

“Is it time for the church to die?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
March 15, 2020

Exodus 17:1-7 and John 4:5-42

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Let me tell you a story. It's a love story, in a way. Many years ago, there were a people who loved God. God led them out of slavery to a land of milk and honey. They built a nation there, devoted to the worship of the God they loved so much. But then an argument arose. Some of them said that God's holy mountain was in Jerusalem, in the Holy of Holies of God's Temple. Only there could one encounter the true God and become clean. Others, however, said God's holy mountain was in Samaria, on one of the highest peaks in what is now the Palestinian West Bank, Mount Gerizim. There they built their own temple and worshiped God.

It's here that our love story turns to conflict. The worshipers on Mount Gerizim became known as Samaritans. They were the descendants of the northern kingdom of Israel, destroyed long ago. They were the ones who remained, intermarrying with people of other cultures and religions. They became unclean, untouchable, in the eyes of their neighbors, the Jews. The Jews were the worshipers in Jerusalem, the descendants of the southern kingdom of Judah, who were clasped in chains and taken into exile, only to return 70 years later. Over the years, they fought, and so the people who loved God became enemies.

It is this centuries-old debate that courses beneath the encounter of Jesus, a Jew, and the Samaritan woman at the well: Is God's holy mountain in Jerusalem or Samaria? Whose is the true religion? The Samaritan woman references this age-old debate, fully expecting Jesus to take the familiar stance.

Instead, Jesus shocks her. He says that both mountains shall pass away: “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.” He tells her that the thing she and her people love so dearly, and the thing that his own people love so dearly, they will both come to an end.

I suppose that's the problem with love stories: they always come to an end.

One of the most beautiful moments in recent cinematic history is a love story of its own. But it's not a drama or a rom-com. It's a children's Pixar movie called *Up*. For five minutes, no words are spoken, in a montage of moments from the life of two people who love each other: Carl and Ellie. Who here—I want you to raise your hand—has openly wept like a baby at this scene? If you did not raise your hand, I am going to assume it's because you have not seen the movie and not because you are heartless monsters.

The montage begins with Carl and Ellie getting married. They fix up a home together. They take picnics in the park, lying on their backs, watching the clouds. They go to work. They sit side by side in their home, quietly reading, hands touching. They lie on a green hill and dream of a child. They paint a nursery. And then the music changes, as we see Ellie crumpled in a chair, crying, as the

doctor tells them they've had a miscarriage. Later, Carl and Ellie make a promise to save up enough money to fulfill her childhood dream of going to this faraway place called Paradise Falls. Of course, as life goes on, they keep having to dip into their savings: a flat tire, a broken leg, house repairs. They grow old and gray. They have a good life. Carl decides they're finally going to take that trip after all. He buys the tickets, prepares the surprise. But before he gets a chance to tell her, Ellie gets sick, really sick. Ellie dies.

A few years pass, and the world has changed. All the houses around Carl have been demolished, replaced with a bustling city of skyscrapers. They want his home. He refuses. How can he give up this place that he and Ellie built together, not just wood and paint, but a lifetime of love, his last connection to her?

I suspect he may have felt like that Samaritan woman at the well. What do you mean, Jesus, that this place I love so much must pass away?

It might be how we feel. This church isn't just wood and paint to us. It's baptisms, and weddings, and funerals. It's the songs we've sung all our lives. It's the children who've played and learned and believed here. It's the grandparents who held our hands in these pews. It's the old Bibles that have given us hope. It's the food we've shared with the hungry, the people we've visited in the hospital, the justice we've proclaimed with those who cannot breathe. It's God, the God we love, the God we need. And now they want to take that from us. They want to tell us that this place doesn't matter anymore, that it's not relevant. And what if it's not just the world telling us that this thing we have loved so dearly is passing away? What if it's Jesus too?

Here, this Lent, as we walk to the cross, it may be that Jesus meets us today at a similar well. We come with our churches and buildings, our doctrines, our denominations. We come with debates and disagreements. We come with worry for the future of the church, desperate to save what we love. And to all of this, Jesus says: it shall pass away. It needs to die.

Why might Jesus say that? Is it simply because times have changed and something new is needed? Is it because we have allowed our disagreements to become more important than our shared love? Is it because we've started worshiping a religion rather than God? Is it because we've grown too comfortable and have forgotten that the way of the cross takes us to the suffering and the oppressed? I don't know, but it grieves me.

Of course, we know a secret, don't we? Love stories may end, but there's always a new beginning. In talking with the Samaritan woman, Jesus prophesies not just an ending but also the beginning of something new. He says, "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth." God won't just be in a temple or on a mountain. God won't be the special property of one people, or one theology. God will be everywhere, especially in here [*point within*]. God will be more than an idea; God will be as intimately close as spirit, as breath, as love, as Jesus Christ himself—in whom God is incarnate.

Toward the end of the movie *Up*, Carl is grasping Ellie's scrapbook, convinced that he failed her. He imagines the empty pages, where the adventures he promised were supposed to go but never did. Then by accident, the page turns. There's a picture from their wedding, and then a birthday, and then the park, photo after photo. All their beautiful life is there, and then a note written from the

hospital, saying, “Thanks for the adventure—now go have a new one!” He hadn’t failed her; their life had been the adventure. Now it was time for a new one.

For the first time, Carl leaves behind his house and befriends a young boy, Russell, whom he’s ignored until now. Suddenly, Carl looks at Russell, this boy with an absentee father, this boy so desperate for love, and he realizes that all along, here was the child that he and Ellie had wanted all those years ago. Here was his new adventure. He gets to be a dad.

Mountains and temples may pass away, love stories may end, but Jesus tells us today that there is always another page, always hope beyond the cross, always a new beginning.

We haven’t failed. We’ve had a great adventure with the church. And now, perhaps, that page of the story has ended. But why should we be afraid? We are a people of resurrection. God has something amazing in store for us, if we’d but brave the turning of the page.

Perhaps it starts with lovingly being with the church as it dies, a kind of hospice, as we patiently grieve and honor what has been, while opening our hearts to see what God births in the ashes.

What might we then be free to become? How might it change us theologically, missionally? Who might be welcome who isn’t right now? How might we relate to God differently?

Maybe this new church won’t have walls. Maybe it will take us, as it took Jesus, into all the places in our lives and our communities that are like Samaria.

Maybe it will be less about hierarchy and more about mutuality, the kind shared by Jesus and the Samaritan woman, both of whom had water the other needed.

Maybe this new church will be a conversation. An intimate, loving, real conversation that risks vulnerability, communicates curiosity in the other, and wants to be changed in the process.

Maybe we will become newly aware of the immanence of God, binding us to nature, to the arts, to science and philosophy, to justice, to one another.

Maybe we won’t just think about God; we’ll touch, and see, God—as close as breath, as spirit, as Jesus himself. Church won’t be a couple hours when they’re convenient; church, faith, the path of the cross, God will be our whole life. Everything.

Perhaps this time of anxiety about coronavirus, and so much else, with all the closures and social distancing, is the perfect opportunity to explore what this new worship of God in spirit and truth looks like. We will find courage we never knew we had. We will make sacrifices for the other, for those who are vulnerable, out of a love we’re just beginning to understand. We will find new ways to be in relationship with one another and with God. We will learn the depth of prayer. We will Zoom and Facebook Live and maybe even TikTok. We will cultivate new silence in our lives, a less hurried pace, a reborn Sabbath. We will rediscover God.

For in every ending, there is a beginning. To a love story. To a church. To a cross. **Amen.**