

“Life in the Spirit: Awakening”

Acts 20:7-12

May 9, 2021

Several years ago, in a column titled “The Power of Posterity,” writer David Brooks imagined a world with no future. What would happen if those living today learned that they were the final generation? The effects, of course, would be devastating. Brooks writes, “without posterity, there are no grand designs. There are no high ambitions...Even words like justice lose meaning because everything gets reduced to the narrow qualities of the here and now.” Brooks draws this conclusion: “Anything worth doing is the work of generations.”ⁱ

Just before his own death, I heard the great preacher Fred Craddock, then in his mid-eighties proclaim that, of all the great heroes of history, the person he most admires is the cathedral worker. Many of the great cathedrals took over a century to build, and Craddock imagined the mason cutting the rock for the cornerstone of a massive building that he will never see completed in his lifetime. These wise people trusted that their great-grandchildren would worship in the cathedral that they began. Theirs was a faith that looked forward, that boldly envisioned a bright future for the church.

Today, that future feels threatened. It is simply a reality that millennials, those born since 1982, are leaving the church and other religious communities. And, unlike their parents, they aren’t coming back. The reasons are varied but there are common threads. A perception of the church as stifling, fear-based, or antagonistic. Messages that feel shallow, manipulative, or lacking in substance. No strong feeling of connection with others who attend church. A lack of engagement with the challenging issues or deep questions of our time.ⁱⁱ

I was born in September of that pivotal year. I’m aware of how my profession puzzles my peers. I remember the curiosity and confusion that came from

my friends in college when I shared that I would be going to seminary. They were happy for me...in a polite, “isn’t that nice” way. Deeper down, there was suspicion. Like many in our generation, they had grown up with no significant religious engagement. They were caring and compassionate people who didn’t need a faith community to make them moral. The institutional church was the relic of another era, a fossil left behind from the days of our grandparents. For many of us raised on Nickelodeon, Nintendo, and the Ninja Turtles, the church missed the opportunity or lacked the credibility to captivate us.

In the brief account of a youth named Eutychus in the Book of Acts, we find a First Century analog to the experience of many young people in our churches. Paul has been preaching since just before noon, and it is now midnight (that’s right, a twelve-hour sermon... for those who grumble after twenty-five minutes). Eutychus, whose name ironically translates “Lucky,” is precariously perched on a windowsill. It’s getting late. The boy has reached the limit of his attention span. The author of Acts seems to be smirking as he writes the next phrase, “Eutychus began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul. Talked. Still. Longer.” Finally, Eutychus falls asleep, out of the window, to his death. Or so we thought.

But a miracle takes place. Paul interrupts his sermon. That’s one miracle! He goes downstairs and takes the young man in his arms. There is still life in him. Paul pauses to engage Eutychus and revives the life still within him. It’s an odd and even amusing little story, tucked away in the accounts of Paul’s preaching journeys. But, if we look again, we may find a lesson for the cathedral builders of our time and for the future of the church.

There’s a giveaway clue in the opening phrase of the

passage, “On the first day of the week.” In Acts, this is more than a marker on the calendar. It is an allusion to another event that took place on the first day of the week. It takes us back to Easter morning when a group of women discovered an empty tomb, a risen Lord ahead of them, a God alive in the world. The first day of the week is the day of resurrection. **This** is a resurrection story—a description of what happens every time the church gathers to worship God. As Will Willimon writes, “there is something about this God that just loves to wake people up, shake people up, raise people up.”ⁱⁱⁱ Resurrection is the mission of the church. It happens when disciples of Jesus refuse to stay in the tombs of past glory or likeminded isolation and instead follow the Spirit of God always ahead of us. It happens when faith looks forward.

If we fail to do this, if the church forsakes the future, we will be (in Brooks’ haunting words) reduced to the narrow qualities of the here and now. Preserving what we have. Myopically focused on ourselves. Marveling at the beauty and stability of what we have received while neglecting our responsibility to those who will follow us.

A few weeks ago, an envelope appeared in my mail slot at the church with a note and a faded sermon manuscript. The sermon was preached by Rev. Mac Wells on June 26, 1977, and is titled “What Do These Stones Mean?” It’s a reference to the words Joshua spoke on the verge of the Promised Land: “in the future when your descendants ask their parents what do these stones mean, tell them Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground, for the Lord your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over.” Wells closed his sermon with the words of another of Second’s pastors, Bill Hudnut, words written in 1963, the church’s 125th anniversary, and his first year as the senior pastor. These words seem providentially potent for the spring of 2021. Listen.

*The well of the past becomes useful to us as we dip into it **only** if the waters from which we drink refresh us on our journey into the future’s broadening way. A church that has more tradition than vision is dying. The justification for looking backward is not self-glorification but the erection of a platform from which we can spring into the*

dawn of a new day...our work is not finished; it never will be. We have not already attained, but we know whereon we stand.

Dr. Hudnut’s words call us to faith that boldly looks *forward*. They ask us to be a church that knows and appreciates what it has been, and they compel us to cast a vision for what God intends to do with and through us now.

As Twenty-First Century peers of Eutychus fall out windows throughout the American religious landscape, we owe it to our God, our children, and generations yet unborn to articulate and embody a faith *for* the future. In doing so we honor the best of who we’ve always been and shine a light on the path ahead. What does this look like for us, here and now? Is there still life in this old body? I want to suggest that vibrant forward-looking faith for our time offers a compelling theology of transcendent truth, a clear call to seek unity in the church, and a commitment to seek justice, love mercy, and serve with humility. Let’s explore those.

A compelling theology of transcendent truth.

It should not be lost on us that this morning’s story takes place in the context of worship. Eutychus may be dozing, but he’s in the right place for divine encounter nonetheless. Worship of God is the central act of Christian community because it places us in a context larger and more significant than ourselves. Many millennials are skeptical of a culture that has no place for transcendence. We’ve seen the limits of narcissistic coddling or endless acquisitiveness in search of elusive meaning. We’re ready to hear that the world does not revolve around us. The experience of Eutychus, who was raised from the dead in the middle of a worship service, feels like a hopeful possibility. Perhaps we too can be awakened from the unquestioned drive toward more of everything with no attention to what it’s all for or why we’re here in the first place. Faith that looks forward must also look up, turning our vision to the One who offers abundant life not empty abundance. Tragically, what is missing in many appeals from churches today is **God!** Out of embarrassment, uncertainty, or both, we are neglecting the core of our message. There is a God who has made this world a place of divine encounter, whose grace is a gift beyond

human comprehension, whose love can transform your life, whose will grants purpose and possibility. Without this truth, nothing else we say or do can carry the weight of faith.

A clear call to seek unity in the church. Unless this truth of transcendence turns us toward one another in grace, our churches will simply reflect the toxic division of the world or become mere clubs for like-minded individuals. Eutychus and his friends, I assure you, can see through such transparently shallow messages that reduce the Gospel to a bumper sticker. We all know how entrenched and polarized partisans are responding to the most challenging issues we face. What is missing, I think, is a theologically informed and spiritually shaped vision for this divided time; one that is not about scoring political points, slamming other perspectives, or silencing voices of dissent. In here, we are about something different. We ask how Christ calls us to shape the world and live together. Doing so means transcending divisions between conservative and liberal, traditional and contemporary, Bible-believing and social-justice seeking. Accomplishing the great purposes of the church leads us beyond such dualistic thinking and into an authentic community that leaves space for listening to each other, our neighbors, and God's persistent voice.

A commitment to seek justice, love mercy, and serve with humility. I'm convinced that the future of the church depends on communities of Christians deeply committed to the world that God created and loves. It depends on churches that guide us to Christ-centered and selfless lives, to contribute to the welfare of our neighbors *because* of our faith, to see the world through the Gospel lens of justice, mercy, and humility. If the Church is a collection of self-righteous answer-givers intent on telling everyone else how to live while ignoring our basic call to neighborliness, we've forsaken our mission. Our commitment to seek justice, feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, advocate for

the oppressed, and honor all people is, and must be, grounded in God's word to us. The time is right to open our eyes to suffering in our midst, use our voice to name it, roll up our sleeves and serve with a spirit of humility, remembering that we are servants of a servant Lord.

Fifty-eight years ago, Bill Hudnut perceived a moment of possibility for this great church in the context of political division, spiritual seeking, major movements of societal change, and widespread uncertainty. He imagined the construction of a platform, built on the solid foundation of the past, from which Second could spring into the promise of a new day. What followed was an awakening, an era of growth and vitality, influence and impact, leadership and service. The church had an awakening. By God's grace, what has happened before can happen again.

In the future, when our descendants ask the meaning of these stones, what will our answer be? Will we look back in self-glorification of storied tradition? Or will we point to this our time as God's people in this place as a moment of awakening that renewed the purpose of our church? In the coming months, I'll be sharing more of my hope that we might claim this time and proclaim God's call to transcendence, unity, justice, mercy, and humble service.

I can promise you this. God is still at it. Shaking us up. Raising us up. Calling us to spring into the promise of a new day. Prepare your hearts and gather your strength. It's time to wake up. Amen.

ⁱ David Brooks, "The Power of Posterity." The New York Times, July 27, 2009. Also accessible at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/28/opinion/28brooks.html>.

ⁱⁱ More information on the study can be found at <http://www.christiansincontext.org/2009/09/book-review-rethink-is-student-ministry.html>. The study itself can be found at www.barna.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ William H. Willimon, "Lucky to Be Here" preached on August 29, 2004 at Duke Chapel. This was Bishop Willimon's final sermon as Dean of Duke Chapel and I was privileged to hear it.