

# “Future Church: Changing for the Next Season”

*Exodus 14:10-12, 15:23-24 & 16:1-3, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 11, Isaiah 43:18-19*

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**Prayer for Understanding** Eternal Spirit, you flow through the ages from the pages of Scripture, healing with your comfort, transforming with your challenge and inspiring those who hear to love extravagantly. Open our hearts and minds to experience you. Amen.

Pastor Riz and I have been praying, reading, discussing, studying, and investigating the future church. We do not know what the future church will look like. God will continue to redeem the world through people who receive and share God’s grace, the church. If the future is anything like the past, about every 500 years the church goes through a major shift. Our current church style with a sermon by a pastor, liturgy, Sunday School, programmatic ministry, worship in a building, denominations, has been around for a little over 500 years, a relatively short time. Every time the church has gone through one of these radical changes people thought it was the end of the church. And every time, God transformed the church into an incarnate bearer of grace to a wider, more diverse, more inclusive, community of people. That is, God delights in revealing love, joy, hope, and peace through people; God delights in forgiving, healing and welcoming people home through people. God’s grace is never diminished by the culture; however, as the culture changes, God communicates grace in the language of the culture in ways that more and more people can experience grace. God’s grace welcomes all into the eternal love story of God and humanity.

Pastor Riz and I will be sharing insights on the future church that hopefully will generate questions, discussions, and a passionate desire to journey into the future. The Sessions of North Presbyterian and New Life Presbyterian are exploring our future and will be meeting together. Pastor Riz and I will each be sharing two sermons on the future of the church at both North and New life.

The wisdom of Ecclesiastes proclaims. **Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 11 “For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to harvest. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to tear down and a time to build up. A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve and a time to dance. A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones. A time to embrace and a time to turn away. A time to search and a time to quit searching. A time to keep and a time to throw away. A time to tear and a time to mend. A time to be quiet and a time to speak. A time to love and a time to hate. A time for war and a time for peace. God has made everything beautiful for its own time. God has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God’s work from beginning to end.”** As individuals, as families, as a church, as a country, we continual go through a myriad of seasons. We cannot see the whole scope of God’s work. Scripture promises everything, everyone, will be beautiful. God has planted eternity in our heart. By God’s grace each of us is eternal, all the love, joy, hope, peace, and goodness we experience and share is eternal and exponentially grows through every season. Some seasons are glorious. Some seasons are tough, arduous, and confusing. Transitions between seasons, which the church is in now, are uncertain, scary, and turbulent.

Gratitude is a dependable guide through every transition and season. There was a time when someone left our church family that I was sad, wanted them to come back and discouraged. Then I realized how selfish this was for me and selfish for North Presbyterian Church. Now I am grateful for the season that we shared together. Grateful for the unique facets of God I experienced through them. I am grateful they found another family of faith or a way to connect with God outside the traditional church. My son, Spencer, gave me several pictures of our time backpacking in Glacier National Park together. In the center is a quote from John Muir: “I would rather be in the mountains thinking of God, than in church thinking about the mountains.” Spencer was a little unsure if this picture would be appropriate for my study at church. Over the years, this quote keeps revealing fresh insights for me as to the myriad of ways God connects with us. God is far to loving, gracious, awesome, big to be restrained, limited, or contained by a church, a group, or our thoughts. So, for the people who have journeyed into a new season, I am grateful for whatever way they are connecting with God. I am grateful that every “good bye” is a “see you later”. We will all be united in the glory of heaven for eternity. We will savor together all the love, joy, and goodness we shared on earth. More and more I realize it is not about me, it is about them journeying into new seasons with God. If we truly love someone, we set them free.

Growing up on a farm I learned if you plant the same crop, in the same field, year after year, then every year health diminishes, disease consumes more of the crop and erosion steals more of the soil. Crops need to be rotated for vigor. Plants need to be cross pollinated with different plants from far way locations for vitality. Constant change is a must for healthy crops and livestock.

On Sunday mornings as you look around and see fewer people, missing some dear friends, rather than being sad in their absence, try being grateful for your season together, imagine them enjoying their new season, imagine the reunion that awaits you in heaven.

Times have radically shifted. The majority of churches in every denomination, of every style, theology and approach in Europe and the United States are all declining in membership. We are living in a shift of seasons. The church will be fine, although it will be radically different in a few years. So, as you see fewer people here, it is not your fault or anyone's fault. There is nothing we could have done differently to change the shift in seasons. The serenity prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference, living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; taking this world as it is and not as I would have it; trusting that You will make all things right if I surrender to Your will; so that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen." We cannot change the shift of seasons for the world or the church. We can change our reaction, our attitude, and whether or not we will choose to journey forward into the next season.

When a person journeys through the horizon of death to Life Triumphant, God's grace transforms them; all their goodness, love, joy, peace is purified, magnified, and set free to grow; all their limitations, pain, fear, and hate dies and is buried. There is much about the current church that is good and will be transformed for the next season, however there are some aspects that diminish life and need to die. I have seen the church hurt people. I entered ministry with great passion to help people experience God's grace. My first call had many wonderful moments and some ugly moments by someone who hurt me so deeply that I almost left the ministry and the church. I have forgiven them although I still have scares. Sometimes I still react in a way I do not want to react due to the trauma I experienced through the church. I know many others with similar experiences. These aspects of the church need to die. I have also seen the church burn people out. That needs to die. Ministry should be life giving. I have seen people who have been rejected, because they did not fit into mold of the desired church member. That needs to die. In the 50s and 60s, the church had so much abundance (people, money, resources) that some people trusted the resources more than God. We cannot see the scope of God's work. I trust God to resurrect all the goodness of the church for the next season and let die all that is diminishing life.

The stories we tell ourselves is critical. The stories we tell ourselves determine our future. Brene Brown has researched the way people process what they experience. Far from the logical and rational beings we think we are, we instead unconsciously interpret events to fit some kind of already established narrative we "know" to be "true." It is the stories we tell ourselves, more than actual events, that create our anxiety, negative reactions, and shape our future. Here is a real example from Brene's life:

- Steve opened the refrigerator and sighed. "We have no groceries. Not even lunch meat."
- I shot back, "I'm doing the best I can. You can shop, too!"
- "I know," Steve said in a measured voice. "I do it every week. What is going on?"
- Brene knew what was going on and said: I had turned his comment into a story about how I am a disorganized, unreliable partner and mother. I apologized and started my next sentence with the phrase that has become a lifesaver in my marriage, parenting and professional life: "The story I am making up is that you were blaming me for not having groceries, that I was messing up."
- Steve said, "No, I was going to shop yesterday, but I didn't have time. I am not blaming you. I am simply hungry."

What are the stories we are telling our self and each other about North Presbyterian? New Life Pastor Jeff Japinga wrote: "We all tell ourselves stories to explain what we see, hear, and feel. It is human. What we often fail to acknowledge, however, is the enormous power these self-told stories have to define the world around us and shape how we treat people. Sometimes the stories we tell absolve us, and others, of guilt and excuse bad behavior; other times, we use them to shame or belittle others. Sometimes our stories bring us together and build community; at other times, they tear us apart. Too often, however, the stories we tell ourselves about what we see and think and feel simply pass as unquestioned fact. And that is when we are shaped by stories that just are not true. I wonder what would happen if we started to think more critically and carefully about these stories we tell, about ourselves and others. Where do they come from and why do we tell them that way? Are they even right? Or are they simply

caricatures and false assumptions? In other words, lies. When we can slow down our reaction and identify that we are telling ourselves a story, then we can be more open and curious to the world of possibilities that live in every moment. Instead of being locked into one narrow and restrictive interpretation of what's happening (our church pews are not full, so we are failing and might as well just quit trying; that person holds a different interpretation of Scripture that is ruining the church), perhaps we can explore where God might be in that story, and what God might be calling us to be in that story. There, we might find true freedom from the habitual thought-patterns that keep us imprisoned."

It has been confirmed over and over again by every discipline that humans resist change. Even good positive change that we want to make is resisted by a part of us. There is a part of us that yearns to go back to the familiar, to the way things were in the past. Nostalgia cripples our journey. God set the Israelites free from slavery. They wanted this change. They prayed for this change for years. They dreamed about this change.

You would expect the Israelites to be joyful over the change of their freedom. Exodus tells of the Israelite's attitude as they were leaving Egypt. **Exodus 14:10-12 NLT** "As Pharaoh approached, the people of Israel looked up and panicked when they saw the Egyptians overtaking them. They cried out to the Lord, and they said to Moses, "Why did you bring us out here to die in the wilderness? Weren't there enough graves for us in Egypt? What have you done to us? Why did you make us leave Egypt? Didn't we tell you this would happen while we were still in Egypt? We said, 'Leave us alone! Let us be slaves to the Egyptians. It's better to be a slave in Egypt than a corpse in the wilderness!'" Often when one is in the midst of change, they blame others and blame the circumstances.

Three days later. **Exodus 15:23-24 NLT** "When they came to the oasis of Marah, the water was too bitter to drink. So they called the place Marah (which means "bitter"). Then the people complained and turned against Moses. "What are we going to drink?" they demanded." Bitterness and demanding are not characteristics of a healthy, welcoming church.

Nostalgia, yearning to return to the past, kills joy and murders one's future. The Israelites were free. They were on their way to the Promised Land. Nostalgia crippled them and delayed their entrance into the Promised Land by 40 years. None of the people who left Egypt made it to the Promised Land, because they refused to change. It was the next generation that embraced change who entered the Promised Land. **Exodus 16:1-3 NLT** "One month after leaving the land of Egypt. The whole community of Israel complained about Moses and Aaron. "If only the Lord had killed us back in Egypt," they moaned. "There we sat around pots filled with meat and ate all the bread we wanted. But now you have brought us into this wilderness to starve us all to death."

As any organization declines in membership, there are typically three options for the future. We have a choice. What the majority of you choose will determine the future of North Presbyterian Church? Option A is blame, bitterness, nostalgia, separation, factions, refusal to change and death. Option B is to be gracious, loving, and kind to each other. Agree upon a few key ministries and gratefully let go of the rest. Enjoy God and each other. Accept the waning membership of the church. Agree upon a time and way to merge, or dissolve, passing on resources to other organizations. Option C is to be gracious, loving, and kind to each other. Strive to change. Be tenacious for change is challenging. Strive to transform. Actively seek the change God desires for the church. Intentionally become a family of faith that is able to communicate God's grace in the language of today and tomorrow. In two weeks, we will explore what choosing Option C might entail. Next week Pastor Riz will share insights on the future church.

God is saying to us through the prophet Isaiah through the New Living Translation. **Isaiah 43:18-19 NLT** "But forget all that—it is nothing compared to what I am going to do. For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness. I will create rivers in the dry wasteland." God is saying to us through the prophet Isaiah through the Message paraphrase. **Isaiah 43:18-19 MSG** "Forget about what has happened; do not keep going over old history. Be alert, be present. I am about to do something brand-new. It is bursting out! Don't you see it? There it is! I am making a road through the desert, rivers in the badlands." Amen