

“Is It Gonna Be Okay?”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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Deuteronomy 31:7-8 NRSV ⁷ Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, “Be strong and bold, for you are the one who will go with this people into the land that the LORD has sworn to their ancestors to give them, and you will put them in possession of it. ⁸ It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.”

John 21:15-17 NRSV ¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”

The “elephant in the room,” as they say, is that two weeks from today will be my last Sunday leading worship here as your pastor. As these final weeks were approaching, I was asked if there were any particular messages I wanted to be sure to impart to you before I retire. That reminded me of an incident that occurred in our driveway many years ago. We had packed up both cars to drive our oldest son Kevin to his first year at The College of Wooster. As we locked the house, my wife said to me, “Why don’t you have Kevin ride with you so you can talk on the way there?”

I remember responding, “What do you think I’m going to be able to tell him in the next sixty minutes that we haven’t been able to teach him in the past eighteen years?”

And that’s sort of the way I feel this month. What novel perspective or insight am I possibly going to be able to squeeze into these last three sermons that I’ve not shared over nearly thirty-two years?

According to the Gospel of John, after the Last Supper Jesus took time to talk to his disciples about how they should prepare for what was coming. In John’s gospel Jesus spent five chapters offering what’s called his “farewell discourse.” *Five chapters!*

I don’t have five chapters for you. But I did think of something. I thought of the question that may be running through your minds. Perhaps it’s in your subconscious, or maybe it’s grabbed hold of your thoughts and you keep wondering about it.

- As you come to terms with the reality that I really am going to retire from this pastorate...
- and as you try to imagine someone else standing in this pulpit...
- and as you try to imagine someone else leading a meeting...
- and as you try to imagine someone else visiting you before you go in for surgery...
- and as you try to imagine someone else sitting with your family as you meet with the funeral director...

...as you try to imagine the weeks and months and years and decades ahead, the question that may be echoing in your head and stirring butterflies in your stomach might be a question as simple as, *"Is it gonna be okay?"*

This church is entering a time of change—a time when there will be feelings of loss and sadness, yes; and some anxiety about the unknown, of course; but also wonder and excitement about what the future holds. As our church steps into this next segment of its faith journey, it's natural to wonder what lies ahead, what will be different, what will remain unchanged, what *and who* we can depend on.

After all, there are only about sixty people on our membership roll today who can remember a time when someone else was the pastor of this church. Everyone else has come to this church during my pastorate. It'll be a big change—for you and for me.

If you were asked to name some important figures in the Old Testament, it's almost a lock that one of the names you'd come up with is that of Moses:

- the baby floating in the basket;
- hearing God through a burning bush;
- the escape from pharaoh's armies through the Red Sea;
- the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai;
- forty years in the wilderness—*that* Moses.

But after all they had been through together, Moses and the Israelites, after decades of working and worshipping and playing together, eventually Moses' time of leadership came to an end. God then guided the Israelites through the agency of another figure selected for leadership, a person named Joshua—yes, the one who "fought the battle of Jericho, and the walls came a'tumblin' down." Moses encouraged Joshua, endorsed Joshua, blessed Joshua to carry on. In Deuteronomy Chapter 31 we read that Moses told Joshua, "It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed."¹

So, *"Is it gonna be okay?"* Yes. Yes, it's gonna be okay. God isn't going anywhere. For years and years and years God has blessed this church and its members and leaders with inspiration and devotion, commitment and generosity, faithful trust and inspired ingenuity. As Moses told Joshua, *God will be with you. God will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.*

At the end of John's gospel, after the account of the crucifixion and resurrection, the gospel tells of Jesus having a kind of breakfast meeting with the disciples on a beach at the Sea of Galilee. They had just come ashore from a fishing trip. Jesus spoke to Peter. In my mind's eye, I picture Jesus addressing Peter face to face, but speaking in a way that included the other disciples, too.

Speaking symbolically as he often did, Jesus gave Peter and the others instructions: *Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.*² Jesus was handing over to them the responsibility to protect and nurture the people who had been in *his* care, especially those who were vulnerable, needful, requiring guidance and reassurance. Jesus was comfortable transferring authority and responsibility to his friends. And I'm

¹ Deuteronomy 31:8 NRSV

² John 21:15-17 NRSV

comfortable with you, my friends, as you embrace this journey of transition to whatever God has in store for you. *“Is it gonna be okay?”* Yes, it’s gonna be okay.

One of the things this pastoral transition presents is the opportunity to *not* do things as you’ve always done them. Especially after such a long ministry, this is a time to realize that just because I always did something in such-and-such a way doesn’t mean that there aren’t other ways of doing them. Indeed, you’ll be able to consider what maybe *doesn’t* need to happen anymore, as well as new opportunities you might want to consider. This will be a time overflowing with chances to say, “Thank you, status quo, but we want to see what else is possible besides.”

Recently I heard of an example of just that: imagining what else is possible. That’s what a pastor named Kristen did when she accepted a call to a church in a rural part of our state.

Soon after she arrived, she was looking around the building and found the nursery. When she opened the door, she discovered it had become a storage room. When she asked about it, she was told that it had been years since the congregation had a baby in their midst. Kristen asked if it would be okay if she cleaned out the nursery. Two ruling elders offered to help, and over the next few weeks, the three of them emptied the nursery and repainted it. After visiting a few garage sales, they found a nice rocking chair, changing table, some lamps, and some toys. For a few months, the nursery sat empty. Then, in the spring, a young family visited the church. The parents were delighted with the nursery. The young mother said it looked like they had prepared it just for her daughter, and the elder said, “As a matter of fact, we did. We were waiting for you.”³

Kristen’s church had the option of accepting the status quo and saying “That’s just the way it is and we’re doing pretty much all we can.” But they didn’t. They chose not to settle for the way things were simply because that was familiar and comfortable.

We haven’t come across a nursery that’s been hidden for years, but in recent months we’ve already started exploring different ways of being the church. This summer we added our “Pray-ground” in the sanctuary and we’ve turned part of our infant nursery into a classroom. We’ve broadened worship to include instrumental music like string quartets, woodwind ensembles, brass quintets. The transitional journey ahead will undoubtedly reveal opportunities for new ways of approaching how we do mission, the activities we engage in, how church business functions are done — the horizon is wide open.

So coming back to the question of the day as this church is on the cusp of a journey of pastoral transition: *“Is it gonna be okay?”* Actually, no. No, it’s not gonna be *okay*. It’s gonna be good. It’s gonna be the *same* and it’s gonna be *different*. It’s gonna be *healthy*. It’s gonna be *God-led* and *Spirit-driven*. And it’s gonna be good. Thanks be to God!

[se20220918; © 2022 Jon M. Fancher]

³ — Rodger Nishioka, “Leaders Hope,” *PCUSA.org*, August 16, 2021.

<https://www.pcusa.org/news/2021/8/16/regarding-ruling-elders-monthly-series-serving-fai/>. Retrieved September 25, 2021.