

## **Don't Forget Who We Are**

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Since the beginning of October, we've had a sermon series around the theme "Don't Forget." And I chose that theme specifically because we are living through what I believe is a seminal moment for our country, for the Church universal, and for our own congregation. It is a moment where it feels like something is dying. The pandemic has been extraordinarily painful on its own, but it has revealed other disturbing things about who we are as a people also. Mainline churches that were already on decline or finding it harder and harder to know how to continue sharing God's message of love with the world. And in our own congregation we too have experienced some pain and conflict, we've experienced the uncertainty and difficulty that the pandemic has brought us, and on top of all of that, we're going through a pastoral transition.

This is a time of stress, of anxiety, and of pain. And that's why I felt like it's so important that right now, we don't forget who we are. It's so important that we all remember what God has said about each of us – you are the Image of God – just as you are. It's important to remember all that God has done. It's important to remember that God has gifted us with the Sabbath and we are invited to practice self-care, especially when we feel stressed. And during this time when it is so tempting to turn inward, God has reminded us that we all must remember and advocate alongside the marginalized. Today, we finish this sermon series with the theme, "Don't Forget Who We Are."

Maybe as a person who is new to this community, I might be able to offer a unique perspective. This is who I've experienced you to be: I've experienced you to be warm and welcoming and kind. I've experienced you to be a people who really cares about each other and looks out for each other. I've experienced you to be a people who is willing to step out in faith and take risks. I've experienced you to be a people who cares about the larger community and wants our ministry here to extend beyond what happens on Sunday morning. You do so many things so well. And it's important to remember that this is who you are, especially in times when we as a congregation may feel discouraged or tired.

But remembering who we are runs much deeper than just knowing who we are right now because we are who we are today, in large part, because of the shoulders on which we stand. Today is also the Sunday in which we commemorate All Saints Day and remember and honor those who have come before us. This is not the only moment in time that the people of this church have found themselves in a difficult time. Our forefathers and foremothers lived through the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. They lived through a church split and a church merger. They lived through two World Wars and the great Depression. They lived through 9/11 and took a leap of faith to build Johnson Hall and the Centre School when it probably didn't make a whole lot of economic sense to do so. And we are on the verge of completing a capital campaign that began in a pre-pandemic world and is now ending in a world forever changed. If we can learn anything from those who came before us, it's that time and again this congregation has found that God is faithful no matter how difficult the present

moment may be. We have a long history of people from this church taking a step out in faith without knowing exactly where that step would lead but still trusting that somehow it would be ok.

This is who we are as a church. But this is a story that is also not unique to us. In many ways, it's the story of our faith that dates back long before this church began in the late 1600s. Time and again, God's people have found themselves at seminal moments where the present was hard and the future unclear. One of the most profound of these moments is the story of Moses at the burning bush. Out of the bush, God tells Moses, "I have heard the cries of my people who are enslaved. Go and set them free." The conversation that follows between God and Moses is one of the richest pieces of literature in all of Scripture. Basically, it's a back and forth with God telling Moses to go back to Egypt and Moses coming up with every reason imaginable as to why it's a bad idea. And Moses had some pretty good reasons for not wanting to go. For one, Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, wanted to kill him. Two, Moses had tried to unify and lead the Hebrew people and they had rejected him. He had just settled into a new land and started a new life when all of a sudden, God says, "Go back."

And so Moses argues. "Who am I that I should go?" I imagine most of us have said something like that to God before haven't we? God, I'm not strong enough. I'm not smart enough. I'm not...fill in the blank. And then comes my favorite part of the text. God says, "Moses, I will give you a sign so that you can know everything is going to be ok. After you have set the people free, you all will worship me on this same mountain you're on right now." Do any of you see a problem with this sign? Yeah, the only way Moses gets the sign is if he actually trusts God enough to go back to Egypt. After you have set the people free, you will worship me on this mountain. This has got to be the worst sign in the history of signs. But it's all Moses was going to get...and it's all we get.

When we are living in uncertain and hard times, I think we are all like Moses. We want a sign. We want to know that if we just do this one thing, it will all work out. The easy thing to do is to simply keep doing what we're doing. That path at least is known. There's not too many surprises. We can be pretty confident in what's going to happen. But what if God has a different future in mind for us? What if God is calling us to step out into the deep where the future is not known and the path does not feel safe. Like Moses, I want to say, "Ok God, but you have to give us a sign." And I think God says the same thing to us that God said to Moses, "The only way you get the sign is if you step out in faith. The sign only comes at the end."

But thankfully, God's refusal to give Moses' (or us) a sign is not how the conversation ends. Moses asks for God's name and God responds, "I am who I am." Or another way to translate the Hebrew words is "I will be who I will be." It's almost like God is saying to Moses, you cannot confine me with a name, or a time, or a place, or a specific circumstance. I am the eternal mystery who is working in ways you cannot fathom. But I am here. And I will be here. I am who I am and I will be who I will be."

But then God says perhaps the most helpful thing in the entire discourse. God says, "I am also the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." God is reminding Moses that he is not the first person that God has called forth to do hard things. He is not the first person who found himself in a seminal moment where the path ahead was uncertain. Moses had an entire cloud of witnesses who had come before him who had trusted in God enough to take that step of faith and time and time again had found God to be faithful.

Friends, the truth is that none of us know the future. We may well take a step of faith and do hard things and it might not work out. But I promise you that if we wait until we are certain as to how the story will end, we'll never take that first step. And we have a God who is loving and kind and good but also very mysterious. We have a God whose existence and presence so transcends the depths of our thoughts that the only description that could suffice is "I am who I am. I will be who I will be."

But that is not all we have. Like Moses, we too have that great cloud of witnesses who have come before us. In our 350 year history of a church (and in our 2000 year history as a Church Universal), we have the example of those who have gone before us, who have taken risks and done hard things, whose very lives call to us that God is indeed faithful.

We are not called to try to live out our faith as if we are the first people that God has ever called. Like our banner of our tree, those of us who are part of this church in this moment are but a single leaf surrounded by those who have come before us and we are grounded with roots that run very deep. There were entire generations of people who have come before us who loved this church, who loved people like us – people they would never meet – but loved us enough to step out in faith and leave us what we have.

Today marks the beginning of our pledge campaign for the upcoming year where we are asking you to make your financial pledge for the year ahead. And I think it's so tempting to think of our giving to the church in terms of the present. We have to give to pay our staff (thank you very much), to maintain our facility, to pay our bills. Or we may think of our giving in terms of our ministry. We give so that our youth can have meaningful programs, to support the incredible music ministry that each week inspires us with such beautiful and lovely hymns, anthems, and solos. We give because we know that this church gives back to the community by providing needed meeting space for AA groups, for kids' drama and dance clubs, and for youth leadership programs. We give because this church provides food bags for the hungry and clothing for those who need them.

Those are all very important reasons to give. But I think there's one more that may be often overlooked. Our giving to the church is sort of like a seed that is planted. We are giving not just to support the current work of our congregation, but also because we want to make sure we leave something good and loving and wonderful for those who will come after us. So let us draw strength from those deep roots and remember that just as we stand on the shoulders of those who come before us, there will be others who stand on our shoulders. May we too have

the faith to leave them something profound so that through this 350 year old church, future generations may also be able to experience the eternal love of the Great I Am.