

Sermon Given by Dr. Joanna Douglass

on February 18, 2018

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight oh Lord we pray. Amen.

I'm not sure how common rainbows are in Colorado. In Scotland where I grew up, rainbows are very common. Despite their frequency, when anyone in my family sees one we all rush to view it, and varying numbers of my four boys dash out to try and photograph it. In fact the photo you will see later is a triple rainbow over our vacation house in Scotland.

Rainbows incite in us something otherworldly for they are fleeting, beautiful, and always surprising, unexpected. I am sure this is why God chose them as the eternal sign of his promise to never again willfully destroy his creation. .

Despite this promise it seems to be a difficult and challenging world we live in, for many reasons, but one that strikes close to our hearts are the changes in American churches, in our own denomination and in our own declining membership.

We want to hold fast to God's promises but we wonder, where has everyone slipped away to?

Why is this happening?

What is Christ calling us to do about it?

So many questions and seemingly too few clear answers.

Growing up this problem seemed unthinkable for many of us. I grew up in Scotland, and I knew what it was to be in a strong, people filled church.

The Church of Scotland is essentially a state religion - so much so that when my local elementary school needed to attend a special worship, all 300 of us walked a mile in crocodile fashion to my home church. Of course I can't actually remember what the reason was for the special service!

Every Sunday there were two packed worship services and a Sunday school with nearly 200 children - we were all jammed around rickety tables, squished into the church halls. It was very noisy!

The church was also the center of the community. Scouts happened there, girl guides, nursery school, badminton, ladies tea, and Scottish country dancing, to name but a few of the myriad of going-ons. There was not a night or day when the four large halls we had were not full and busy.

I could not imagine that this bustling church would not, with new suburbs springing up close by, continue in similar fashion. Yet now when I return home to visit my parents it is a different picture. There are more empty pews than full ones. The Sunday school struggles for children and there is only one minister now where there used to be two. Something game changing happened.

Fast forward to the United States where I have lived for last 30 years and raised my four boys. When I arrived in America the church we attended was full. There was a strong Sunday school and a vibrant youth group in which my boys were active until they left home for college.

Like many churches, my congregation is seeing declining numbers, as have many houses of worship. We have disbanded regular Sunday school because we cannot attract enough children. We look radically different than we did 20 years ago.

And what about my boys?

I wish my boys still attended church. They don't.

Despite growing up in the church they feel no affinity for it. It's not that they don't have ideas or thoughts about God. It's much more complicated than that. They are part of a new generation that simply is not attending church once they leave the family unit. Yes - they will always attend if we ask them, if they have something to do.

Yet, they find no appeal or meaning in showing up at church to sing hymns, listen to a preacher, and say prayers. They voice hesitancy about organized religion as they encounter polarizing radical voices, be it of Christians, or Muslims, or Jews, or other religious groups that are at odds with their pluralistic experience of the world. They, like many young people, are resistant to bureaucratic institutions, of which religion is but one example.

I worry this rejection of formal religion means they are not challenged to think about where God is in their life and what a relationship with God can look like in their busy and complicated lives.

I worry that our church, this church, my church, is not adapting to the needs of this younger generation.

I worry about the future of our church as we find ourselves with smaller and smaller numbers.

We cannot delude ourselves. We cannot keep doing what we have been doing for the last 30 years and expect the trend of declining numbers to change. For - as we know - the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results!

Ted Bolsinger in his book *Canoeing the Mountains: Uncharted Territory in Christian Leadership* addresses this issue of the need to change and adapt head on. He describes the challenges faced by Lewis and Clark who set out in 1804 up the Missouri river to find its head-waters. Their goal was to locate the legendary northwest passage to the Pacific Ocean. But when they found the head waters they found no downhill route to the Pacific Ocean. What confronted them was nothing they had ever seen before. The Rockies.

Their journey, just like ours, required them to completely rethink their expedition. As Bolsinger said about their experience, and the experience we find ourselves in, "the world in front of you is nothing like the world behind you."

When Bolsinger starts to detail why we, as a mainline church are experiencing declining membership, he talks about the end of Christendom - that is "the 1700 long era with Christianity at the privileged center of Western cultural life." -- A period in which the church has in essence not changed.

People congregated in church every week because that is what the community did. It was a societal expectation. And there was no competition to Christianity. No pluralistic society. It was the only show in town - not just religiously but also from a societal standpoint! There was no football practice, no movie theatre, no You-tube, no quick jaunt in the car to go skiing 60 miles away. The church was the center of family and community life. There was little beyond the reach of the church.

And it probably remained that way until the 1970s. Since then our country has become more pluralistic and the opportunities for activities beyond church have exploded. As Bolsinger points out "Extracurricular activities from music lessons to sports are considered by most parents to be more effective at forming good character in our children than church."

The idea of Christendom has ended. Between 1967 and 2013 the membership in the Presbyterian Church declined by 50%. This is the case, give or take, for all the mainline traditional churches.

So, like Noah, who looked out of the ark after the flood and saw a whole new landscape,

or Lewis and Clark who saw the Rockies for the first time,  
we too see a new and uncharted landscape.

The question is - are we ready for an expedition in this landscape?

Do we feel called to figure out what it takes to be God's church in this new, complicated, multi-dimensional landscape?

This is a time when we need to look at who we are and what we do. Are we here to organize ourselves around the maintenance of historical Christendom? Or are we a missional church, defined by its calling to be God's hands and feet in the wider community.

The sad story is that most churches are dying. Churches and their parishioners are not willing to be different or believe they cannot be different. By actively remaining the same and not choosing to be radically new our churches are actively choosing death.

Many pastors are also leaving the church. They either feel unprepared to lead in this new landscape or "they are worn down by trying to bring change to a church that is stuck."

If we want things to be different then WE have to be DIFFERENT. This is not about tweaking things around the edges. As Bolsinger says, it is not about trying harder at what we already do. We know that does not work. It is about being radically different.

As we begin Lent, we remember the 40 days that Jesus was led into the desert. He was tempted by Satan, but the Holy Spirit was with him throughout his whole journey.

Coming face to face with the rugged desert landscape and daily temptation must have deeply changed and shaped him as he prepared for his ministry. Jesus was now ready to face the challenges he found in his ministry, giving him the strength and courage to lead a radical ministry that dared to meet the deep spiritual needs of the society he met. Through Jesus' ministry God didn't remain isolated from us, an outpost. He came and dwelt among us, he dwelt in our very community, where we needed Him.

As we look at where we are, are we in a desert?

Are we prepared to take this time to grow and identify opportunity as Jesus was?

Are we ready to lead a radical ministry that responds to the needs of our society - as Jesus was in his time?

Are we ready to meet our community where they are now, rather than where we wish them to be?

Are we ready to be a different church, are we willing to be changed through God's call to us?

As we ponder these questions, we need to remember the rainbows in our world

Reminding us that God is continually present with us

That God gives us the strength we will need

Wherever we head.

Are you ready to claim this power and choose something different?

Amen