

“State of the Church Address”
Isaiah 40:21-31

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Every year on the day of our Annual Meeting I like to give a State of the Church address. There's not a lot that inspires me in politics - mostly things that aggravate me - but I do love watching Presidents and Governors and even Mayors reflect on the past year and lay out a vision for the year ahead. It's about more than campaign promises. It's about bringing us back to the values they will be leading from and speaking the truth about what is going well and what needs work. I'm just grateful that in our church context there isn't someone waiting in the wings to give a rebuttal address when I am finished.

When people ask why it is that people continue to choose to belong and participate in a church when there are so many other options competing for our time, I usually say that church continues to be important because it helps us connect with something larger than ourselves. Sometimes that larger something is God - church grounds us in an understanding of a Creator whose work is more expansive than we can imagine and a Savior whose commitment to radical love is deeper than we can ever fully understand.

And sometimes that larger something is community - we see that in a church we can make a bigger impact when we work together. 100 voices shouting for justice are easier to hear than a lone voice in the wilderness. Many people using their gifts and skills together results in big networks of compassion, support, and community outreach.

But last year was different. Last year was a year when all of our lives felt smaller. We canceled travel plans, reunions, and parties and instead we stayed home. We narrowed the circles of people we would typically spend time with, some of us not seeing anyone outside our household for weeks at a time. We minimized the stores we needed to go to, we stopped eating out, we moved our lives online. We went from living as if the world was our oyster to feeling afraid or uncertain about venturing out too far, being surrounded by too many people, getting too close to one another.

All of us made sacrifices in the name of love: to care for our neighbors, to care for our elders and immune compromised folks of all ages, to care for ourselves. There were times when our worlds felt so small and tucked away that when we talked to each other and said, “What have you been up to lately?” There was silence, because we couldn’t figure out a single interesting anecdote or activity that was out of the normal.

But even as our day to day lives shrank, God, whom the prophet Isaiah says “stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in,” continued to work in our world and community, always pointing us back to something bigger than we could fully imagine or take in.

Our worship service moved online, and even as we grieved the weekly time together in person, we started hearing stories of our worship community expanding. Parents were worshipping with children who lived across the country for the first time in years. Members of Edgewood who had moved away began to reconnect through our online services. Parents of young children could be present at home and feed themselves spiritually. So even this year as we begin to make plans to returning to our sanctuary and resuming worship in person, we

understand that we are hearing a call from God to imagine worship bigger than what it used to be - to find a way to continue to include folks near and far, at home and in person, to accept the challenge and opportunity to not just go back to the way things used to be.

In a year that was defined by scarcity, Edgewood's call to stewardship expanded. While people were hoarding toilet paper and buying flour by the bushel, Edgewood started a COVID Emergency Relief Fund to give away several thousand dollars to communities and organizations most impacted by the pandemic. When a federal loan was made available to businesses, our Governance Council voted to honor our value of separating church and state and did not apply for the funds - only after taking this leap of faith did it become clear our members and supporters would continue fulfilling their pledges at a rate that not only sustained but increased our financial health throughout the year. A spirit of generosity was infectious and our opportunity in the coming year is to deepen our stewardship to grow our outreach impact in our wider community.

And in a year when many experienced real feelings of loneliness and isolation, Edgewood kept finding its way back to each other. We created connections through penpals, Sunday afternoon walks, a phone tree of caring, and in every meeting of every team and committee asking the question, "Who are we missing? Who do we need to reach out to?" Last year we grew in our understanding of our call to care for one another, to show up with persistence and compassion, to nurture old relationships and develop new ones. In doing so we are a part of a web of connection and caring that is much larger than any one of us could manage or lead on our own.

I believe that God is doing big things in our midst, and I believe that no matter what this year brings us with vaccines and variants, God will continue to show up, pointing us toward

generosity, love, and praise, reminding us that none of us is alone, we are all in this together.

May it be so. Amen.