

John 3:1-17

Something has got to change. We all know that. Patterns of congregational attendance and membership have declined for decades and swiftly so over the last few years.

Of late, I have been reading on social media, about our need, in particular, to take stock of the changes in our culture that demand changes in how we worship, preach, and organize ourselves as the church. For instance, we need to recognize that people's lives are much busier, even frantic, than a generation or two ago. "Time-saving" innovations like email have all but eliminated any sense of Sabbath, and work, as a result, knows no bounds. youth sports and other activities that used to treat Sundays as sacred, or at least family time, have now claimed that part of the calendar as prime time for additional practice or tournaments.

In addition, the culture of duty -- doing things, including going to church, simply because we're supposed to -- has eroded into a culture of discretion -- where, given all the options, one exercises discretion to determine what activities are most rewarding. And our culture no longer has a vested interest in supporting church participation. As a result, the emerging generation does not and will not go to church simply

because their parents did, but only if that hour on Sunday meaningfully connects to the other 167 hours of the week.

So maybe we need to move from traditional “performative” ministry -- where the Vicar is responsible for doing the central tasks of the Christian life like interpreting Scripture, connecting faith and life, and sharing our faith -- to more “formative” ministry -- where the job of the vicar is to help people get better at doing these things themselves. (Which is where I hope I’ve been taking us!)

We are aided by God’s powerful Spirit who will blow us places we’d never imagined.

We all worry about the future of the church and about our children and grandchildren’s relationship to the church in particular. Concerns about attendance, concerns about paying the bills, keeping up the building. Such anxiety can be paralyzing.

Which is why this familiar passage from John has never been more important! While we know it best for the centrality of John 3:16 in both our theology and popular imagination, there are two other elements I would also like to highlight, each of which is anchored in, and expands the implications, of the love of God so clearly expressed in 3:16.

The first is the freedom granted to those who are born of the Spirit. Notice this part of the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus. When Jesus says that we must all be born anew, Nicodemus is confused, he takes this metaphor literally. And so Jesus then contrasts life in the flesh and life in the Spirit. And one of the key characteristics of life in the spirit is an element of freedom. We are not bound by the same concerns of those who live according to the flesh because our future and fate are sealed by God's tremendous love. "Do not be astonished," Jesus says to Nicodemus, "that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

I think this declaration that the Spirit -- and those born of the Spirit -- blows where it will gives us tremendous freedom when we think about how best to respond to the challenges and opportunities of this age. Part of what is so anxiety provoking about this time is that it feels like there are no road maps. Worship that lasted an hour. Communion once a week. A theologically grounded lectionary. The three-point sermon. An annual stewardship campaign. These weren't just useful practices, they were reliable patterns by which to organize our life that provided a clear road map, and at times even

recipe, about what it meant to be the church and, by extension, a Vicar. When we give these up, however, we feel like we are sailing in uncharted waters or driving down a foreign and forbidding road.

Except that we are not alone! The Spirit -- which Jesus will later define as his own Spirit -- accompanies and empowers us to face a future that we may feel is uncertain, but has been secured by the death and resurrection of Jesus. From this perspective, the anxiety that many of us feel -- there is no roadmap! -- can be transformed into excitement -- there is no roadmap! :) Which means that we are free -- we don't have to do things the way they've always been done. We can experiment, risk, fail (you can't experiment without failing), learn, and grow in ways we'd never imagined. Because the Spirit of Christ will blow us in directions we hadn't imagined.

The second element I want to lift up is the ultimate source of our confidence. For coming right after the world's most famous Bible verse is this promise: "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him." God intends good for us, both here in our life together and ultimately in our eternal life

with God. For this reason, whatever setbacks or failures we may experience are always temporary, because God has promised to redeem the world in and through Jesus. Which again lends us a measure of freedom. We are free to experiment and struggle and succeed and fail and live and love and die ... all knowing that in Christ God has already worked to redeem the whole world. In other words, redemption is God's responsibility, not ours. Our job is to strive to identify and share where we see hints of that redemption already.

So, the challenges in front of us are great, no doubt about it. But so also are the opportunities.

Whether we grow or shrink, flourish or struggle we need to remember we are only part of the larger story that God is telling and bringing to a good end. But make no mistake, we are part of that story.

So I want to remind you that we are free. that we are aided by God's powerful Spirit who will blow us places we'd never imagined. Maybe even to climb mountains! Don't think for a moment that 24 years ago when I first gave my life to Jesus that I imagined myself being here as a leader of a church.

That's what the Holy Spirit can do, blow us to places beyond our imagining. And finally, know that God loves this whole world -- including us and our little corner of it -- extravagantly and so has promised that whatever may come, we all have God's promise of redemption in and through Christ Jesus our Lord.

It's a powerful message and promise, one we need to hear, especially at this time in our history. So, let's be willing not just to share it but to proclaim it with hope, courage, and confidence.

Let us pray

Blow, Spirit of God, Blow away the tight rules that hold us back from trusting, risking, loving

Blow away our sin that stands in the way of encountering our neighbours. Ready us for re-birth, Prepare us for risk, Equip us with courage and vision for the new thing that waits around the corner. We cannot choose the stories we have inherited But we can choose the stories that we become.

Amen