

“Brave New World!”
Colossians 1:11-20; Matthew 28:16-20

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Today is Christ the King Sunday. It is a day we pause to emphasize the Lordship of Jesus in our lives.

As Christians, we know Jesus is our King. Jesus is our Lord. Jesus is the fulness of God, the visible image of the Invisible God. That is, the more we learn about Jesus and know him personally, the more we know God.

As Christians, we understand Jesus is the head of the church. He is the firstborn of the dead. Through Jesus, God has brought peace and reconciliation to all creation.

As individuals, and as part of the universal Church, we carry out the mission Jesus gave us: making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to live the way Jesus wants us to. In other words, our mission is to spread the good news of how much God loves us.

On this earth, the Church is Christ’s body. It is alive. It is organic. Like all living, organic things, the Church is not static. It is constantly changing. Sometimes, it seems the Church is barely changing at all; so slow it is hard to notice. Sometimes, those changes are happening so fast our heads are spinning.

Imagine we are Jesus’ followers the year he died, about 30 AD. At that time, the Church is rural. Most of Jesus followers are country folk. We are probably Jewish, and we speak Aramaic in public but Hebrew when we are reading and discussing Scripture. We read our Scriptures from a scroll, and we worship on the Jewish Sabbath, Saturday.

By 100 AD, followers of Jesus have radically changed. As followers of Jesus in 100 AD, we almost certainly live in a town or a city. The Church is now a thoroughly urban institution. We are probably Gentiles, and we certainly speak Greek – even when we read and discuss Scripture.

Speaking of Scripture, by 100 AD scrolls are hopelessly passé. Now, we read our Scriptures from a codex, a pamphlet. Now, we can flip through our scriptures rather than endlessly rolling and unrolling a scroll.

Speaking of passé, so is worshipping on Saturday. That's Jewish. As good Christians, we worship God on Sunday.

In just 70 years, the Church has gone through tremendous change. And of course, it doesn't stop there. In 314 AD, Christianity becomes an officially recognized religion in the Roman Empire. By 400 AD, St Jerome has translated the Bible into Latin and Latin becomes the official language of the Bible and the Church for the next 1,000 years.

But in the 1400s, the Bible starts being written in the language of the people: English, French, German. In the 1500s, the Reformation gathers steam and before we know it, Protestantism is born.

Puritans, Pilgrims, and others bring the Church to America. As the immigrants spread across America, they take the Church with them. No town is really a town until it has several churches. Before long, Christianity is the de facto national religion of these newly United States of America.

By this point, the Church has come a long way. There has been a lot of change. New languages, new ways of reading, new places and ways of worshiping. The landscape of the Church radically changed since 30 AD. And, there is much more to come.

In the 1950s, the landscape begins changing in a hurry. The mid-1950s are the high-water mark for voluntary societies in America. Social clubs, civic groups and so forth, they all reach their peak in the 1950s.

Since then, voluntary societies in America have been on the decline. The Kiwanis Club, the Lions Club, the Rotary Club; you name it. When was the last time you saw the International Order of Odd-Fellows or Woodsmen of the World? How many people are banging on the doors of the Masonic Lodge, trying to join?

And furthermore, those who do join want to be a part, but they don't want to be in charge. They want to participate, but they don't want to be the secretary, the treasurer, or any of those other important jobs.

It's what we call the Bowling Alone phenomenon. In 1995, a Harvard professor, was doing a study on social cohesion. As part of that, he studied bowling leagues between the mid-1950s and the mid-1990s. What he found was that just as many people were bowling in the 1990s as in the 1950s.

The difference was that in the 1950s everyone was bowling in leagues. In the 1990s they were bowling alone.

Churches, like the Kiwanis and Lions and most every other voluntary society in America, have been shrinking. There are lots of reasons for it. People are busier now. They have fewer children. They are turned off by the hypocrisy of the church. There are lots of reasons – but the main reason is social change. As a culture, we are not joining groups as much as we used to. We're still bowling. But we're bowling alone.

And what's more. It's not going to stop. It's not going to stop!

According to the Gallup organization, in 1937, 73% of Americans belonged to a house of worship. In 2021, only 47% belonged to a house of worship.

In our own denomination, from 2013-2017, attendance in worship dropped 24.5%. Financial contributions dropped 15%. In our Synod, from 2013-2017, attendance in worship dropped by 25%. Financial contributions dropped by 36.5%.

The latest data from the Pew Research Center tells us by 2070, 50% of Americans will have no religious affiliation at all. Within the next 50 years, 50% of all Americans will have no religious affiliation at all. Fifty percent of all Americans will have no religious affiliation at all.

The landscape has changed. The landscape has changed, and we have to change with it. The church has to change with it.

Let me back up a bit.

Back in 1803, Thomas Jefferson was President of the United States. Like most people at that time, Jefferson was convinced there was a river that flowed from the headwaters of the Missouri river across the country to the Pacific. If someone could just find that river they could get to California in weeks instead of months, commerce would flourish, and everyone would be rich. If someone could just find that river.

So, in 1803, President Jefferson hired two men to go looking for that river: William Clark and Merriweather Lewis. Lewis and

Clark were ideal for that mission. They were frontiersmen. They knew how to build a shelter, ride a horse, shoot for food.

But, they were also river rats. They knew how to make paddles. They knew how to build boats and canoes. They knew how to navigate on water and how to draw maps while they were moving. Lewis and Clark were ideal for the mission.

Find the Pacific Ocean. That was the mission. Find an overland route to the Pacific Ocean. Off they went, with their crew, heading north up the Missouri river.

Finally, they got there. They were at the headwaters. They had made it. They looked to the west. And what did they see? Did they see a grand, glorious river flowing to the Pacific Ocean?

No! They saw the plains and the Rocky Mountains.

What were they going to do? All of a sudden everything had changed. Everything had changed. Except their mission. Except their mission. The mission was still the same. Find a route to the Pacific Ocean.

All of a sudden, these river rats had to become mountain men. It must have been a real shock. They had planned for one kind of expedition, an expedition along a river, an expedition they knew how to do.

All of a sudden, they had a different kind of expedition. They had to abandon their boats. They had to hoist their packs onto their backs. They had to turn their paddles into walking sticks.

Instead of using the muscles in their arms to paddle canoes they used the muscles in their legs to walk with packs on their backs. Instead of using fishing lines and hooks to get food, they used rifles and bullets. The landscape had changed but the mission had not. And so, they adapted.

Make no mistake, the landscape we are operating in has changed. We can worship in our recliner or in the pew. We sing and read Scripture on a screen. Meetings are hybrid: by video AND in person. Every year, there are more and more claims on our time. Every year, fewer and fewer people are interested in what we have to share.

The old ways of worshiping and ministry and faith formation were good. They worked well. And, they still matter. But, we also need to learn new ways of worshiping and ministry and faith

formation. Our landscape has changed but our mission is still the same. Sharing God's good news. Sharing God's good news.

In 30 AD, in 100 AD, in 314 and 400 AD, in the 1400s and 1500s, in the 1950s and 1990s, in 2022 and 2070, the mission remains the same. Baptizing, teaching, sharing God's good news. Only the landscape has changed. The most important part, the mission, remains the same.

The same year The King James Version of the Bible was printed, 1611, William Shakespeare wrote a play called *The Tempest*. It's about a young woman named Miranda. Miranda is 15 years old. For the last 12 years, ever since she was 3, Miranda and her father have lived alone on a deserted island. No other humans on the island.

One day, when Miranda is 15, there is a tremendous storm, a tempest. A ship is wrecked on their island. After the storm stops, the passengers begin coming ashore. These are the only other people Miranda has ever seen. She is mesmerized. She is enthralled. She is amazed to see other people. And O how wonderful, how handsome, how gorgeous, and marvelous they appear. Miranda cries out, "O, Brave new world, that has such people in it."

The problem, though, is Miranda is naïve. She hasn't seen other people. What we learn as the play goes on is these people are all lay-a-bouts. They're ne'er do wells, wastrels, the kind of people we wouldn't invite to a party. Miranda, sadly, doesn't know that.

For many of us, especially these last few years, it feels like we've been in a storm at sea. A *Tempest*. We've been tossed and turned upside down. We thought after the pandemic, everyone would naturally come back to church. But they haven't. We thought our giving would naturally increase. But it hasn't. We thought all we needed to grow our church were more young families. But those young families have things to do on Sunday, and they're getting smaller. We thought going to church was normal and natural and everyone else thought so, too. But people who think like us have been shrinking for 70 years, and it's not going to stop. Like Miranda, we have been naïve.

The landscape of ministry has changed. We are stepping into a brave new world. But friends, we still matter. The Church still matters! In fact, I think we matter now more than ever. Strong

churches that are committed to proclaiming God's good news are more important than ever. People still want to connect with each other in honest, genuine ways. People still want a sense of stability and certainty in their world. People still want to hear of God's love. They may not know it on a conscious level, but deep down inside they want what we have. And we can help them get it.

We can help them, but first we're going to have to turn our paddles into walking sticks. We're going to have to adapt to our new landscape.

"O, brave new world, that has such people in it." Poor Miranda. She was so naïve.

By God's grace, we are not Miranda. We are not naïve. We know people still need Jesus, even if they don't know it.

We know Jesus is our King. Jesus is our Lord. Jesus is the fulness of God, the visible image of the Invisible God. That is, the more we learn about Jesus and know him personally, the more we know God. We understand Jesus is the head of the church. He is the firstborn of the dead. Through Jesus, God has brought peace and reconciliation to all creation.

We know this. Everyone else needs to know it, too, whether they realize it or not. Whether they realize it or not, everyone is hungry to know what we know. Everyone is hungry to know what we know.

Yes, the landscape for ministry has changed. We are stepping into a brave new world. And that's OK. The most important thing has not changed. Jesus is Lord. The Holy Spirit is with us. God loves us now and always. Jesus is Lord. The Holy Spirit is with us. God loves us now and always.

So then, let's take our paddles, turn them into walking sticks, and joyfully travel into this brave new world, making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to live the life Jesus has taught us to live. Amen.