

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Making the World New: A New Love
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The Rev. Bethany Peerbolte

1 Peter 1:17-25

I want to start today with a refresher on how and why the new testament came to be. As with all things in Christianity we should start with Jesus. Jesus was raised knowing the Tanak (Torah, Writings, and Prophets) or as we call these the Old Testament. We know Jesus knew these well because he references them constantly throughout his ministry and uses them to demonstrate how his new message is a continuation of God's story. His message uses the same rhythm of love, hope, peace, and joy that the Old Testament is founded on. So then we get a time when Jesus is gone and the early church has to figure out how to continue living and teaching this new message. They have to take up the rhythm of God themselves and continue it into a new generation. The first writings that come about are the Epistles. These are letters Paul and other leaders write to churches to help them stay strong, sort out debates, and respond to the wider world. These letters were passed around from church to church and copied for their archives. Over time churches had a collection of letters they could pull from to help them be the church. Letters that helped them remember what the rhythm of God sounded like.

When the apostles begin to be killed for their faith Luke decides to write down their stories for the people to remember too. That's how we get Acts. And there was a rich tradition of telling the stories of Jesus' life and teachings orally. They were not written down but passed from storyteller to listener. This is how the memory of the parables, the Sermon on the Mount, and miracles were remembered by the community. The events that encapsulated who Jesus was were told most often and some of the less loved stories were lost to time. The stories that remained in the community were about what it looks like to live in rhythm with God.

Eventually, Mark decides these need to be written too. As you can imagine with oral retellings, the sayings were being twisted and he worried the truth and the rhythm would become lost. Then Matthew and Luke decide to write their accounts of Jesus, and eventually John. But with the gospels and writings, we know today were other writers. So the early church had a wide range of teachings they were using to keep the rhythm of God heard in the world. This all happened in the first 80ish years of the Church's existence. Then we have a few hundred years where the individual town churches operate from their archived writings that have been passed around. In some of these files are other gospels, other letters, and other stories of the Church that we do not see in our Bible today. That is because in the late 4th century the New Testament was finally decided on and canonized. This happened because the Church became a real power for change and needed to organize the message. Making sure the rhythm that was being passed down and lived out was the same from one church to the next. A council met and churches submitted their favorite letters, gospels, and writings for consideration. The canonized New Testament was born out of this process.

And so we have the gospels, epistles and other writings that the council decided best told the story of the Jesus followers. The words and stories that best conveyed the rhythm the community was collectively called to drum. They picked stories that showed how God has continued to guide the people and strengthen the community since the ending of the Old Testament. These words have brought Christians through thousands of years of life as a community. These are the stories we tell when someone is struggling with infertility, these are the stories we tell when people fall in love and get married, these are the stories we tell in happy times and in sad times because these stories show us that no matter what we are experiencing there is a common rhythm to it all. God has already been there and brought the people through it. It proves that we can

depend on this rhythm. We can depend on God because God has weathered these storms with the people in the past, and we can trust that God will get us through the storm we are in now.

For us at this time, a pandemic is not something any of us have experienced. It is new and scary, we struggle to find the rhythm. For God though, this is not new. God has brought the world through multiple pandemics. God has seen churches close due to plague and God has brought the Church through it, even in times where there isn't Zoom and Facebook and YouTube to help maintain a level of normalcy. It is new to us, but not to God. God will keep the rhythm going as we work to find it and take it up again. It's what the Bible tells us happens every time humanity faces chaos and tragedy. The Bible is all the evidence we need to keep trying.

One might ask why we don't continue to update the stories we find here. For one, the stories here are enough. They show us how God blesses people, they show that God can handle us being angry with God in the lament sections, they show us how to respond in every situation a Christian could find themselves. Sure, there is not a story about what to do when the government asks you to stay home for two months, but it does tell us how God's people act during adversity or unsure times. The Act's passage today was about the early church adjusting to having to be the church in a new way, without a leader sitting in the room with them, teaching them and planning trips for them. They had to devote themselves to reading scripture on their own; they had to pray for themselves; they had to identify needs on their own and find ways to meet those needs even if it meant selling their possessions. That kind of response is still very relevant for the place we find ourselves in today, and we can learn from that story, even though it is not the same situation.

Another reason I think we stick to the scriptures and do not add to them is that we have access to these other more modern stories of how God interacts with Humanity through the internet and published books. Pentecost Spoiler alert: Jesus leaves the Spirit with us to help us hear God's rhythm in all sorts of sources: in music, in the wind, in ourselves, in poetry. If we have read and heard the stories that are recorded in scripture, we know the rhythm of God's presence. We can sense that beating of love and hope in other things and make the connections we need to be inspired even 2000 years later. For example, this month a woman named Kitty O'Meara wrote a poem called "and they stayed home" about the pandemic our world is facing now. In it, she describes what communities do when they are asked to isolate. She highlights things like reading and creating, resting, and learning new ways to live. As I read the verses from Acts today her verses came into my mind too. They sounded like they were written by the same person. They had the same rhythm, the same sense of hope in chaos. Let me show you what I mean. I took the Acts passages and Kitty's verses and wove them together. I wonder if you can catch which words are 2000 years old and which are 20 days old.

And the people stayed home. And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still. And listened more deeply. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts. And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed. (Bold words are by Kitty O'Meara, normal words are from Acts.)

To hear these two passages this way made me realize how connected to God's people throughout time we are. We are acting in the same way the early church did. They devoted themselves to one another, and WE have been more devoted to each other too. They gave their possessions to those in need, and WE have seen great generosity pouring from our community. And as I read Kitty's words I could feel the truth in them. This is what God's people do when life gets hard. They become more focused on the important things, the learning, the healing, the dancing, and the praying. If I had to guess, I feel confident in saying the early church danced too. The dancing just wasn't recorded for us when someone finally wrote about their struggle 40-50 years later. The rhythm of God was what they recorded because it is what remained in their memory.

Imagine a high-schooler in 2030 needing to write a history report about the coronavirus. The child asks a parent to tell them about 2020. The parent recounts the fear everyone had and how even close friends became people to be cautious around. The parent remembers the stress of teaching, entertaining, working, and parenting 24/7. The parent admits they cried in the bathroom a lot. There are some memories of making masks, but no one knew which the right kind were. Then the parent says to their child, "But you must remember some of this, you were old enough then to remember something." The child responds and says they only remember having more time with their parents, laughing while watching YouTube videos, and cuddling till bedtime. They remember sewing the masks and picking out which colors go with each other. They admit, learning to sew is why they want to go to fashion school and make accessible clothing for people in wheelchairs. Children remember the eternal, the way they felt. The details fade from our childhood memories and we can only remember how loudly the rhythm of God's love was beating during different experiences. The surface details fade away, the eternal rhythm remains.

1 Peter demonstrates this in a great metaphor. The Old life is like the grass, its beauty as short-lived as wildflowers. Grass dries up, flowers droop, God's word goes on and on forever. The word is where we learn God's rhythm. That rhythm of God, of hope and love, is what is eternal. That rhythm is what is remembered in everything we do. We know this because we hear it in the Old Testament. It continues to beat throughout the New Testament, and we can hear it inspire and guide us today. That rhythm we feel from the scripture is what ultimately gets remembered after times of struggle. Time tunes down the superficial, making it dry up and droop, and time amplifies what is God's rhythm.

We have been generous these past few weeks but the amount of money we have given is just the grass, it will fade. The number of masks we have made are like the flowers, they will wither and not be remembered exactly as they are. The number of phone numbers we dialed will disappear over time because what we do is the surface action. What will remain is why we did these things, because of love. To keep the rhythm of God's love beating loudly into the world. If you have ever talked to someone who has been on a mission trip they usually say the same thing, life-changing, I met God there - it has anchored my faith. There is a reason many mission trips have this effect on people, it is a chance to connect to the rhythm of God's love.

Before every mission trip, I give prospective participants the same message. I tell them it would be easier for us and our partner organization if we just sent the money we are spending on food, accommodations and flights to the organization and let them pay for professional masons and workers to do this work. The work would be done better than we could ever do it. They do not need us to build or to work. We do not need them to meet God. So there must be another reason you go. Ultimately a mission trip is not about the work, it is not about what we do, it is about why we do it. When love and fellowship and showing up for God's people in another place is our goal, when that rhythm of God's word is our inspiration, a mission trip will never fail. The reason why mission trips are life-changing and hold so much weight in a person's faith journey is that they allow us to engage with the rhythm of God. We hear the stories of lives changed, but I can guarantee there was a fight on the mission trip or something went totally wrong, but that is not what is remembered when people commit themselves to the rhythm of God.

“And they devoted themselves to one another.” We don’t hear about the arguments. “They read and learned.” We don’t hear about the lazy mornings and days when procrastination won. “They had glad and generous hearts.” We don’t hear about the regret-filled selfish moments. And I want you to hear these scriptures telling us to not put so much pressure on yourself or your family to get this perfectly right. If there has been a day you did nothing? Good. Didn’t quite get that at home science experiment to work? It’s fine. Not keeping a good schedule and accomplishing everything you wanted to when this whole thing started? Totally acceptable. There are some things that last, and some that, thankfully, fade away. It’s not about what we do, it’s about why we do them that counts. If we have created a space for ourselves and our families to live into God’s rhythm, we have done what we needed to do.

I had a teacher friend post that if your child shows up for school next year behind, it’s okay. That is why she became a teacher, to help kids learn no matter how they did the year before. Teachers are not expecting parents to be able to do the same job they can in a classroom. It’s why we need teachers! Not everyone is skilled in that way. Heck, even if you are a teacher trying to teach your own kids during a pandemic, it is not going to be the ideal situation. Parents, take a breath, and realign yourselves with God’s rhythm. If love and protection fill your home, nothing else matters. The crafts, the homework will fade away. What remains will be how the people around you felt during this time.

The same principle goes for those of us who are not parents. The important things are not going to be how many ZOOM calls we were on, or if we drank enough water, or if we kept a good schedule. Those aren’t the things that last. How we make people feel is what will last. The connections we made, the love we spread, how well we kept the rhythm of God alive amid chaos is what will be recorded.

I know the title of this sermon is a new love, but I have to tell you, this is not new. It is the love God has been sending into the world since the beginning of time. We are just the drums currently tasked to keep the rhythm going. Show love in every way you can, and if you miss a beat forgive yourself like God forgives you and take up the rhythm again tomorrow. In this way, God’s people have come through many storms before, and in this way, God’s people will come through this storm.