

The Lord Goes with You
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
September 11, 2016

Jeremiah 17:5-10

⁵ Thus says the Lord:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals
and make mere flesh their strength,
whose hearts turn away from the Lord.

⁶ They shall be like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see when relief comes.

They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.

⁷ Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.

⁸ They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.

It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

⁹ The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse—
who can understand it?

¹⁰ I the Lord test the mind
and search the heart,
to give to all according to their ways,
according to the fruit of their doings.

Deuteronomy 31:1-8

¹ When Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, ²he said to them: 'I am now a hundred and twenty years old. I am no longer able to get about, and the Lord has told me, "You shall not cross over this Jordan." ³The Lord your God himself will cross over before you. He will destroy these nations before you, and you shall dispossess them. Joshua also will cross over before you, as the Lord promised. ⁴The Lord will do to them as he did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, and to their land, when he destroyed them. ⁵The Lord will give them over to you and you shall deal with them in full accord with the command that I have given to you. ⁶Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you.'

⁷ Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: ‘Be strong and bold, for you are the one who will go with this people into the land that the Lord has sworn to their ancestors to give them; and you will put them in possession of it. ⁸It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.’

Two things have been constant here since September 8, 1846. The first? Change. I was saying the other day that my favorite view entering town is heading north on 164, about a half mile before crossing 59. From there, up high, I can see the whole of town, treetops and steeples. And I feel like I’m getting a glimpse of what much earlier peoples saw from that very hilltop. But then I realize that what I see is all new; even the trees have grown up in these last 170 years. Before them was Wisconsin prairie – abundant with asters, coneflowers, and black-eyed susans, a sea of grasses. Even before the settlers came to what they would eventually call Prairie Village, then Prairieville, the lands of the indigenous peoples were paradoxically changing, with the seasons, with the needs for food. Settlers sped up those changes. Change has been, and is, constant.

In checking into the history of Prairieville, I came across *The History of Waukesha County, Wisconsin*, published in 1880.¹ With a prognosticating boldness I wouldn’t dream to profess, the authors included a prediction of what Waukesha County would look like in 1980. They wrote,

“Highways will then be macadamized, or constructed of paving blocks; trees will line all the streets; fruit will be within reach of passers by; horse cars – not drawn by horses, however, but propelled by some of the many stupendous natural forces which will then be utilized – will cross the various towns; the scores of beautiful lakes will be lined with magnificent villas and summer hotels, and their bosoms dotted with floating gardens and steam craft not now thought of; ...dwelling houses, offices, and cities will be connected by a network of wires or tubes, affording such a cheap and simple means of communication that all can use them;...there will be some different and more strict qualifications for voting; women will be allowed to vote upon many, if not all, questions.”²

Some guesses? On the mark. Others? Not so much. But in anticipation of this proportion of accuracy, the authors closed the section with this:

¹The web link is absurdly long – look for it in Google books!

² pp. 630-633.

“finally, not a single person who reads this book in 1880 will be here in 1980 to know how truly this prophecy will be verified. However, it is by no means an unreasonable one, for, had any one predicted, fifty years ago, the existence in the future of what we now have about us, he would have been written down a lunatic...”³

They knew change was coming – they didn’t know exactly which changes, but they knew change was coming. I can be pretty certain that the Reverend Lindsley and the Reverend Pratt knew change would come to the church they and ten charter members founded, but I can also be pretty certain that they would have never predicted a woman would step into the pulpit of the very same church. Change is constant and I wouldn’t be so bold as to predict the changes to come for this church beyond today. And I don’t need to. In fact, just thinking the phrase “I am terrible at predicting” gives me a giddy feeling.

Which leads me to the second constant – God. Of course, God has been constant in this place long before September 8, 1846. God was constant in the early settlers. God was constant in the indigenous peoples. God was constant in the glaciers and before the glaciers. The God who was, and is, and forever will be. This is the God of Jeremiah, and the God of the cloud of witnesses who have worshipped under the name of First Presbyterian the last seventeen decades. Jeremiah explains: “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.” Change comes but God is constant. Today we give thanks for all those who have come before us to witness to God’s constancy, and we pray to be like them, not as “those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength.”

We pray to be those who witness God’s constancy in **this** day so that we can assure those who will continue to worship under the name of First Presbyterian in years to come, so that they will hear our assurances in the same way Joshua heard Moses. Moses said, “I am now a hundred and twenty years old...the Lord has told me, ‘You shall not cross over this Jordan.’” He then said to Joshua, a representative of the future to come, “Be strong and

³ p. 633.

bold, for you are the one who will go with this people into the land that the Lord has sworn to their ancestors to give them; and you will put them in possession of it. It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.”

I cannot know what our earliest founders thought the land the Lord had promised them would look like. I definitely don't know what the land the Lord has promised us looks like, nor can I foresee what those who follow us will imagine that land to be. And that's okay, because that's only a part of Moses' message – the language of promised land. I daresay of even greater import to Joshua, to our founders, to us, to future Presbyterians, is the message that Moses offers twice. He first says, "...it is the Lord your God who goes with you." For extra emphasis he says the same message again – almost. He tells Joshua, "It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you..." The God who was, and is, and forever will be goes with AND before God's people. This is the God of whom the psalmist declared "You hem me in, behind and before...where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?"⁴ God is constant, above, below, before, after, now.

Our unofficial theme to describe this church for this anniversary has been "firmly rooted in the 19th century, boldly stretching its branches into the 21st century." Wrapped up in it are the two constants. We claim boldness from Jesus, who came to assure us again of the triune God's constancy, telling the disciples: "...remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."⁵ Alongside God's constancy, we cannot help but acknowledge the change that been with us from the 19th century until now, and the change that will continue into the 21st century and beyond. It's an odd thing, isn't it, to be bold in uncertainty? And we believers certainly are an odd bunch, aren't we, who strive to trust in God more than ourselves? I suppose that's why being firmly rooted matters so much, why those who preceded us, congregants and Israelites alike, belong in our celebration. They have been there and done that and still proclaim that God is good. They are our roots which assure us that we can make it through the heat and through the drought. And when we draw upon

⁴ Psalm 139:5, 7

⁵ Matthew 28:20.

their faith and their trust in God, we find what we need to reach into that uncertainty. We find the God who was, and is, and forever will be. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: God who is with and who goes before us, make us strong and bold, and quiet any fear or dread, we pray. Amen.