

One of the most beautiful services I have ever attended was a church rededication service. It happened one beautiful sunny Sunday morning in Gadsden, South Carolina at Lifeway Bible Christian Church. This was the church that two years previously had been burned down by the KKK. This was the sacred and holy ground where I felt God calling me into ministry.

This church had experienced much grief and hardship. The fire was an arson born out of hate that destroyed the entire sanctuary. There was little money available to rebuild so the congregation had to rely on the services of church youth groups and service groups, so the work was slow.

It took two years to rebuild the sanctuary and I am sure it was so hard to wait two years for this congregation to return to in-person worship. We were out of in-person worship for three months and it seemed like forever.

On the day of the rededication service there was so much celebration and joy: celebration that the congregation could officially resume weekly worship and activities; celebration that volunteers could come and see the realization of the piece of the puzzle that they participated in. And celebration that people of all different colors and ages could work together for the glory of God.

I loved this service because it was full of hope and it reminded me that we are all invited to be part of building up the body of Christ both literally and spiritually. I will never forget the memories I made that day for as long as I live.

Today is an important day for us as we rededicate our lives to God after being away from each other for a long time. Today marks the moment we start together in what will be our new normal. We are all navigating this new territory together so may we give one another grace as we move forward as the people of God on the Rappahannock Charge UMC.

As the people of God there are several things in our spiritual DNA that have helped us prepare for this moment. We see in both the book of Genesis and the book of Acts that the people of God continued to move forward even during great trials and tribulations. And God will continue to lead us forward as we start over again.

In Genesis Hagar had no choice but to start over. Perhaps Hagar never could have imagined this moment happening to her and her son, or maybe this was her greatest fear. She bore a child with Abraham because Abraham's wife Sarah was barren. Through God's grace Sarah was able to bear a child named Isaac.

All was well until Sarah realized that Ishmael, the first born, would receive his father’s inheritance. The jealousy of Abraham’s wife Sarah caused Hagar and Ishmael to be dispelled from their home and left to die. And yet, God saved them and gave them a new way forward. God revealed to Hagar that there was water nearby that she and Ishmael could drink so that they would live.

This moment of receiving water reminds me of the living water that Jesus offered to the Samaritan woman. That day Jesus said to her: “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14).

That day in the wilderness Hagar experienced the water of life. Time and time again in Scripture God shows us that God brings life out of certain death. God responded to Hagar’s cry. God saved her life and the life of her child and made of them a new nation.

God is always bringing life out of death, but are we noticing? Are we taking part in Christ’s ministry of resurrection in the world? The book of Acts is about the birth of the church. Just when the disciples thought that the Holy Spirit would not show up fire and wind reigned down from heaven.

Our Scripture for today from Acts 2 shows us how the early church was formed. Out of deep grief over the death of Jesus Christ, the church rose from the ashes into new life through the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

As we have heard through the story on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24) many of Jesus’ followers were mourning his death. Even though they heard that Jesus had risen from the dead, they may not have truly believed that it occurred.

Like these early followers of Jesus, we too have experienced a season of grief during this pandemic. Weddings have been postponed, graduations were cancelled, family gatherings took on a different tone with social distancing. People experienced isolation.

We were not able to be together to worship in our beloved sanctuaries. We may have even found ourselves missing the mundane tasks like grocery shopping which has become so different now.

Most of all, we were not able to embrace one another as we once did in our times of joy or times of sorrow. And yet, God has continued to move despite our grief.

I am sure we all have a lot of questions. When will things go back to normal? When will everyone feel safe coming back to church? When will we all get to gather with our extended families again? When will our beloved events and activities resume?

None of us know the answers to these questions, but we do know that God is still working in the midst of this uncertain time.

One of the things I love the most about scripture is how many times a sentence includes “but God...” or “and God.” This is our story as Christians. We were minding our own business, or we had found ourselves in a season of grief, but God showed up and saved us and offered us peace. We thought all hope was lost and Jesus was dead, but God. When Jesus ascended to heaven, we wondered now what? But God. God continues to usher in new life, despite what is going on in our lives and the world.

Hagar was destined for death, but God heard her cry, saved her, and gave her a new life. Jesus’ followers didn’t know what to do next, but God showed up through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit and led them forward.

My “but God” experience during this time of pandemic has been watching how God is continuing to work in and through us. We are still called to be the church even when we are unable to be together.

In the book “Acts: Catching Up with the Spirit” by Matt Skinner, we hear these words of assurance and encouragement. Skinner says, “[The] church is how Jesus remains active in the world.ⁱ The beautiful thing about the birth of the church on Pentecost Sunday is that we now get to participate in God’s ministry in the world.

Over these next seven weeks we will explore the book of Acts as we watch how the body of Christ was born, how they practiced their faith, and how we too can be sent out by the Holy Spirit.

Today we focus on the first converts. What is so interesting about the first members of the body of Christ is that we have a lot in common with them.

They heard a powerful sermon given by Peter and were convicted to accept Jesus Christ. They repented of their sins and were baptized. That day over 3,000 people joined the church. Wow!

The way that the early converts embodied their faith was by following the “apostles’ teaching and fellowship, breaking bread and praying (Acts 2:42). This is how we continue to worship God today. We follow the teachings of Jesus, we spend time in fellowship, we share our resources, and we pray for one another.

We can still embody our faith even when we are unable to be together. Here are some things for us to think about during this time of new normal that were shared through our Scripture today.

1) Do not give up.

Hagar teaches us through the book of Genesis not to give up. Even when we find ourselves in a season of grief we are called to cry out to God. When we cry out to God, God hears us and responds.

2) Work on yourself.

During this pandemic we have been given the gift of time. Why not use it to grow spiritually? We see in the book of Acts that the new converts spent time together growing in their love and knowledge of God. Spend this time you have studying the Scripture or participating in our weekly Bible Study led by our intern, Susan. It will begin on Wednesday July 1 at 6:00 P.M.. We will be studying the book I mentioned about Acts by Matt Skinner for six weeks.

3) Know that God is still calling you to serve.

Even as we find ourselves at home more these days there are still many things you can do to serve. Just as the first converts shared everything they had with each other we are called to share all that we have with one another.

Perhaps consider trying a new way to serve. Join our weekly prayer call Wednesdays at noon. Start a card writing ministry to your friends. Call a local nursing home to see if there are people there who would benefit from cards or a call. Volunteer at the Food Bank or consider making or distributing some face masks. We can all do something as we continue to serve God in our new normal. And finally,...

4) Rejoice in God.

It can be difficult to turn to rejoicing in this uncertain time, but we have to remember that God is still at work in the world and for that we rejoice. God is at work through us and our extended body of Christ, what an amazing responsibility.

As we continue to journey in this time of new normal may we take heart that God has already equipped us for such a time as this. It is up to us to respond and move forward with hope.

Today may we all recommit our lives to God so that we can go forward in new and creative ways to serve the Lord.

The good news for our lives today is that God provides a way forward for us through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. May we trust that God is still leading us forward with hope. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Resources

Keck et al. the New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary. Vol. I. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1995.

Keck et al. the New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary. Vol. IX. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1995.

ⁱ Matthew Skinner. “Acts: Catching Up With the Spirit.” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. P. 15.