

Exodus 17:1-7 ~ Ephesians 2:8-10, 14, 19-22

We Have Come This Far by Faith

World Communion ~ Peace & Global Witness Dedication ~ 20th Anniversary of Building
October 1, 2023 ~ The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis ~ Communion Meditation

Okay, saints. Let's start with a show of hands. First, I will invite all the people in this room who were here 20 years ago, when our building was completed in 2003, to please raise your hands. Look around! Keep your hands up, and now let's add everyone in this room who was here 10 years ago, 2013? How about five years ago, 2018? One year ago, since 2022? And finally, anyone who came here at any point in 2023, including today for the first time? Thank you! You can all put your hands down now.

So, how did we all get here? For some, it may be hard to remember... And what brought us here *today*? Probably the potluck, maybe the pumpkins, and the promise of a short sermon... Surely, the deeper answers to "how we did we get here" are as different and fascinating as each person "in this very room," *and* each person worshipping remotely. No two stories are the same. Yet, I am quite sure one thing we all share is doubt. Questions about God. "Are you even there, God?" We are more like the thirsty Israelites than we may realize. Out in the wilderness at Rephidim with no water anywhere near in sight, they asked, Is the Lord among us, or not? In our first scripture lesson from Exodus, there are actually five questions in seven verses. From Genesis through Revelation, our sacred scripture is threaded with questions, doubts, and dark nights of the soul. So too, is our faith journey, as individuals and as a church, if we are being honest.

Today, we are here to celebrate twenty years of ministry in this building. Twenty years of the Lord being among us, working through us together. We have come this far by faith. Some of you in this room were part of the deep discernment that led to the purchase and building of this new church on the corner of Lincoln and Adler. The twists and turns, the doubts and delights of that story, you will hear in more detail from Mark Nelson right after the benediction. And then we will enjoy a Trivia game, pictures, videos, and tours that will spark memories for some. For relative newbies like me, these will help to fill in the story I am eager to learn more about. Looking back and remembering helps us to see how far we have come by faith.

Right now, my word for us as we prepare to come to the Table of grace, is a challenge for us as we look ahead. As we consider the future steps in our journey as God's faith community, FPC. In five years, we will celebrate not only 25 years of ministry in this building, but also 150 years of being the First Presbyterian Church in Marshfield, WI, founded in 1878. Will the Lord still be among us or not, in 2028? While we know that God is with us, especially when we are walking through the dark valley; the other side of this question is whether *we* are choosing to be about God's call for us, or not.

That is the question to keep front and center. Not how many members will we have, or how much money will we have in the bank, but are we doing the work of Christ, breaking down the dividing walls of hostility, hate, exclusion, and indifference, or not? When people come here do they feel the loving presence of Christ, or not? Will this be a church where hearts are lifted,

where all people are seen and heard, valued and validated? Will we do our best to be Christ's hands, and feet, and voice of unifying love, here in our community and beyond? We will be a church that continues to honor and steward the gift of God's fragile ecosystem that is our one and only precious planet, or not?

We stand on the shoulders of our ancestors and on the foundation of the apostles and prophets before us. Believe me, they had their doubts and questions through the ages. As looming and large as the ones we have today. You may wonder about the future of the church as we see churches shrinking and the number of "Nones" growing. (Those who do not identify with any faith tradition.) Alongside the challenges I just posed, I have an appetizer of good news to give you about the future of our church. It comes from our youth here at FPC! Their experiences on their mission trip to Nashville this past summer can offer us with hope today. Listen to the reflection just one of them offered, during the report they all gave in worship here on July 30, under the guidance of Carmen Lawler, our Christian Education Coordinator who led them on the mission trip.

This teenager wrote, "I feel that this mission trip was just the beginning of my lifelong calling to serve God and humanity. I will forever carry the lessons and memories of our experiences close to my heart, knowing that serving those in need is not just an event but a way of life. May we all be inspired by the spirit of love, compassion, and unity that we experienced during this mission. Let us embrace every individual as a child of God, showing kindness to all and being a beacon of light in a world that sometimes feels dark and indifferent. Together, we can make a difference, one compassionate act at a time. Let us continue to serve, love, and share God's light in our community and beyond."ⁱ

Friends, that is the voice of a young person nurtured in the embrace of this church. Truly, we have come this far by faith—whether you are wearing an "I was here" tag or if this is your first time here. Christ was here too, and is here now in the breaking of this bread and pouring of this cup. In Christ we are nourished for the good journey ahead, together. Let us pray:
*You who gather us together in this new threshold time in your holy history, When we know we are complicit in the degradation of both soils and souls, you still invite us, call us, again and again to be your people—whole and holy, To live in alignment with your deep creative joy. We are called again and again to your truth, to your justice, to your more abundant life. We, though called, are given no obvious path, on the way—the practice of discernment in this complex, suffering and wonder-full world. So, we pray for the will to claim pause and the art of presence in a busy and distracted world. We pray for the capacity to recognize shared silence as a political act of interdependence in a society fractured by individualism. We pray for the stilling of inner chatter. We pray for seeing hearts listening souls, informed minds, and the grace, the gift of your in-sight. We pray for the courage to respond to your calling because we long at the deep core of our souls to continue from this day forward, your ever more faithful people.*ⁱⁱ Amen.

ⁱ July 30, 2023, Youth Mission Trip Report, p. 4. (See FPC web site archive of sermons)

ⁱⁱ *Prayers for the New Social Awakening*, ed. Christian Iosso & Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, part of "That We May Be a More Faithful People," by Sharon Daloz Parks, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2008), 74-75.