

# “New Wine”

*Mark 2:18-22*

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*Pastor James York*

I experienced Synod School this year as both shocking and challenging, initially depressing, yet ending full of hope.

Synod School is a gathering of over 600 Presbyterians. We gather to worship, fellowship, learn, teach, play, and discuss. It was the largest Synod School ever with the most children and youth ever, over 200 of them.

This year’s theme was “Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land”. During the opening hymn in worship, the communion table, font, and pulpit were carried out. Next the choir sang a song of exile with the refrain, “and we wept, and we wept, and we wept.” Pastor and Professor Chris Levan then pointed out a variety of statistics. Every Christian denomination is declining in membership numbers and is getting older. In Europe, Canada, and the United States, Christians are leaving behind a 1,700 year time frame of being the mainstream majority, and returning to a time of being the marginal minority. No longer should church health be measured by bigger buildings, more members, or the leadership and education of the pastor. The vision of sending missionaries to every person around the world and making the whole world Christian has been shattered. We endured about a half an hour of such statistics and statements and were invited to mourn, to grieve for we are “Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land”.

In the morning Pastor and author of *Reframing Hope: Vital Ministry in a New Generation*, Carol, invited us to let go and consider what God is doing in the world today. For the rest of the week, Chris and Carol invited us to recognize some of the major shifts that have taken place in the world, making the world strange to everyone. They invited us to hear the stories from the Bible of how God works in times of change and strange lands. They challenged us to sing the Lord’s song, drawing on our tradition and experience, yet in new ways to proclaim God’s renewing love. They proclaimed the ever enduring hope God lavishly gives us.

We surmise some good people with pure motives, a deep love for the faith, and a desire to do the right thing, came to Jesus. They were confused. It was a time of change and they found themselves living in a strange land. Fasting was a tradition, a central part of worship, a way of confessing sin, revealing dependence on God. It was a way of growing ones relationship with God, and a sign of one's love for God. Yet, Jesus and his disciples were not fasting. The gospel of Mark proclaims **“Once when John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting, some people came to Jesus and asked, “Why don’t your disciples fast like John’s disciples and the Pharisees do?” Jesus replied, “Do wedding guests fast while celebrating with the groom? Of course not. They can’t fast while the groom is with them. But someday the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast. “Besides, who would patch old clothing with new cloth? For the new patch would shrink and rip away from the old cloth, leaving an even bigger tear than before. “And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. For the wine would burst the wineskins, and the wine and the skins would both be lost. New wine calls for new wineskins.”**

I am too young to remember a news report from Walter Cronkite who was voted the most trusted man in America. Perhaps you can remember. Walter ended his broadcasts “And that’s the way it is.” That view has radically changed. A news report now ends with “We report, you decide.” In Walter’s era, facts and the source were highly valued. Today facts are cheap. In just a few seconds, you can Google a topic and find out all kinds of facts, video, perspectives, and commentary on the story. Some are true and some false, so you have to decide. A news report only gives one perspective of the story. Go online and you can read, watch, and discuss the story.

During Walter Cronkite’s era, the pastor was highly valued and trusted. The pastor’s education, reference library, experience, and guidance of the Holy Spirit, enabled her or him to proclaim sermons which usually ended with Amen, which means, “so be it”, much like Walter’s “And that’s the way it is”. Today anyone can go on line and find commentaries, analysis, Greek and Hebrew parsing, and an abundance of sermons for every verse of scripture.

Many in the younger generations today want to hear from more than just one perspective on a scripture. As Presbyterians, we are uniquely experienced to flourish regarding this shift. It is a similar shift to what happened when the printing press was invented. Our denomination flourished because of our belief in the Priesthood of all believers, that every person can read the Bible, be inspired by the Holy Spirit, and share God’s truth.

Many in the younger generations also want to wrestle with issues, debate them, hear from people who have lived them, and get numerous perspectives. From the local church, to General Assembly, we are experienced at debating issues. We value different perspectives. We can disagree on numerous issues and still celebrate our unity in Christ. Our church governance is built on the belief that God speaks to each person, so we discuss, read scripture, pray and vote and repeat over and over. We are once reformed always reforming, in hope of living more and more in accordance to God's will. Our challenge is to tell our story. Many view the church as an institution that tells people what to do, and wants money instead of a community of loving people who support and help each other wrestle with their faith, connect with God, and name and celebrate God's renewing love in our lives and world. Our challenge is to tell the story of God's grace in the language of today through podcasts, blogs, and social media.

I have seen this congregation grow in our ability to express and share God sightings. Our children and youth are helping us all find our voice by sharing God sightings a couple a times a year in worship. This fall we will start a new worship service once a month on a Saturday evening. There will be songs of praise, prayer, and scripture will be read. Then everyone will be invited to share what they think God is saying through that scripture, how it applies to their life, and to share how they experienced God in the past week. Then it is my hope that the conversation will keep going online for the rest of the month. If this interests you please talk to me. If this is not for you, that is fine, however please refrain from negatively judging it. This type of faith sharing will likely be a primary means of evangelism. People are searching for God online in record numbers. The most searched, read, and discussed topic online, is the cluster of God, spirituality, and mission.

Another major shift is jobs. Today jobs are scarce, even for the well-educated and trained. Many jobs are part time, lower paying, and short term. It is estimated that the average young adult will now change jobs every 2 years and move every 2.5 years. How can they stay connected to a church family? If the church has online sermons, discussions, prayer chains, and blogs, they can stay connected anywhere. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could offer more to our youth as they scatter after graduation? Wouldn't it be great to utilize the internet to connect with everyone in our family of faith no matter where they live? Perhaps the church of the future will be a physical place where people gather to worship with a digital connection to our worldwide family of faith. One in five college students today in the United States have never even stepped foot in the door of the church yet all of them are online and most likely all of them have discussed God and sought answers to their questions of faith online.

Another major shift is the prominence of the television. For the first time in over half a century, the number of TVs per household is decreasing. Research has found that people in their 20's are turning off their TVs and are mystified as to how previous generations could spend so much of their time passively watching television. By in large, when the younger generation watches a video, they want to be able to vote and discuss it. They are searching for churches that have posted media online and are discussing it from a faith perspective. What does this media reveal about God? Is it revealing a faithful, loving, peaceful, enriching way of living?

The passion for action can be seen in the quest for social justice such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Movement, and purchases for a cause. If a retailer or coffee chain pledges to donate a percent of your purchase to a social justice cause, their sales spike, especially among young adults. Social justice is an area where the church excels. We have been doing social justice for 2,000 years, however many do not know even a snippet of what we are doing. The church is very effective, efficient, and compassionate in our quest for social justice. Do you know that Presbyterian Disaster Assistance right now has warehouses of supplies ready to be quickly distributed to those in need from the next disaster? Presbyterian Disaster Assistance was the first to get supplies and assistance to those affect by Katrina. In Haiti, Presbyterian missions were there long before the earthquake, during the earthquake, and will continue to serve in that country. This church, through Remember Niger, is providing education to the poorest country in the world. We, Presbyterians, put pressure on a large, popular national food chain, until they started treating their workers with respect and paying them a fair wage. Centuries before the Green movement, we have urged careful stewardship of the earth. The list can go on and on. The younger generations are passionate to improve the world, as are we. Perhaps we should look for more ways to join together.

We should not fear our transition from the mainstream majority to the marginal minority. The Christian church flourished and God did amazing things through the church for the first 313 years when we were the marginal minority. If you go back through the Old Testament, the faithful have spent much more time being the marginal minority than the mainstream majority. God has done many of the greatest miracles, renewals, and transformations for the entire world through the minority. Jesus and His followers were clearly the minority.

One night we explored the lives of five marginalized women of the Bible, Tamar, Ruth, Rehab, Bathsheba and Mary. Pastor Chris wrote a biography for each woman that was read by 5 different women. The next day, in good priesthood of all believers, Presbyterian form, we debated these accounts.

Several thought Chris's interpretation was off and gave their perspective. This is the type of dialogue that many in the younger generations are seeking. Most of us agreed that for at least part of their life they were outsiders, poor, condemn by religious leaders, lived in the bleakest of circumstances, and faced extremely difficult predicaments and death. Yet, they all had unshakable hope in God. God did amazing things in their life and through their lives, and God brought Jesus to earth through their family tree. There are 46 names that the gospel of Matthew lists in the genealogy of Jesus. Only 5 are women. Matthew is trying to emphasize something special about them. Much more prestigious women could have been listed such as Miriam, Esther, Abigail, and Rebecca. We concurred that these five women were picked because of their persistent, creative, hope that inspired them to find a new way.

The world has changed. The church is changing. It is ok to grieve our losses. God is active. God is lovingly renewing all. Let go of measuring success by church numbers, programs, and budgets, and let come reaching the world through our digital connections. Let go of relying on the pastor or leaders to teach, inspire and lead, and let come everyone sharing God sightings. Let go of the church hierarchy sending missionaries to make the world Christian, and let come collaboration with others renewing the world through social justice. Let go of judging, comparing, contrasting, and belittling other generations, and let come love, compassion, and support.

Jesus said, "**New wine calls for new wineskins.**" How should we "sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" Instead of ending with "amen" I invite you to ponder, share your insights with each other, talk to the elders and myself. Be bold and share your experiences of God in a new way.