

Back to the Future – UUC

Isaiah 42:8-10a; Psalm 62:5-8; Philippians 3:10-16

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We recently celebrated the centennial year of this church. What a great history; what a great heritage! But what is next? What is the future to look like? Now, as we honor the past, this is our opportunity to embrace the future.

Think about what it is like to embrace your children or your grandchildren. Embracing the future of this 100-year-old congregation includes wrapping our arms around whatever that will be and holding it close to our hearts and making it ours. But before we can embrace that future, we must

- Decide that we want to move into something new,
- Decide what we want to carry forward,
- Decide what we think was good but no longer necessary.

Change is can difficult because often it involves giving up something to gain something else. It is possible to become so captured by what has been in the past that we are unable to visualize what could be in the present or in the future.

Sometimes we get caught up in the “if only” syndrome. “If only” we had done other things in the past, our present would make it easier to move into the future.

Maybe you remember the Steven Spielberg movie “Back To the Future.” The movie featured Michael J. Fox as the character Marty who was obsessed with going back into the past and, by being there, trying to change some of the decisions that made his present situation what it was.

Marty makes contact with Dr. Emmett Brown who has transformed a silver-colored Delorean into a time travel car. Marty climbs into the car and is transported back to the time of his great grandparents. He tries to discover what made his future the way it is and change those things which he wishes were different. Of course, he finds it impossible to change the past and frantically escapes in his magic car back to the future.

Paul’s words to the church at Philippi, and to the church for all time encourage all of us to build on the past, enter into the struggle of the present, and decide to intentionally move into God’s future.

Paul’s image is of a race in which the runner can see the prize while racing toward the finish line. Seeing the prize, the prize of continuing to be the congregation that honors Christ, and seeing what can be in the future, motivates us to run the race with all of the energy that Christ can give us.

We tend to think of the future as something a long way off. In reality the future always begins with the next breath we breathe, begins with the next movement of the second hand on the clock. Today is the future that we talked about yesterday.

We will move into the future, but how shall we plan for it? As individuals and as a congregation, it is important to first decide to make positive decisions that enable us to live as the people of God that we have declared we are and that honor Jesus as the Lord of our lives.

I understand personality profiles, and yes, congregations have personality profiles too.

- Some profiles tend toward the traditional (“This is the way we do it here.”)
- Some profiles tend toward skepticism (“We’ve never done it that way before.”)

Let me suggest for our consideration some thoughts that may be helpful for us as we begin to consider and plan for our future. As the Pastoral Search Committee begins to work, a part of the process, among other things, will involve all of you completing some surveys about what you think about what already is and what should be. We will need to sharpen our focus on those very things.

First, we must be sure that our vision is sharply focused on Christ.

A little girl brought to her father a picture which she had found in one of her books. The picture was busy with all kinds of small characters and images. The instructions beneath the picture told the viewer to hold the picture ever closer to the eyes without blinking, and then to move the picture slowly away. As he did so, an image not visible in the maze of all of the other images seemed to pop out and stand in front of all of the other images in the picture.

Sometimes the picture that is held out before us includes the financial situation, changing relationships, debilitating illness of those we love, grief that can paralyze, disappointment in things we have attempted before, comfort in the way things are at present, you can add other images to the big picture.

Our physical eyes, our spiritual eyes, are called to capture so many images, to deal with so many “pictures” that surround us, it is just possible that we will miss our focus on Christ who is at the center of it all. Sometimes we may even think that God surely doesn’t understand our needs, or God would do a better job of taking care of us.

Second, we must listen to the voice of Christ.

As I am sure that many of you do, each morning I listen to the news reports. I have a need to know what is happening within our nation and within our world.

In an instant the whole day may be rearranged by circumstances totally beyond our control. In an instant our prayers and our concerns and our actions may be redirected by what we hear or what we read.

Is it not possible, that our thoughts and our concerns and our actions might also be redirected if we made it a practice to listen to the voice of Christ? Immediately after the baptism of Jesus, God gave a direct, clear, indisputable command, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to Him.” (Luke 9:35)

“So, Jesus,” we might ask, “How do we hear your voice in a way that we can understand what You are saying?” Let’s begin with a sincere, authentic, desire to hear what Jesus is saying to us, even if at times it may not be what we want to hear. There are far more practical teachings of Jesus found in our scriptures than we have begun yet to act upon in our lives. We are the continuing students of the Master Teacher. His teachings instruct, inspire, challenge, give practical solutions, and offer timeless truth. Most of the teachings were given in the context of where people lived their lives day to day, and within those practical teachings are spiritual truths. In listening and in positive responding there is blessing.

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Second, we listen to the voice of Christ.

Third, we must center our lives in Christ.

As a teenager I read the book *In His Steps* which had been written by Charles Sheldon in 1896. The book continues to be available to this day. Described in the book are several persons who were dealing with the ordinary events of daily life. The focus was that they had made a covenant with one another that before making decisions they would ask the question, "What would Jesus do?" Some years ago the question again became popularized as bracelets that bore the question and bookmarks that bore the question were marketed with the initials WWJD. There is a vast difference in using those initials as a popular slogan and asking seriously the question as we make decisions.

If we were to take that question seriously, really seriously, the answers to that question would transform our lives and the future of this congregation. It would direct our attitudes, guide our deliberations, facilitate our decision making, and allow God to give direction to our future.

Finally, dare to dream!

What dream has God placed within your heart and mind? Maybe you are not in the habit of dreaming what might be. If not, have a conversation with God. Ask God what dream God would place with your heart and your mind about the future of this congregation. A word of caution: If you truly ask, God will answer.

I do know this. When God places a dream within your heart and mind, it will be a God-shaped, God-sized dream. It will be a dream that you will need God's help to bring it into reality. If it were not God-shaped and God-sized, we are just human enough that we would believe that we could achieve those dreams without any help from God. When God gives a dream, God expects to be included in its accomplishment.

Paul was certain of this when he wrote to the church at Philippi telling them that "everything could be accomplished through Christ who strengthens those who follow Him. Long ago Isaiah wrote the words of God to those who declared to be God's followers, saying, "Do not dwell on the past; I am doing a new thing."

We will move into the future. God has always called God's people to embrace a positive future. Planning can be challenging, but it can also be exciting. If we become partners with God in this process we will, like Paul, gain the prize.

"What prize is that?" you ask. It is the prize of being the people and the congregation that honors God as we move into the next century of ministry.

May it be so.

Amen.