck, with everyone pitching in to set up canopies and bring food and clean up. Celebration is a holy practice.

The celebrations continued just last weekend, as we gathered for Pastor Tesa's ordination. Did you see what God did here through us? Not just the pageantry and the party, but the launching of a talented and called young woman into the life and vocation of ministry. God is truly on the move!

I was struck, honestly, by how well our two scripture readings today reflect parts of the moment we're in as church. Psalm 8 is such a beautiful piece, full of wonder and awe but also challenge. The world is big and complicated, and God is glorious, we're reminded. "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" There is much about the vastness of the universe that can make us feel small.

But Psalm 8 reminds us that God has given us a special role in all of that. The world can feel overwhelming, but God has given us the capacity to change it. God will always be God. God is Sovereign and we are not. But God has invited us into a partnership; God has given us responsibility to care for this beautiful, complex creation, to make a difference.

It is true that being told we're supposed to be making a difference can feel like a burden when we're so tired. We are worn down and wrung out. But that's where Paul's words from Romans 5 fit in. God's love has been poured into our hearts, he writes. The Holy Spirit has been given to us. That's how he can say with confidence that "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope." I've always been fascinated by this line. It's quite something to get from "suffering" to "hope" in only 11 words. So let's take a closer look at those words in the middle. Another way the word "endurance" is sometimes translated into English is "patience," but many scholars find "endurance" better because it evokes more of the idea of getting through something difficult, rather than passively waiting. And sometimes the word "character" is translated "experience," but that's much too neutral of a word to get Paul's meaning across. Many scholars use an English construction that is closer to the meaning to talk about this verse, but it's not found in translations because it's not technically a word. Instead of "character," they suggest "approvedness," that is, the sense of having been tested and found up to the task. We have been through some things, Paul is saying, and we're still here! The 2022 meme

version of this is the encouraging posts that remind us that “We can do hard things!” And we can! We have been! That is how our suffering leads to hope, because wherever we are, we can look back and see what we came through and that we’re still here, being church as faithfully as we can. God has brought us through! God continues to bring us through. This is why our hope cannot fail us.

Four years ago, we launched a new season of focus on cultivating growth and vitality in ministry and membership. Though the pandemic threw a wrench in those efforts, we have continued to welcome new folks into membership, even when we weren’t worshipping in the sanctuary. We have maintained our ministries of love and hospitality, adapting creatively as needed. The time will soon come when we will sit down together and re-group to see how to focus our efforts again.

But for the moment, it is my sense that we are still waiting on God to tell us to get started. The pandemic was a major force of discombobulation. I suggest that we take a cue from airports in some cities that label certain sections the “Recombobulation Area.” It’s where you go, after taking everything apart at security, to put things back together, check to make sure you have everything, and get your shoes tied again. God is Sovereign, which means we have the blessing and liberty to take some time for recombobulation. The world is still very much in flux. We’re still in recovery from months and months of uncertainty and constant change. We’re tired and not always sure our shoes are on the right feet. If I’m feeling that here, as the one who’s paid to do church full-time, I can’t even imagine how those of you doing

church here in your free time must feel. So let's commit ourselves to recombobulation. Let's take the time.

One of the reasons I trust that this congregation will make it is because you take care of your pastors. The Board recently approved two weeks of "restorative leave" for me, on top of regular vacation, because you understand that soul-tiredness takes some extra rest and attention to be satiated. I hope that we can extend that grace to everyone, and I think we will. Let's take the time we need to get things back in place, to recombobulate our souls. The world is huge and complicated, but God has shown us that we can do hard things. God has shown us that God will be beside us while we do those hard things. Hope is real. Let us take the time we need to be ready for whatever God is bringing us next. Let us lean into God's grace and peace, take a deep breath, and give thanks. Hallelujah and Amen!