

## **“Celebrating 75 Years of Sharing Christ’s Welcome”**

Jeremiah 17:7-8; Revelation 22:1-2; Matthew 13:31-32 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – January 1, 2023  
75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Kick-Off Sunday

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might embrace the moment before us now and re-commit ourselves to following you into the future, faithfully and fruitfully. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.*

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Well! Happy New Year! Happy New Year indeed! I should clarify here that what I’m going to share this morning isn’t quite a sermon. It’s probably more accurate to call it an introduction or an orientation. We have been talking about how to celebrate our 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary in various meetings since August, and I’ve been doing a lot of reflecting on it on my own, so today I want to share some thoughts about our plans.

First of all, let’s talk about trees. As you have seen and heard already multiple times this morning, our anniversary imagery is all about trees. The anniversary logo on our banner and the stickers and pretty much everything else associated with this celebration is intended to be loosely reminiscent of the cross logo we’ve been using for a few years. That logo, in turn, was based on the cross on our reredos there behind the baptistery. But that’s not the only tree we’ve got going on. We also have plans to plant some trees in a few weeks, on our official celebration day, in the front bed out here between the lower parking lot and the sidewalk. Tim Cliffe and Tracy

Stockdall are working on that project to ensure we plant appropriately native trees. In just a bit, we'll turn to the paper tree that is now growing on the bulletin board in Bailey Hall. But for now, let's look at some of the trees in the Bible that inspired this imagery.

Scripture is full of tree metaphors, and they all offer us beautiful guidance for living out our faith. The tree Jeremiah references is about endurance. It is planted near water. It's not necessarily a lot of water, but it's enough to keep that tree going. "It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit." This is a particular potent metaphor for us here in Southern California, as we close out the driest three-year period on record. How can it help but be a sign of promise that we kick off our celebration today under rainy, cloudy skies? Hopefully, it will let up enough after worship to allow us to go out and hang up our banner!

Next, we turn to the tree of life in Revelation. I wasn't really focused on the fruit part of this passage, though fruitfulness is a major aspect of the teachings of the trees in scripture. This particular tree sounds kind of like a "fruit-of-the-month" club! Maybe that's a symbol of the various celebrations we'll be having all year. The part I was more interested in, as you heard in the song we learned earlier, is the last line about the leaves, which are "for the healing of the nations." What does that even mean? Like a lot of the imagery in the book of Revelation, such a phrase can go in many different directions! But it's clear that the leaves don't merely exist for their

own sake. If we are going to be the leaves of the tree planted by God, we are called to live for one another, not just on an individual level, but as God's people actively engaging with our community, our society, and indeed, the whole world.

Finally, there is the "tree" in the verses from Matthew 13 about the mustard seed. I put "tree" in quotes because it's clear that Jesus is exaggerating when he calls the mustard plant a tree. Even the "greatest of shrubs" isn't exactly a tree. But that is totally not the point, is it? Jesus is telling us about what the power of God can do with small things. A tiny mustard seed, which grows into a little bush, can be a tree of hospitality, a home for the birds of the air. Those of you who were here last week may have noticed that the picture on the screens during that scripture reading was the little Christmas tree from last week's story. For those of you who weren't here, the point of the story was that the Christmas tree wasn't perfect in shape or structure, because it had offered shelter and nourishment to the animals of the forest. But despite its imperfections, it became the most beautiful tree in the forest, precisely because of the compassion it had shared. It may not look much like a mustard plant, but I think Jesus would have considered it a close cousin. There are lessons here for our little church, as we think about who and how we're going to be in our community and our world. (If you want to read the story from last week, the book is in my office.) Jesus is telling us that our size is not a barrier. There is no need to be big or shiny or perfect-seeming in order to offer hospitality and welcome. Indeed, those things might get in the way.

In a way then, these trees have led us to the wording that is on our anniversary banner, even though the slogan seemingly itself has nothing to do with trees. There is another scripture verse that speaks to our anniversary theme. In Romans 15:7, we read “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” That verse is key to why we ended up with the wording we did.

The idea of hanging a banner outside all year, so that our community would know we are celebrating, first came up at the Elders meeting in October when we were brain-storming about different ways we could mark this milestone year. At that meeting and in many conversations afterward, a bunch of different words were put into various arrangements to see what might emerge. Words and phrases like God’s love and neighbors and sharing and loving and welcome and celebrating and in Jesus’ name and such were arranged and re-arranged, and yet, it just wasn’t clicking quite yet. And then, at some point – probably near the last minute because that’s how the Holy Spirit seems to work around here – a important realization dawned: as important as the biblical command to love our neighbors is at Vista La Mesa, as a grounding description of what we do, it’s too limited. It’s too one-directional. Too often, human hospitality sets up a dichotomy of host and guest; one person is at home and the other is visiting. And that’s not actually what happens here. We realized that it’s not that we are welcoming them; it’s that God is welcoming all of us. We are not offering Christ’s welcome, as if it is ours to give; rather, we are sharing in it along with everyone else.

This more expansive understanding of God's hospitality also incorporates the ways in which we care for one another within our church family. When we host our neighbors without shelter, we are sharing Christ's welcome. But we're also sharing Christ's welcome when we're upholding a fellow church member in prayer and offering rides when they're facing surgery or cancer treatment or any of the other many difficulties life throws at us.

Whether the tree that is Vista La Mesa is offering shelter or nourishing us with fruit, we all share in the healing that comes from the welcome of God that we know in Christ Jesus. There is no "us and them." There is only the one family of God's creation.

Just a couple other things that I love about this theme; though it doesn't have that many words, it manages to nod to both the past and the present. The use of the word "sharing" references a former slogan, pulled from our mission statement and turned into a bumper sticker: "Share the Joy!" And the use of the word "welcome" connects to our currently most defining outreach ministry, Welcome Saturday. So there past and the present are there in the words. Maybe it's the tree that points toward the future.

So let's get back to the trees for a moment. Besides all the parties we're going to have this year, there is another vital aspect of our plans that I want to launch today. It is my prayer that this year will be a time of reflection and discernment for us, a time for conversation about our core values, the convictions that shape who we are a

congregation and how we're going to respond to God's invitation into the future. If we don't know who we are, we can't tell anyone else much about why they should check us out. When we have clarified why we're here, moving forward with courage and passion will be much easier.

We had actually begun this process just before the pandemic began. We were having conversation in committee meetings about the values that shape those particular aspects of our ministry. We were talking about ways to make those values more obvious to people who were less directly involved. But, as they say, life happened, and for a while, that meant a giant interruption involving Zoom church and technical adaptation and working harder just to hold things together. As we move into a new stage in our relationship with the coronavirus, it's time to pick this process back up. And we're going to start today.

I mentioned that there is a tree in Bailey Hall now. It's not a great tree, because I am not really very good at drawing trees. But you all are going to help it look better. Because it's a tree of discernment, and it needs some leaves. We're going to pass out some leaves now, one for each of you, and some markers, which you'll have to share. I want you to do some thinking and when you're ready – it could be after worship – write a word or phrase on that leaf that, for you, describes something about the essence of Vista La Mesa Christian Church. What is it that makes us who we are? What is it that God has called this church to do? No one leaf needs to have all the answers to those questions, so don't try to cover everything.

We're going to hang these leaves on the bare tree in Bailey Hall, and then we're going to leave the leaves and the markers there and let other people add to them. Zoomers, if you have a word or a phrase you'd like to put on leaf, just type it into the chat box and we will get it up there for you. This is just the beginning of a conversation that we're going to have all year, in a bunch of different ways. But we're starting here because we want to remember that the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. We want to remember that the tree doesn't fear when the heat comes and continues to bear fruit. We want to remember that even the smallest shrub can offer shelter to God's creatures.

A new year has begun! A year of celebration and discernment, a year of talking and singing and praying and studying and sharing. A year of rejoicing in the welcome Christ has offered us, is offering us, is inviting us to share with one another. Let us give thanks and sing! Hallelujah and Amen!