

It's good to see you all this morning. Because you are here doing something counter-cultural. You're at church. You've come to worship the Living God.

There was a time when worship was a priority in our culture. But not longer. Even in West Texas which is somewhat resistant to cultural change, even in the Bible Belt, worship is no longer a cultural priority.

I remember a time when Wednesday evenings were protected—there would never be school activities scheduled on Wednesdays because of church. Not only is that gone, but now Sunday mornings are also unprotected. Worship now competes with everything else in our culture.

That can be a little depressing at times. I've been ordained 23.5 years now. That entire period has been one of decline for Christianity in America. At first it was mainline churches: Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians. Now it is affecting churches that were growing in the last part of the 20th century—churches like the Southern Baptists and the Assembly of God are having to cope with shrinkage for the first time in their histories. All American denominations are shrinking. It's a tough time for all of us.

It's been this way in Europe for decades. Great cathedrals in large European cities will have only handfuls of worshippers on a Sunday morning. We can take dubious comfort in the fact that we're not that badly off in the United States.

There is only one sub-group of Christians in the US that is experiencing consistent growth. These are ethnic congregations aimed at providing worship for recent immigrants. They're not following American trends. They are more influenced by the trends of the Third World.

And currently Christianity is booming and bursting at the seams in the Third World. And amazingly Christianity is growing in, of all places, China. The Chinese church is exploding. If current trends continue, by 2030 there will be more Christians in China than in the United States.

Because of those trends, the Chinese government is responding with increasing levels of persecution of Christianity in China. In fact, it hasn't been this bad since the time of Chairman Mao. Please keep Chinese Christians in your prayers.

In the Third World and China, Christianity is on the rise. But in the west, in the Old World of Europe and in the New World of the United States and Canada, Christianity is declining.

So it's good to see you this morning. You are bucking the trends. You are counter-cultural. You are choosing to make God a priority in your life. And you deserve praise for that.

But it can be tough, I know. I think of the way things were in my childhood, and I sometimes get nostalgic. If only we could go back... If only we could recapture the glory days... I even look at the pictures in our hallway, with the glories of St. Paul's in the past and get nostalgic. If only...

But is that what God wants of us? To gaze lovingly and longingly into the past? To view through the misty haze a golden era of days gone by? To spend our time nostalgically pining away for the way things were?

Of course, the past is important. We are a faith with a rich past. Christianity is a faith that celebrates the past. We read about it in scripture. At this time in the past, God called his people out of slavery. At this time in the past God brought his people back from exile. At this time in the past, God lived and walked among us in the person of Jesus Christ. And we gather at God's table, and remember every week, that on the night before he died, Jesus took bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to his followers. We remember it with great joy. Christianity is a faith that treasures our past.

And yet, we are a faith that looks to the future. We treasure the past, but we move forward. And we look forward to the day when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. And we push against our culture and say, "This Sunday morning there is nothing more important in my life than for me to gather with my fellow Christians and worship the Living God." That's why you're here this morning.

In these tough times it's helpful to see how our ancestors have dealt with difficulties in the past. And we have some wonderful help in our Old Testament lesson today. Isaiah ch 62. This is the 3rd of three prophets whose writings are combined in the one book of Isaiah.

This Isaiah, nicknamed Third Isaiah, lived in the time after the exile. The Jews had been taken away in captivity. They lived in exile in Babylon. But now a number of them have been allowed to return home to Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem, things are not as they once were. The returning exiles now live in the midst of ruins. Their city walls are piles of rubble all around them. Their temple has been leveled. And yet, God has brought them home.

What do they do? They do some rebuilding. But they're also pretty depressed. Things just aren't what they were. The past was much better than the present, and the future seems bleak to them. During this time there were several prophets who arose to inspire the people. Amongst them was 3rd Isaiah.

And his message is powerful. What should the people do in the midst of ruins? Should they be stuck in the past? Should they just lay down and give up?

3rd Isaiah doesn't think so. He says forcefully, "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch."¹

Two amazing things here. First of all, he's saying that he will not keep silent and he will not rest. He's not going to shut up. And he's not going to give up. He's not going to be paralyzed by the past. He's going to move forward.

¹ Is 62:1

And he's doing it for Zion's sake, for Jerusalem's sake. He's probably talking about two levels: for the sake of the city of Jerusalem, and for the sake of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. For the sake of God's city, for the sake of God's people, 3rd Isaiah is going to keep going, and he will not rest until God fulfills his promises.

He continues, "The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give."²

In other words, when God fulfills his promises to Jerusalem, the whole world will know it. And Jerusalem will be called by a new name, a name that God himself will give. Jerusalem will have a new identity when God gives it a new name after bringing Jerusalem to a new stage in its history.

This is a strong message. The prophet is going to persevere, the prophet is going to go on ministering until Jerusalem reaches the new stage of its history that God is promising to bring.

And this new stage in history, this new identity, this new phase will be a glorious thing. This is 3rd Isaiah's description:

You'll be like a beautiful crown, a royal diadem in God's hands.³

You won't be nicknamed Forsaken, or Desolate. Instead people will call you God's Delight, or God's Beloved Spouse.⁴

For God will have that close, loving, intimate relationship with you, like a husband and wife have for each other.⁵

Notice what 3rd Isaiah is saying here. The people are in the midst of ruins. They're probably thinking about the way things were in times past. And yet the prophet lets them know that God has a future in store for them, a glorious future that will be characterized by an intimate relationship with God.

He does NOT say they'll go back, and everything will be just like it used to be. This is not an escape into nostalgia.

Also, he does NOT say they should just sit around and wait until the new reality comes. This is not a time for inaction.

What he DOES say is that he won't keep silent and he won't rest until the promise of Jerusalem's next stage in God's plan arrives in all of its glory.

² Is 62:2

³ Is 62:3

⁴ Is 62:4

⁵ Is 62:4

There's no going back. And the promise of the future has not yet arrived. But standing still is not an option. 3rd Isaiah says he won't keep silent and he won't rest. He'll keep plugging away in the present.

There are parallels for us in our time. Yes it's a time of decline for Christianity in America. Yes, St. Paul's is smaller than it was in decades past. And our choice of options is similar to that of the people in 3rd Isaiah's time.

1. We could look longingly back at the past and wish we could return to some golden era.

2. We could be paralyzed in the present, we could just hunker down and be depressed and inert.

Or 3. We can plug away and move forward in hope, looking forward to a time when God's future vision for us comes to fruition.

Or, to use a football analogy, 1. we could remember nostalgically championship teams of the past. 2. We could just stay on the sidelines and forfeit the game. Or 3. we can get out on the field, and push against the defensive line, and try to gain ground and move the ball forward.

That's my choice. I want us to try to move the ball forward. There will undoubtedly be times we may lose some yards. At times we may have to punt. And we may not get the ball across the goal line, at least in our lifetimes. But we still need to get out there and push forward.

As I said, I've been ordained 23.5 years. Yes, I've been a priest during a very tough period in the church's history. But I don't want to give up now. I don't want to sit on the sidelines and forfeit the game. I want to be out on the field, pushing.

After all, when I was ordained, I made vows that contained verbs like, "be diligent, do your best, endeavor, undertake, persevere." I didn't take those vows to sit on the sidelines.

And when I was younger, when I was confirmed, I made vows that contained verbs like, "strive, proclaim, continue, follow, persevere."

And when I was even younger, when I was baptized using the old 1928 Prayer Book, they prayed these words over me:

"(We) sign him with the sign of the Cross, in token that hereafter he shall not be ashamed to confess faith of Christ crucified, and manfully to fight under his banner, against sin, the world, and the devil; and to continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant unto his life's end."

Those are not words that allow me to sit on the sidelines. Those are words about persevering and pushing forward.

Also, at my baptism, there was a Saint in attendance. All Christians are saints, small "s." But this man was later added to our official calendar of Saints, capital "S." His name was Jonathan Daniels. He was a year behind my Dad in seminary. A year and a half after my baptism he took a temporary leave of absence from seminary. He went to the south to work in

the civil rights movement. And there in Haynesville, Alabama, he became a martyr on August 20, 1965. Jonathan pushed himself between a little black girl and an angry racist wielding a 12-gauge shotgun. And St. Jonathan was killed by the blast of buckshot that was intended for her.

This was a man who witnessed the promise at my baptism that I would "manfully fight" and "continue (as) Christ's faithful soldier and servant until (my) life's end."

So what can I do? Can I look backward? Can I stand still?
No, I must seek to move forward!

Because of these promises I have made and that were made for me, I have only one choice. For Zion's sake I will not keep silent. For the sake of St. Paul's on the Plains, I will not rest. For the sake of the Kingdom of God I will keep pushing forward, even during tough times.

And I would invite you to do the same.

We have needs in the community around us. We have children to educate and nurture in the faith. We have a wonderful music ministry, and wonderful space and a wonderful ability to offer the best worship and praise we possibly can to the Living God.

So let's persevere. Let's push forward until God's vision for us shines forth in our midst. I'm willing. Are you?