

“All Will Be Thrown Down”

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We have to. We have to do something, because the world in which we live is changing so rapidly, and nobody seems to be able to keep up. The struggle is that if we do not, we will have the ghost of Christmas future at our door. Others have done it.

In our Presbytery alone, out of - I believe - 54 churches, there are eight that can afford a full-time pastor - out of 54. We need to respond to the needs of the world around us; while at the same time celebrating the ghosts of Christmas past. When you think of the incredible ministry that Rev. Hall, Rev. Orr, Dr. Yeates and Rev. Hansen did, and blessed, and laid the foundation we are standing on today. We have the same obligation to lay a foundation down so that the Henry Davison-Rippeys, and all of the other young people coming up and people that we do not even know yet, will have a place called Westminster Presbyterian Church - that will provide support, care, love and most of all an understanding of God that will change this world. It will continue to move even amidst the difficult moments of life and bring life - life here and life eternal.

Now, we can kick ourselves and say, “I understand what the second ghost, the ghost of Christmas present was doing. I understand about all of the other difficulties - the responsibilities. We are moving at a pace our parents, and certainly our grandparents, could never have understood.” All of the activities and now - we don’t even have Wednesday evenings available or Sunday mornings.

It is a terror to try to be “church” in a world that no longer seems to even want church. We live in a post-Christian society. We live in a society that thinks that there is no room for church, and for many that the church is even antiquated, old and unnecessary - or even wrong.

There has never been a time when it has been more important to bring Christ back into the world in which we live, and we need to get about that business today. But just because this is a very key moment in the world’s history doesn’t mean we haven’t been through it before.

When I read that passage from Mark chapter 13, the people of faith were living in a new world order and they didn’t know how to handle it. It was Jesus who said the walls would come tumbling down in the early 30s CE - but Mark was the earliest Gospel written, and it was written in about 70 or 71 BC; months after the walls of the temple came tumbling down in Jerusalem. They never thought it could be possible at all. In fact, the Roman historian Tacitus said, in describing that edifice, that “it is a mountain of white marble adorned with gold. It is the most magnificent, extravagant well the world has ever seen.”

No one could ever have imagined that anything could have happened to that magnificent structure. No wonder they were mad at Jesus when he said those walls would come tumbling down - that not one thing would be on top of another. They couldn’t imagine it, and would consider Jesus a heretic for even saying it, because this God that we worship - if this God would allow the walls of his own home to come down - then that God could not be

almighty, that God could not be powerful enough to be the one we should worship, and that is heresy. Yet, just a few decades later – boom!

They reeled, because in the Old Testament especially in that ancient time before Jesus, they could not perceive of God being anywhere except in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. If the Temple was gone where was God? God did not dwell on earth. God was not in their midst. How could they relate to a God without a Temple?

They turned to the Apostles and Disciples of Jesus Christ and they remembered the words of Jesus and they began to explain a new paradigm, a paradigm that did not require God to be in a building, in a structure, in a Temple with a priest - a high priest being the only one who could actually be in the presence of the Divine; but a God who had transitioned into the incarnation in Jesus, who made God so open and available that all could be there; that it wasn't a requirement to put God in a box or a room, but to expand how God related to human beings in all places, in all times, to all people and all cultures.

The paradigm shift changed everything. It was amazing. Now, we are at a moment in our church and in our society where there is a time for a paradigm shift as well. The old way was working in its time and it is not working as well today. I have friends who are elderly now, who are pastors, who were mentors to me, and every once in a while when I have a bad day I call one of them up. I have said, "This stinks. You were lucky. You had it in a day of the 1940s and 50s, when people knocked down the door [of the church] to get in. Now I have to kick them just to get them in the door. It is so unfair. You didn't have to worry about Facebook, Instagram and everything else, so that we can trick them to come in the door, making it look like, wow, you didn't have to sell yourself like a carnival act, in order to get people to come in the door. They just came. It was part of society. The Church was the center of everyone's life and now, look." And they [my pastor friends] just say, "Suck it up, Scott. Go do it."

They are right. God is working a new way in this world, and sometimes it is only in the most difficult moments where we are called to the "blessing" of having to rely, not on ourselves, but on the power of the Holy Spirit, to take us to that new place.

Now those ghosts were making jokes about us and change - but we have to realize that change has always been taking place. You read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation; you feel the change taking place in the way that God relates to us. God may be unchanging but the way God relates to us, changes continually; figuring out new ways, becoming more intimate with us, responding with anger and frustration, forgiveness, accountability, starting over and doing it again. It was a constant struggle for God to figure out how to work with us; and as people of faith it is our struggle to figure out how to work with each other and how to bring a community that is fractured and separated from the love of God back together.

Now I have an idea and I bounced it off some people and I think - no, I know: We are going to go with this, as a new paradigm shift. This paradigm shift means that we are going to do and live our faith in a new and meaningful way. It is going to be more relational. It is not going to be as cold programmatically. The emphasis will always be on how we relate to one another in faith, because your personal relationship with God and my personal relationship with God, and how we share that with other people, is intensely personal and extremely

public. So we need to put faith to life in a new way. We have been doing it well, for those of us that are here, but we have not apparently been doing it well enough to allow other people to be part of our midst and to care for them. They are very busy and we have made them busier when they come here; so let's figure out how we can work together to make that change.

The first thing we can do to become more relational with one another is to have one service and not two. I want a place that is full every week. If we need to set monitors in the Narthex, let's do it, until we are so full we have to go back to two services because the people in The Commons are crabbing.

Until then, we need to be full every Sunday because when people come in seeing three rows of blank pews, they say, "That's not real healthy." They don't see that we are not two half-empty churches, but one full, dynamic place. This summer it was full every Sunday and there was energy in this place. I want that back, because I think the Holy Spirit works when we are together and we are full of people.

So we are going to do that. We are working out the struggle, because change always hurts; and the fight is going to be "What time?" I'm not going to pull this one today. I'm going to let somebody else go down on that one. And also, "When is Sunday school?" We will let you know.

That isn't the only thing that makes change. Worship is the center of who we are as people of faith, but that isn't the only aspect of what makes dynamic change.

I think one of the most exciting things we are talking about developing is "Discipleship" groups. We have small groups and they are doing great, but this will be a separate thing working simultaneously alongside. These Discipleship groups will mainly run on Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings. I do not want to ask one more thing, timewise, from the people who go to church here.

I know what you are going through when you have children and are trying to run everything. But, if you are going to be here anyway on Wednesday nights, we are going to offer Discipleship groups which have a very specific spiritual formation focus. (Say that three times fast!) You will be able to meet for 50 minutes and have a relationship with the people in that group that is deep, intimate and meaningful. You will begin to share your life stories. You will pray for one another. You support one another. You learn together about the faith. Then you express it in the larger community, in worship and other events that may come along - but the key is not adding to your burden. Those events will happen on Sunday mornings before or after church. We will have nursery and child care for those who need it, and Wednesday night when you are here anyway.

I'm excited for what I believe will be a transitional moment in the life of the Church. You will do your outreach ministries, whether it is Backpack Buddies, or Family Promise, and we will do those as Discipleship groups, or the small groups you are already in.

We will try to cut down on the number of other activities that get in the way or are too demanding of your time.

We will still do Fine Arts and those activities, but maybe you'll do them as a small group. Youth groups: We can look at how we do youth groups (especially when our new person arrives) so that you can have the big group time, but also develop a small group or Discipleship group relationship, in those groups.

This will become the foundation of how we do ministry at Westminster; because we cannot continue to do business as usual. We need, and we must take responsibility to do what is necessary to make the changes in how God relates to us so that we can continue to grow, in faith and in numbers. Because those who are not here today still need to hear the message of Jesus Christ; they need to have the relationships that come in a deep and abiding spiritual relationship with God. We need to be disciples to one another; and finally, when people do come into the life of the church - we do have a good number of people that come here visiting - we have a place to put them - on day one.

All of those Discipleship groups will have a few places left open so that new people will be brought into that group. A perfect size group would be 10-12. We will start with maybe 6-8 so that there are 1 or 2 other couples or 4 individuals that can fit into those groups to make them happen.

We are going to start slow, celebrate our successes and expand. Right away, in January, we are going to start formulating the Discipleship groups. We are going to start with six - then move to 12, then to 24, and go on from there.

We need to do ministry in a way that meets the needs of the people we are serving. When people are working 15 percent longer hours than they were in 1965, when children no longer have even an evening a week in which to breathe, we have to figure out a new way, in a new time, to speak and to proclaim.

Please begin this day praying that God is speaking to us in a new way, so that this paradigm will be effective in meeting the needs of people's hearts and minds, and transform Westminster evermore into the place God intended us to be.

It is in God's name and with God's blessing that we say, "Amen."