

January 15

Same Message! Different Methods?

Isaiah 46:9-10; Isaiah 43:18-19

Isaiah 42:10 – Sing a new song to the Lord

Psalm 40:4 – The Lord put a new song into my mouth, a hymn to our God

New song?

We have read verses from Psalm 89 this morning, reminding us of God's greatness, reminding us that God is above all and over all; God is Creator, Sovereign, in charge.

Are we saying we need to change what we say about who God is, what God has done?

No—From the beginning the message has not changed. How do we know? Hebrew Scripture; the Old Testament

And the message is: God doesn't change

That's what we read together in Psalm 89:

--who is like God? Creator, awesome, over all. There is none like God.

That's what we read in Isaiah 46:9-10:

Bear in mind what happened of old

There is none like God; God is divine;

Even at the beginning of time, God has been foretelling what is to come; the fulfillment of God's plan

And what is that plan—what is the message that doesn't change?

God loves us and God's love doesn't change --

--Psalm 89:19-37 –

God's steadfast love and faithfulness are His foundation.

God promised to David and David's line: I will not remove from him my steadfast love or withdraw from him my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant or alter one word that went forth from my lips. Ps. 89:33-34 God doesn't turn away.

We read of God's love in the New Testament:

1

While we were yet sinners, God sent Jesus to die for us, to restore our relationships with God. Romans 5:8

God doesn't change, Jesus doesn't change--Jesus is the same yesterday, today, forever Hebrews 13:8, God's love doesn't change.

Karl Barth, a well-known theologian in the early 1900s, was asked, "How would you sum up your life as a Bible scholar?" He replied, "Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so"

The message is the same as it always has been.

I will be your God and you will be my people Exodus 6:7

Well, what is this new song?

In Isaiah 46, God says

Bear in mind what happened of old

In Isaiah 43—three chapters earlier!—God says

Do not recall what happened of old

Is God contradicting himself?

Throughout these chapters in Isaiah, the message is clear: there is none like God.

The verses that precede 46:9-10, the verses we read, speak to the people who would make idols that they then worship. Bear in mind, God is warning, what happens when people choose to turn away from God. What happens when people worship something other than the unchanging God. We are the ones who turn away from God and when we do, God does allow us to suffer the consequences of our choices; some of us say, God punishes us. Psalm 89:30-32

So when God says "Bear in mind what happened of old," God is reminding us of part of the unchanging message: we cannot serve idols; we are to serve only God.

When we choose to serve only God, God will do something new in our lives – God will make a way where there is no way; God will provide streams of refreshing water. That's the message of Isaiah 43

2

The message is the same.....But God is doing a new thing
And it is now time for us to sing a new song of praise to God

In Isaiah 43, we are reading of God's promise to bring back the people scattered in exile in Babylon. We are reading of God's promise of new life for God's people.

Today we live in a culture in transition. And transition brings anxiety, uncertainty. Is there new life?
We are seeing generational shifts in lifestyle choices—that is, in how to live one's values. Let me give you two examples.

--As the US population has aged, there has been a decline in attendance at.....casinos. Generally speaking, those who gamble in a casino setting, are getting older and fewer in number

The trend is strong enough that casinos now are trying to attract younger players with videogaming and even attract families by providing recreational opportunities for children.

--As the US population has aged, there has been a decline in the numbers of people who hunt, fish, play golf—article from MLive

But like the rest of the nation, Michigan has seen a steady decline in the numbers of hunters and anglers, a trend that goes back a decade or more.

The Detroit Free Press reported in April that about 200 golf courses have closed across the state over the past 15 years.

Golf courses are rethinking ways to attract golfers, what to offer that will bring new, younger players

So too, the millennial generation seems less drawn to golf, as well. Michigan's golf industry - which boomed with new development in the 1980s and 1990s - has gone through a painful retrenchment in recent years as would-be young golfers found other interests. The reasons could be this simple: Takes too long. Boring.

As the US population has aged, there are fewer people gambling at casinos, fewer people hunting, fishing and playing golf.

--And just this morning, we hear that Ringling Bros. Circus will no longer travel after May. That circus, as we have known it, will cease to exist.

What has been happening in Christian churches?

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--As the US population has aged, there has been a declining percentage of the population who attend church and who identify as Christian

--A recent report tells us 60% of those between ages of 20 and 35 who grew up in a home in which the parents were of differing religious backgrounds, do not identify with any religious organization, church

The church is no longer the center of our culture, of our society
And we know this, we see it every Sunday, if not every day.

In the face of anxiety and uncertainty, in the face of a culture in transition, is there any hope for the Christian church? For this church? Do we have a new song? a new beginning?

This is where we return to Isaiah 43:

God tells us to forget what was. Do not long for the way things used to be. God is doing a new thing—and if God is doing something new, hold on because it's going to be the best yet!

The message stays the same: God is God; Jesus came to dwell among us—to teach us about God so we can live victoriously now and have eternal life in the time to come.

But the methods, the way we share the message, are going to have to change.

Let's keep in mind, God's message has always gone out to meet people, to meet ALL people, right where they are—

Samaritan woman

Jesus talked with a woman (men didn't talk with women who were not their wives), with a Samaritan (viewed as racially impure heretics by Jews), a woman whose reputation was so bad she had to draw water from the well at noon, when no one else was there.

And yet, she was so excited by her encounter with Jesus, she ran back to the village. "Come, see this one who has told me all about myself."

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Paul – in Athens. Among all the statues of the various Greek gods was one “to the unknown God.” Paul used that statue to introduce Jesus, the unknown God. The message was so powerful, we read of two who came to believe: Dionysius and Damaris.

God’s message has always gone out to meet people, ALL people, right where they are.

If we go beyond a literal reading of scripture—and I think that’s ok: we don’t encounter Samaritans; we don’t walk among the many statues of Greek gods--we still can ask.... Who are the Samaritans for us in 2017? Who are the lepers, people rejected by their society? Who are the Gentiles? Who are those who seek something bigger than themselves—the Unknown God? All of these kinds of people are around us, every single day.

How do we share God’s message with them?
If we are to grow—what is our message and how do we get our message out?

Jeff Woods, the Assoc. General Secretary for Regional Ministries of ABCUSA, put it bluntly: there are no quick fixes. In fact, Woods says, “Focusing on quick fixes tends to only make things worse.”

What were the quick fixes he referred to? Increased parking, calling a younger pastor, shortening the service were three he listed. He said there is no connection between doing those things and church growth.

A young writer has added: specialty coffees available during the worship service, door prizes, loud praise bands.

Wait, you say, there are churches growing because they’ve made these changes. Many of the studies on church growth and writers about church growth suggest the actual number of people attending churches hasn’t increased; it’s just that those already attending church, and dissatisfied with their church, have migrated from one church to a different church. And as one

Christian pastor put it, “The pool of dissatisfied Christians is shrinking.”

If we are to grow, what is our message and how do we get our message out?

The recent Presidential election introduced new ways of campaigning. I am not stating my approval or disapproval of any particular person. But I have been reminded that the methods used can be critical to the success of getting the message out

The campaign met people where they think they are

Message – what people needed/wanted to hear: hope for themselves. It was a general message, but each person listening could interpret it for their personal circumstances.

Methods:

NOT the “tried and true” institutions: main-stream media (TV, radio, newspapers)

The “new” media: Twitter; face-to-face campaign rallies

If we are to grow, how are we to get God’s message out?

Meet people right where they are within the church

Preachers who can’t speak to the unchurched will preach to a shrinking crowd. Cory Nieuwhof, pastor and Christian blogger on the church and leadership, predicts “eventually only unchurched people will be left.”

The message will need to look and sound different

FBC’s mission statement:

Furthering the Good News of Jesus Christ and reaching new people for the kingdom of God

How might we rephrase our mission statement so it is easily understood by an unchurched person? Unchurched people may not speak “Christian.” For example, what is the “kingdom of God”? And why do we want to reach people for this kingdom?

Sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ by helping people connect with God, who loves them.

Other ways the church would look different, new.....

-- Community, authentic community

Community isn't new—several here speak of FBC as a family, a community for them.

**What is different, new, is the call to be an authentic community: meeting people where they are; accepting that people are imperfect, are sinful, and loving them as Jesus loved. Loving people “warts and all”

**Empathy helps you connect with people in the culture—engaging in conversation, listening to learn a person's story

--Community in which the purpose is not to attract people but to engage people

Invite people-make space for people, even those not like us

Make available opportunities for ministry

We need to be a community in which everyone is welcome, and everyone participates

Allow new people to connect at their own pace

People want to be anonymous, until they don't.

--Outward focus, meeting people right where they are

Jeff Woods speaks of “Joining God in the Neighborhood.”

Where are we, FBC, needed in our neighborhood?

Empathy – there it is again, listening to learn a person's story

**a church defined by how you love each other and the world around you

**a more authentic, more selfless church will emerge

What is our new song?

Look back at Psalm 89, the words we read this morning—

Happy are the people who walk in the presence of the Lord—

Do we live each day showing how blessed we are? Are we joyful?

The Message reads, God's people are so blessed, so joyful they dance all day long, they know who God is, what God does—they can't keep quiet about God and God's wonders

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Our new song—begins within and bursts forth – it cannot be contained

Psalm 40:9-10

(David) I do not withhold my words—I tell of your goodness, of your faithful deliverance, of your steadfast love

Are we so excited about who God is and what God has done and is doing for us that everyone we come into contact with is curious about our excitement? Those who observe our joy, expressed in the way we live each day, want to ask, “What do you have that I don't have? Because that's what I too need.”

Are we so excited about who God is and how God is working at First Baptist that we can't keep quiet?

What is the ministry seeking you?

What is the ministry seeking FBC?

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