

SERMON: January 13, 2019 Lighthouses, Bathrooms, and Third Spaces
TEXT: Isaiah 43:1-7 (NRSV)
SUBJECT: Going into the future with confidence
THEME: Wherever God calls us, God will provide.
PURPOSE: To encourage listening to God's call beyond just our own desires.
PIC: Walking through the Red Sea?

You may be wondering about the title of the sermon today – “Lighthouses, Bathrooms, and Third Spaces”. I want to tell you three stories about church growth and ministry in the world today.

As you know, we are planning on making a decision later on this afternoon about whether or not we will proceed with a \$1.5 million expansion of our facilities over the next three years. I've only come into this project over the past six months, so I would like to know the “WHY”.

.....
I have stated since I got here that there is only one reason for us to be a church here on Marco Island – ***to help people to find hope and healing through Jesus Christ.*** Everything that we do has to reflect that mission, or we aren't really being a church. For those who are already believers, we want to help each other to become more like Jesus and to equip each other to go out and serve in the community so that others will want to trust in Him. And for those who aren't believers yet, we want to offer them love and grace so that they will see that there is a God who cares about them and wants them with Him for eternity.

In today's world, most of that work of outreach is going to take place off of our premises. We will have some events that draw people in, like the Arts Festival and the Strawberry Festival and Mothers' Morning Out, but the truth is that we are going to find more lost people off our premises than on it.

Do we want to reach the lost? Do we really believe that people who die without knowing Christ will spend eternity separated from Him? If we do, then there's no question about whether or not we should reach out to the broken of our community! To not do so tells Jesus that we really don't care about Him, because we don't want to share the life that He has offered us!

.....
So why build buildings? Why not just do all of our work outside of the church, and start home bible studies and prayer groups and mission teams?

Some churches have gone that route. But I want to lift up three real-world examples of what the church can be.

.....



<https://images.pexels.com/photos/302700/pexels-photo-302700.jpeg?cs=srgb&dl=cafe-european-italian-302700.jpg&fm=jpg>

I want to start with a man who had spent some time walking around through Italy. He noticed that the Italian people had lots of cafes. They seemed very inefficient. People would order just a coffee or a loaf of bread and some wine and some cheese, and then sit there for hours just talking with each other. If they would just eat their food and get on their way, that would free the table up for more customers, better turnaround, the store owner could make a lot more money!

When I was in Greece we found a little café like that. They must be all over Europe. There was no pressure to hurry up and get done, like in restaurants in America. We were expected to sit there all day if we wanted to, and just chat.

This man of whom I was speaking discovered something that he thought he could take back to America – something called a “third space”. You have your home, your first space. You have your work, your second space. But what the cafés provided was a third space that you could go and just be. A place you could belong, and either do something or not do something. No one was forcing you to do or be anything. You had the freedom and the security to just be there.

So this gentleman came back to America and tried it out.



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/63/Starbucks_Coffee_Mannheim_August_2012.JPG

How many of you go to Starbucks? I go every once in a while. I’m not a coffee drinker. I love the smell, but I just don’t like the taste. And if I don’t like the taste, I’m not about to spend \$8 bucks on something that I could make at home or get at McDonald’s for a whole lot less!

But Starbucks is not selling coffee. That’s just a by-product. What are they really selling?

Third space. A place where you can come and just be there.

It's not home. It's not work. You can make it whatever you want it to be. You can make it a temporary office (there's always plenty of electrical outlets and free wifi); you can have a game night with your friends (there are large tables and lots of snacks); you can go and read a book or watch people walk down the sidewalk. It is designed as a safe place to go and do something or do nothing. You are known; you are respected; you are given a place here.

We need gathering places. We were created by God as social animals. We need each other. We need places to sit together and look into each other's faces and hear each other's stories.

Synagogue = Gathering together

The word "synagogue" means literally "Gathering together". Synagogue wasn't just a place to go hear a message, sing some songs, take up an offering, and go back home for the week. It was a place of community. There was Hebrew school, and political discussion, and social events. It was a community space where you could come and do something, or do nothing. You were welcome there.

There are lots of "gathering places" here on the island – the beach, the YMCA, the library, the restaurants – but where do people feel safe enough to come explore their faith? Can we offer something that is not being offered anyplace else?

It would be good to have a place to stand out of the elements between services on Sunday morning, but that's not what I'm interested in. I want to see a space that is being used all week long – small groups, and community forums, and exercise classes. I know some churches that have coffee houses and bookstores and even a Chic-fil-a in their lobby! (Just not open on Sunday!)

How could God use our new lobby to draw people to Himself?

Now – bathrooms.



<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0b/2008-11-22 Carrabba%27s Italian Grill in Durham.jpg>

One of my favorite restaurants is “Carrabba’s”. That’s where I like to go for special occasions – birthdays, anniversaries, more than just a night out at McDonald’s.

I like the food. The steak gorgonzola is my favorite! But one of the things that I appreciate the most is their bathrooms.

It’s always clean. The soap smells like lilac. They have Italian language lessons playing in there. I feel as if I’ve been transported to another world, that somebody put a lot of effort into making this a place where people are happy to go, not just a necessary place to go.

Studies have shown that most people (women, specifically) will decide whether or not they will go back to a restaurant by the bathrooms.

The food may be good; the service may be excellent; but if the bathrooms are somehow not up to par, people don’t want to be there.

The same principle holds true for churches – ***two of the most important places that are a critical to people’s decisions about continuing to attend a church are – the bathrooms, and the nursery.***

Now, I don’t particularly like that. That’s kind of hurtful – I would think that it’s all because of the magnificent pastor!

But the reality is that there is a “theology of the grounds” – that is, whether our buildings are warm and welcoming and easy to use. It is a very important factor of whether or not people stay. It says “we care about you, we care about your children, we want for you to feel special.”

How can God use our bathrooms and potentially showers to make people feel welcome?

Now, before I talk about lighthouses, let’s look at the scripture for a moment –

We have mentioned before that Isaiah was written to a people who were living through some rough times. Their faith wasn’t understood or respected by the culture in which they lived; they were persecuted (or at least looked down upon); they had many hardships.

But Isaiah speaks to the people the word of the Lord –

***But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:***

***Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.***

Isaiah was reminding the people that, even though they would have difficulties in this life, “Fear not!” God has not left us; God is here with us!

Isaiah tells the people that yes, there is evil around them. They have experienced hard times. They will experience more hard times in the future. Notice he says, “WHEN you pass through the waters...WHEN you walk through the fire”!

That’s an indication that the hard times are not over yet! (Not a very good recruiting poster, if you ask me!)

But God is saying, “I will still be with you.”

Times may get hard, but that does not mean that God has failed! God is still at work, redeeming the world and drawing it to Himself!

I asked the group on Wednesday afternoon what they thought God was saying to our church through this scripture. Why this scripture now? One thing that they heard was this:

Even when we get into the middle of it, we still have to remain open to God.

I asked what they meant, and they said, “With this building project, we might find that things get difficult. We could get lost. But if we go into it with the idea that it’s not for us, it’s for the people that He wants to reach that aren’t here yet, we can stay focused.”

I love that group. Sometimes it helps me to get focused, too!

Now – let me talk about lighthouses.

All along the New England coastland you will find these ultra-exclusive country clubs, built around old lighthouses.



https://c1.staticflickr.com/8/7357/10978513495_532d10c315_b.jpg

Where did they come from?

Years ago, before we had a weather-prediction and a full Coast Guard active in that area, the rocky coastline and frequent winter storms would cause many shipwrecks. The people that lived along the coast began to build lighthouses to warn ships of the dangers, and when a shipwreck happened, the people would go out and rescue the sailors and bring them into the lighthouse to nurse them back to health.

In the summertime there weren't as many storms and the weather was much nicer, so sometimes the people would gather together and have picnics or cotillions at the lighthouse. They began to fix up the downstairs areas and put in nice carpeting and furniture and made it pretty nice!

But in the winter, when they went back to their routine of going out on stormy night to rescue shipwreck victims, what do you think happened?

Some people began to complain! "We just got these nice carpets, and these comfortable sofas, and now we're getting mud and sand and blood on them! Isn't there someplace else we could take the injured people? We've worked really hard to make this nice!"

They began to be at odds with one another. Some said, "This is a Lighthouse Society – this is what we do, rescue injured people and bring them in here to get better." But as time went on, the "preserve" voices got louder than the "save" voices, and eventually those who wanted to rescue people from danger had to move out and started a new lighthouse where they could rescue people like they had in the beginning.

Unfortunately, this pattern would repeat itself time after time, and that's why today you will find ultra-exclusive "Lighthouse Society" country clubs along the New England coastline, built around lighthouses, who no longer go out to rescue anybody.

What does that say about the church?

We aren't exempt from the desire to build nice things for ourselves. We can even start out with great intentions – but we can be tempted to be more interested in “preserving” than in “saving”.

I see our mission as a lighthouse. Ten years from now I would like to see a thriving small group ministry going on that meets here every day – where people feel safe in a “third place”.

I want for people to like how the bathrooms smell.

I want to hear children's laughter on the playground.

I want to hear babies cry, and I want to smell coffee and popcorn (and maybe Chic-fil-a!)

I want to see young people open up a Bible and start asking questions. I want to see older people listening to them and really listening before they start answering.

I want to have people get here early and stay late after service on Sunday, because there is a place where they can sit down with their old friends and meet new friends here in our lobby.

I want for there to be a line up here, people waiting to get baptized because they have found the peace that they were looking for, because somebody from our church listened to them and made them feel like they mattered.

There is a fourth point that would be helpful to share –

I always send my sermons out to my family when I finish them, and my sister who is a pastor in England read what I had written and responded. She said that, over in England, less than 2% of the population go to church. It has become a very non-theistic society, and a lot of churches as a result are finding it difficult to keep their doors open.

One of the things that they are doing is transforming their spaces. Church are working with businesses and developers to make community centers and shopping areas, just trying to stay alive.

One of the interesting things about this, though, is that even the agnostic society that they are living in still feel the need for “sacred places”. They don't want to come in and just gut the church and make something totally different out of them; they want to still maintain some space that is “different” – what we would call “holy”, or dedicated to spirituality.

There is hope for the churches to realize that the world still thinks they need a space. The world isn't sure what it is that they need, but they notice that there is something different about churches, and they want to still have them there, somehow.

I'm not sure exactly what that means for us, but it is hopeful. We believe that God created all of us with an inborn desire to know Him, and I believe that's what the developers in Great Britain are responding to. They know that there is more than what they can just see and feel and buy and sell.

We still need sacred places. I want for our church to be one where people feel comfortable coming.

One more story - it's about a man I knew at the church I served in Estero, almost 20 years ago.

Forest was in his 90's, and if ever there was someone who was humble before his God, it was him. He and his wife were faithfully there every Sunday, and Forest's place was always at the front door, greeting people as they came in.

We had two sets of double-glass doors that led into our narthex, and Forest would stand there as people came in to greet them.

One day Forest came into my office. He had been concerned, because he was losing his eyesight. His wife could still drive him, but he was afraid that he might not be able to stand at the front door and greet anybody much longer.

And Forest said something to me that I will never forget. He said, "Pastor, I think I know why the Lord has taken my eyesight.

"It's so that I'll greet everybody the same."

I didn't even know how to respond to something like that. Here was a man, so humble, so desirous to serve that it broke his heart to think that he may not be able to do it anymore.

But he found that his fears were unjustified. God always had a place for him.

Before, Forest could see who was coming in and greet them by name, if he knew them. But now, he had no idea who was coming in. All he saw was a shadow, a shape – and he reached his hand out to welcome them in the name of Jesus.

What fears do we have? About the future, about the United Methodist Church, about our world, about this new building project?

What fires or floods will we pass through? Do we fear that we will lose sight of why we're here?

Are we afraid of spending the money? Do we fear the change that will come from a whole new set of people coming in that God is going to send?

When God calls us, we have nothing to fear. That doesn't mean that everything will always go smoothly and that there will never be any problems. It also doesn't mean that we will always agree upon everything. But what it DOES mean is that, **when we surrender everything to God first, we will end up in a stronger place than we ever imagined.**

But now thus says the LORD,

he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

² *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;*

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

³ *For I am the LORD your God,*

the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

I give Egypt as your ransom,

Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

⁴ *Because you are precious in my sight,*

and honored, and I love you,

I give people in return for you,

nations in exchange for your life.

⁵ *Do not fear, for I am with you;*

I will bring your offspring from the east,

and from the west I will gather you;

⁶ *I will say to the north, "Give them up,"*

and to the south, "Do not withhold;

bring my sons from far away

and my daughters from the end of the earth—

⁷ *everyone who is called by my name,*

whom I created for my glory,

whom I formed and made."