

OPENING:

You are probably familiar with the first verse of the Children’s Song “I am the Church”

*The church is not a building;
the church is not a steeple;
the church is not a resting place;
the church is a people.*¹

I always wondered if the authors of that song had ever been to Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, St. Paul’s in London, or St. Peter’s in Rome. Or... if they had ever had the opportunity to celebrate the 140th anniversary of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Burke, Virginia

Next week, we travel up the road for our 10:15 am service, to celebrate the Eucharist at the building that used to be our physical church. We get to be time travelers, to go back in time, moving backwards all the way to 1878 all in the span of a couple hours, barely ever leaving Braddock Road.

This is a tremendous gift and there are people in *this* building who have been working very, very hard on this and will continue to do so in the next week or so. But you only turn 140 once, and we get this opportunity to “re-collect” ... “to remember” who we were, who we are, and who the Holy Spirit is in the process of calling us to be.

JOB

Telling our stories helps us understand ourselves:
How might our story start? How about in this way:

“There was once a church in the land of Burke, named Good Shepherd. That church was blameless and upright, one that feared God and turned away from evil.”

That description is too good to be true. But it’s piqued our interest. What is going to

¹ https://hymnary.org/text/the_church_is_not_a_building

happen next? Could a church actually exist that deserved that description? Does God favor this Church more because of it?

Our Old Testament reading begins with such a description of our hero Job and, as we read, things don't go very well for him. There is so much there, as this incredible book of the Bible performs its own act of time travel, reaching forward and grabbing us by the collar with a genius and a difficulty that the preacher does well to steer clear of.

HISTORY:

I will concentrate on just one part: the fact that Job exists clearly outside of history. He is a fantastic character, who defies identification in time and place. He is from the magical land of Uz, which sounds like "Oz" to me, but actually is in the East somewhere, an area that conveys mystery and great wisdom—think the Magi in the Christmas story. The text also states that Job possesses wealth beyond that of Joseph or Abraham and the other patriarchs, and he possesses a faith in God that is truly remarkable. This is a never-never land of myth and fable.

But somehow, for me and I think for most, this story cuts to the heart of what's most real in our lives. Job is more real than most individuals in the Bible. Despite existing outside history, Job is utterly present with us in 2018: Job is the inspiring leader cut down short in life, Job is the wonderfully saintly figure in the family who suffers senselessly, Job is the child whose death shakes our confidence in the Almighty to its very core. Therefore, the story of Job shows what Scripture can do, what God's Word can do, how it can move across chronology and geography and plant itself under our very noses, defying all laws.

WHERE:

According to the children's song, that's what the Church does as well. The Church does not rest in one place but exists wherever the people are. Here is the 3rd verse of "I am the Church":

*Sometimes the church is marching;
sometimes it's bravely burning,
sometimes it's riding, sometimes hiding;
always it's learning.*

So the Church of the Good Shepherd is where its people are. During the week,

the Church is with ESOL and AA and the Church staff, which indeed meet here. But the Church is also in the meals that FACETS and Food for the Soul has created, and delivers to the hungry. The Church is with our youth as they rebuild other's homes at Camp Hope.

We are then a restless people, on the move, never getting too comfortable in the buildings we inhabit. The ancient churches had no seats! Modern liturgical architecture even looks down on carpet in the sanctuary because that conveys a stability and even laziness.

These are all good things to remember, the Church is the people, particularly with a denomination and Diocese that, I think it's fair to say, pays a good deal of attention to its structures.

And yet, and yet, and yet. Ours is an incarnational tradition, which means we inhabit this world with our bodies, we have a history, of flesh & blood, and timber and concrete.

Perhaps, one way of looking at next week is saying that it's like travelling back to the house that you grew up in, or the house that your parents grew up in, or that your spouse grew up in. You may not remember that you lived there, or it may not really interest you that your parents or spouse spent time there, but you would probably agree that a part of you, by virtue of your relationship with your loved on, is also there.

WHEN:

We are pretty sure of the 1878 date for Good Shepherd's founding. Dating books of the Bible, however, and the book of Job, in particular, is notoriously fickle, with scholars estimating that it could have been written somewhere between the 8th century and the 2nd century. It recalls the comment by a famous Church Father that trying to grab onto and understand the book of Job is like trying to grasp a slippery Eel.²

But remember the Jewish understanding of history. The Jews celebrated the Exodus and Passover, not merely as historical memory but so that they, in the present, are experiencing the Exodus and the Passover *again and again and again*.

² Newsom, Carol A. 2003. *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations*. Oxford: Oxford University, 3.

The Book of Joshua reminds that the Jewish people: “Your own eyes have seen what I did to the Egyptians.”³ What your ancestors saw is what *you* saw. God’s rescue of them implicates *you*, obliges *you*, for *you*... Telling the story brings it alive... bring(ing) the past to bear pointedly on the present... (so that) ‘Each man is obligated to see himself as if he came out of Egypt.’”⁴

Think of how telling that story connects us mystically elsewhere: how, for example, the hidden celebration of the Passover in a European ghetto during World War II, where the Seder finishes with the words: “Next Year in Jerusalem” connects itself to the witness of African-American slaves in the American South. How when they sang those songs “Wade in the Water” and “Go Down Moses”.... That they were all mystically and incredibly singing the same song as the Israelites in the Exodus story.

CONCLUSION:

These were all dangerous, risky, heroic time travelers. I know that’s too much to put on us. Thankfully, the stakes will be much lower next. But, if on the 14th, there is driving rain, the bus breaks down, we get cited for unlawful gathering, and get hauled off to jail..... we are doing more than simply reenacting something in the past, or engaging in nostalgia for its own sake.

What I believe is going to happen when we go to the old Church next week is that I think time and space will be collapsed through our liturgy, that our presence together in community and most of all God’s love will transform and transport us beyond who we are.

As a Church, whenever and wherever we go to celebrate and share in that love, that’s where we are, singing that familiar song, and echoing the prayers and Scripture throughout the centuries, collapsing geography and chronology proclaiming: “We are Good Shepherd.”

AMEN.

³ Joshua 24.7

⁴ Levenson, Jon Douglas. 1985. *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*. Minneapolis: Winston. 38.