

“Finding New Wineskins”

Luke 2:22-40
January 1, 2012

Ky Weekley

Well, the page on the ol' calendar has turned. It's January! Blank slate. New start. . . You know the routine. What didn't work in the year past? What do I need to do differently in the year to come? It's a fertile place to stand, right smack in between the end of one chapter and the beginning of another. And it's not only a fertile place to stand; it's a bittersweet place as well. Because if we're even half awake, we realize that not everything we've thought or said or done in the year past will fuel our journey into the year to come.

Well, that's where we are. . . Not just because this is January 1, but also because a bigger page on a bigger calendar has turned. You – Grace Covenant - have shifted into a new place. You stand at the cusp of a new time. You stand at the place in between what was and what will be. My New Year's Prediction is that within just a few months your Pastor Nominating Committee will be presenting you with a candidate for your next pastor! [THOUGH they should take as much time as they need to get it right!! 😊]

As I mentioned at the beginning of our worship, 176 years of a congregation's life seemed to be burning up in horrific flames on Thursday evening! It remains to be seen what the few dozen folks that still make up Westport Presbyterian Church will be able to do . . . and choose to do about their future. But the fire Thursday night was not really when that congregation's life became in jeopardy. . . that happened at some point years ago when they were a thousand or more members. At some point in time, a certain complacency, a certain comfortableness set in . . . and in time it was reinforced with significant changes in the Westport community. The suburbs offered newer homes, newer schools, people more like them. . . you know the drill! And the critical mass needed to address a new day and new circumstances and new opportunities was no longer possible!

A fair number of you have roots in another icon of this presbytery's heritage – First Church, Kansas City, KS. A few decades ago it did what lots of churches do when the neighborhoods around it change – it moved! Further west, newer neighborhood, better demographics. But early in this past year the remnant there, too, came to realize what others had years before. . . and they closed their doors.

And mind you, what happens in a community clearly has an affect on a church in that community, but I firmly believe that the winsome message of Jesus Christ is not demographically dependent, is not socially sustained, is not finally determined by even the politics and economics of a place!

Grace Covenant has come to be known as a congregation with strong commitments to Children and Youth Ministries, to Music Ministries, to Mission outreach locally and around the world. I doubt there has ever been a time in the last 26 years when there has been more active participation in mission projects than now....And I suspect there is a larger percentage of the congregation involved in our music program than ever before.

But that cannot be said for our Children and Youth programs! Both are in excellent hands with creative and committed Teams and Staff members. But the reality today is that there are more folks who look like me in each of our New Members classes than there was years ago.

If our numbers become smaller because of our prophetic witness and commitment to the sovereignty of God in the whole of our lives, then so be it! But I'm not convinced that happens very often. . . . More often I believe churches begin a slow spiral downwards when they forget their mission, when they become more self-centered than other-centered, when comfort is more important than newness and change . . . whether it's in how we worship, or how we focus our energy, or where we spend our dollars!

A number of important community organizations in Westport are deeply affected by our sister congregation's fire. . . ,but how many of those same groups have been affected by the message that we all are commissioned to proclaim??

One of your Session's goals for this new year of our Lord is to increase our membership by 5% to 10%!! We've very nearly met the lower end of that goal in this past year AND YOU are to be commended for that! YOU are the ones who are most effective in welcoming new folks into the life of this church! Well done!! I fully expect that with a God-blessed new pastor you will capture even more energy and new direction, BUT remember: ALL of you are crucial to that life together!

My recent challenge to our Elders, I have made to my fellow staff members. I now make it to you as well: we must take the creative work of our Children's and Youth Teams and their leadership and

support their efforts to take it up a notch!

I firmly believe there are countless young families – that reflect the diversity of this congregation – looking for a safe and brave place to raise themselves and their children in the way of the Lord Jesus! All of us need to be thinking “outside the box” about how our fellowship, our programs, our facilities can be as welcoming as possible to those potential new members to our family!

After almost 40 years of doing what I’m doing right now, I now believe there should be a clock in the sanctuary!! After all these years, I have concluded that at least the person behind the pulpit ought to know what time it is! In many places around the world, of course, congregations don't care what time it is. In Guatemala, worship services go on for hours. People travel long distances to get to church, many of them setting out before the sun is up. And after such a journey, people want a robust, lengthy sermon. Anything less than an hour and a half, everybody feels cheated. Suffice it to say, this is not the way it works in most Protestant churches in America!

I recall hearing years ago about a preacher who was admirably regarded for always finishing his services right at noon. Then one Sunday, the impossible happened. He preached until 12:30. On the way out, one of his elders angrily inquired, "What **happened** to you?" The preacher answered, "For years I have always put a candy mint in my mouth as the service started, and I would tuck it away. It was always gone at exactly noon. That way, I never had to look at the clock or worry about what time it was. But this Sunday it didn't go away, and I finally realized I had put a button in my mouth."

While I was at Overland Park Church I had an Elder who regularly would come up to me on Sunday mornings before worship and show me a five dollar bill, saying it was mine if we were out on time!

Preachers are not the only ones who have to keep track of time. We all do. There is a time to build up and a time to break down, a time to be born and a time to die. A copy of a Sanskrit poem written 2,000 years ago was given to me one Christmas by friends in the church that I served. Let me share that ancient poem with you. "Listen to the salutation of the dawn... Look to this day, for it is the very life of life. In its brief course lie all the realities and truth of existence: the joy of growth, the splendor of action, the glory of power. For yesterday is but a memory, and tomorrow a vision, but today well-lived makes every yesterday a memory of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope."

When Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, He said, "The time is fulfilled." When we hear that proclamation today, **another** "now" is created: Now is the moment of our salvation. This very moment, rich with divine possibility. Here we are on the frontier between the old order and the new order, where Jesus reigns.

In the 20th century, Karl Barth called his age the time of "great positive possibility." That is equally true right now. January, 2012, is filled, overflowing, with great divine possibility. No, the past is not completely finished and gone, but the truly new has come!

I close with an ancient story, told by the wonderful author and spiritual leader Joan Chittister:

"Where shall I look for enlightenment?" the disciple asked.

"Here," the wise one said.

"When will it happen?" the disciple asked.

"It is happening right now," the wise one answered.

"Then why don't I experience it?"

"Because you don't look."

"What should I look for?"

"Nothing. Just look."

"Look at what?"

"At anything your eyes light on."

"But must I look in a special way?"

"No, the ordinary way will do."

"But don't I always look the ordinary way?"

"No, you don't."

"But why ever not?"

"Because to look, you must be here. And you are mostly somewhere else."

Friends, the voice you have heard today is that of a harried transitional pastor, but the words I have spoken are the wisdom of the ages.

"For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven. Yesterday is but a memory, and tomorrow but a vision. But today well-lived, makes every yesterday a memory of happiness, and every tomorrow, a vision of hope." Let the people say, *Amen*.