



Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55403
(612) 332-3421
www.westminstermpls.org

What Is and What Could Be

Meghan Gage-Finn

Sunday, July 18, 2021

2 Samuel 7:1-13

In the early days of the pandemic, a sign appeared in the front yard of one of the houses a few doors down. It was from the family's home church, a large, Lutheran congregation not far from our neighborhood, and it said, "The church has left the building." When I first read it, on one of my countless walks and runs in the confines of the surrounding blocks, I thought, "Yeah! That's right! The church *has* left the building and we are out in the world. We are present, listening, and serving!"

The longer Covid separation has gone on, as we make slow returns to public places and houses of worship, and to this one in particular, I wonder what patterns and rhythms this faith community will follow in the coming months. What to me felt like a bold declaration months ago, now leaves me with mixed feelings. The sign remains in the same spot on the lawn; I saw it on my way to church this morning. Some days it feels like a prophetic rallying cry. Other days, it feels an ominous and cautionary tale.

On the one hand, “People of God, go out and be the church in the world!”

On the other hand, “The people of God have left the building, and just maybe, they are not coming back.”

“The church has left the building” is not a new term, and it is certainly not a concept born of the time of Covid. I came across at least six books of the same title and various persuasive videos on YouTube. And of course you can buy a t-shirt with the message plastered across the front. Now Elvis was before my time, but at least I get the reference. The phrase was used after Elvis’s shows, to let fans know he was no longer there, and it was time to go home. It was not a message of theological sending, telling folks to go, to be or to do anything, rather it was a message simply to clear out.

Clear out we did after March 8, 2020, and hopefully the community of faith has endeavored to be the church in the world, adapting to the ways the current times are inviting change. This sign keeps poking at me, though, prodding me in this conundrum.

Perhaps as I am, you are spending some amount of time and energy processing what has been, while also trying to anticipate and plan for what might be. As a church staff and leadership team, we are looking back on what we have learned since the early days of sheltering at home, what Covid has taught us about being in community with one another in new ways, and about

harmful and broken systems and patterns of which we may be a part. At the same time, we are planning for what could be - a fall of ministries and programming with a building bustling (safely) with activity, energy, and a renewed commitment to the neighborhood and one another, *and* a plan for hybrid programming is quickly taking shape. What is the meaning of God's sending the church in this season, and how do we both stay out there and come back together as a people changing and changed?

Therefore, we find ourselves in an interesting juxtaposition: we are re-engaging with ministries in and around this building, even as we affirm the movement of the Spirit these past sixteen months in sending out the church. We must acknowledge that we left the building in important and intentional ways, *and* that there is this pull, a momentum drawing us back in a new way.

Our passage for today from 2 Samuel holds some of this same tension in the debate Nathan has with God over whether God can be contained in a building or seen as having freedom to be wherever God chooses. All of this, informs those who follow God in their understanding of their part in God's mission in the world.

David's kingdom is secure; the people no longer need to be on the move. David has built his own palace, and in recognition of this newfound sense of permanence, he expresses a desire to build a house for God. Initially, the prophet Nathan approves of this project, but then God's Word comes to Nathan with the message that God does not need or desire a house. Instead, David through

his descendants will build the expression of who God is. God says, “You will not build me a house. I will build you a house.” However, this is no physical structure, and we can perceive that God’s graceful presence is not dependent on any one place, a temple or palace, but rather God’s promise to David will endure. There is an interesting word play in the Hebrew here, with the word for “house,” *bayit*, also meaning “dynasty.” As Christians, we can read this as a Messianic text, understanding that Jesus is a continuation of this promise from the line of David.

The message to David is this: relationships matter, and God’s covenant to God’s people endures through the generations. Perhaps this word play opens up a new understanding for us, about how relationships and space come together to support and strengthen one another. Perhaps it shows us how generations of relationships, fostered in God’s love, connect and are sent forth because of what can happen in a particular place.

In the midst of all of this good wrestling, I was reminded of the work of theologian Walter Brueggemann and his book *Prophetic Imagination*. He draws from the writings of Paul Ricœur, who said that we become prophets of our own existence by our own imagination.

I wonder if we often think of prophets and prophecy, and those who appreciate and cultivate a prophetic imagination, as being associated with Biblical characters of long ago, far separate from our world and journey of faith. In the same way, I wonder if we consider a prophetic nature to be associated only with an

individual, rather than being a possible experience and witness of a whole community. Might we instead wonder about what is the prophetic capacity of this congregation in the time ahead? How is this season in our shared life pushing us to embody being the church, through buildings *and* open, public spaces, in new and visible ways?

In making the case for prophetic imagination, Brueggemann offers this, “The prophetic imagination knows that the real world is the one that has its beginning and dynamic in the promising speech of God. The task of prophetic imagination and ministry is to bring to public expression [the hopes] and yearnings that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that we no longer know they are there.”¹

Westminster, as a “Telling Presence in the City,” is committed to justice ministries that bring to public expression hopes and yearnings. This body is listening in order to recognize what has long been denied and suppressed. This truth is imbedded in the DNA of the congregation, and is not a developing concept due to reflections on the pandemic.

An individual prophet *and* a group of people sharing in prophetic imagination can nurture an alternative consciousness, naming what *is* while proclaiming and working toward what *could be*. And that is where we find ourselves in this unique moment: emerging and designing that emergence. One of the assertions

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination, 2nd Edition*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2001) 64-65.

from Walter Brueggemann that has stuck with me the most is this: “The grieving cry learns to turn away from false listeners and to turn toward the ones who can help.”²

Does that turn happen in a shift toward listeners and helpers present in a large, open church building in the heart of a neighborhood in downtown Minneapolis? Or, does that shift happen when those same people leave the building to serve the good news of the gospel alongside others in the world?

I will admit to feeling energized, and more than a little bit daunted, by the notion of this duality that a reimagined and prophetic understanding of ministry is not about a building, while at the same time, it is very much about the potential of these spaces to welcome, heal, teach, proclaim, connect, and participate in change.

In preparing for this morning’s sermon, I had the gift of engaging in several Bible studies with members of the church. We dove into the texts and this idea of a communal prophetic imagination, how that relates to faith in a broad sense and in our daily lives. Westminster has two new members, Robin and Larry, who live outside of Denver and who found worship online right before Christmas. They have been part of the ministries and worship of the church ever since, attending small groups, Adult Education, and coffee hour- all online. Knowing their permanent home is in CO, and with no plans to relocate to the Twin Cities, they joined Westminster this past spring, affirming their sense of connection

² Ibid., 12-13.

to nurturing their faith among this group of believers. They have never been to this building, and we hope one day they might visit, but they have immersed themselves in the life of this place, even as “place” has a different definition for them.

As we meditated on God’s Word together, Larry shared this insight: “Prophecy is confronting that which is manifestly uncomfortable, especially if it means giving something up...like prejudices and security.” This led Robin to ask whether it is more or less painful to do that in the context of a community. Her sense is that it is less painful because in community, you have support and encouragement. The conversation led us to ask these questions: “As we are emerging from Covid, do we have a new outlook, and do we honor that life is so fragile? How do we go out positively as a collective into the world with newfound appreciation for life, humanity, and a need for community, all to honor each other?”

Lastly, they asked, “If we are committed to communal prophecy, how are we participating in what the future could be?” I give Larry full credit for the title of today’s sermon: *What Is and What Could Be*. He named this as being the heart of living out a shared prophetic imagination that is both in the now, and moving into where the Holy Spirit is leading.

Song and Rob Lee and I also shared in Bible study on the Luke 10 passage together, though we were able to do it in person. Here we listen not just to the sending of twelve disciples, but to an even larger group sharing in communal ministry. Rob wondered if we

interpret the seventy as a literal number, or does it represent a larger, agreed-upon quantity to those who first heard this story. There is mutuality and unity in this shared sense of ministry filtering through this story of disciples going forth while also staying put.

Here the seventy are out in the world, but are also told to make localized connections in people's homes. Do not greet anyone on the way, and remain in place. Do not move about from house to house, but root yourself in one place. This is a framework for prophetic imagination that is a practice, a part of what is and what could be. This is not passive work, separate from the needs of those around us. It is work that is grounded, woven through relationships, while at the same time, it is ministry on the move. Song and Rob articulated in the way Larry and Robin did, that being one of the seventy would be hard, uncomfortable and unsettling, but as Song said, "I am not the main character. We are not meant to lead self-centered lives."

According to Walter Brueggemann, "Prophetic witness is a mindset. It is a countercultural consciousness of how a community of faith sees all things. Therefore, to ask the question if one specific group of ministries are 'prophetic voices' might imply that other ministries within the same church setting are not." He goes on to say, "The mere presence of a question considering the prophetic nature of a specific group of ministries within a local congregation is in danger of misunderstanding the nature of prophetic witness...*all* functions of the church can and should be

prophetic voices that serve to criticize the dominant culture around us while energizing the faithful.”³

At Westminster, the choir singing praises to God in this sanctuary is prophetic ministry, as is last week’s Senior High mission trip. The youth used this building as their home, and went forth to share God’s love in dynamic ways in surrounding communities. The care of the facilities here is prophetic ministry, so that the building is ready to receive those who seek support in downtown Minneapolis. We were preparing this past week to welcome and shelter individuals who were displaced by a recent apartment fire in the city. While the Red Cross secured another option, we are ready should a future need arise. The Cuba Ministry Team organizing to send syringes to our partners on the island, to further safe Covid vaccinations, is prophetic ministry, as is our commitment in baptism in a few minutes to little Thomas Patrick, and parents Nicholas and Diana. Small group Bible studies meeting here on-site is prophetic ministry, as is finding ways for members and friends who live far beyond the boundaries of the Twin Cities to share in the love and justice of this congregation.

The church, in visible ways, imagines and enacts the prophetic nature of the people of God within and outside the walls of any one place. We are no longer in the time of what was, and with God’s help, we are participating in the shaping of what could be, and the physical walls of this church play a key role in that. But at

³ Ibid., 124-125.

the same time, let us be sure that they don't restrict the faithful in living out the good news as we know and follow Christ.

For more than a year, Westminster has had a guiding statement: *"Together we are the Body of Christ. While apart, we covenant still to be the church. We are not alone. Thanks be God!"*

You will see it on the cover of your bulletin today, for those worshipping in person. It was crafted in those early days of Covid, when we were just realizing this might go on for a little while, and when the church had emphatically left the building. It was a way to frame and proclaim theologically an understanding of this time.

Realizing we are in a time of shifting, from what is to what could be, a new statement developed at the end of this week to lead the congregation into the time to come. You will see it on the church's website and on the cover of next week's bulletin.

"Westminster offers new ways to gather and create community. We are the church in the world, online, and in person. We belong to one another and to God. Thanks be to God!"

We acknowledge what is and we commit to what can be, through the life and ministries of this community gathered here and where God's Spirit leads us. With prophetic imagination, the church leaves the building to love God and to love God's people, to serve God and to serve God's people. And the church returns

to this place to be nurtured and refilled to gather and create community and to affirm our belonging to God and one another.

I would like to close with the words of St. Teresa of Avila, from the 16th century, which serve as a reminder of the prophetic ministry that Jesus calls us to share. They are as true now, 500 years later, as they were then, and with imagination, may we enact them here, there, and anywhere God leads.

Christ has no body on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out to the world.

Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which he is to bless others now.

May it be so, and thanks be to God. Amen.