

A Few Thoughts for the Hunkered-Down

Tuesday, July 28, 2020

The Church, Seen by Faith

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. —Revelation 7:9

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for the conviction of things not seen. —Hebrews 11:1

With the national shutdown begun in mid-March, there came a strange and most unsettling experience. Suddenly, it seemed as though the Church had disappeared! Even on an Easter morning the sanctuary was eerily silent and empty. The people were gone from sight and it all had the feel of a “Twilight Zone” adventure. Since that time, we have moved on through a “yellow” then on to the present “green” phase, and folks are out and about much more. We are gathering for Sunday worship, but so many are still unable to attend due to health concerns, and the masks and distance do much to dampen the fellowship. Our activities, particularly “Lunch with Luke,” our fund raisers, and Vacation Bible School have been indefinitely suspended or significantly adapted. Where did everybody go? What happened? Where is the Church?

Of course, the Church is not the only enterprise which seems to have disappeared. There was no parade, no 4th in the park, and all kinds of organizations and businesses have gone into hiding. “When will this end?” we wonder, and we discuss the hopes of a vaccine and anticipate a restoration to normal by New Year’s. It is good to have such hopes, but we cannot be sure that this will happen as hoped, and we certainly do not want to sit idly, merely waiting for that better day. What shall we do when the Church seems to have disappeared?

Is my lament of the disappearing Church an apt observation, or might it be a pity-party which I throw for myself when feeling down, or might it be some mixture of the two? “Where is the Church and how can we get back together?” is a good question, and God has given me some wonderful hints as to the answer. These hints may come suddenly and joyfully in an unexpected phone call, in a hymn during worship (muffled as it may sound as we sing through masks), in an e-mail or Facebook message. I hear beautiful stories of ministries and kindnesses happening all around, and know that for every story heard there are dozens of blessings going forth. Suddenly I am reminded of the Family which cannot be separated, and that we are one! These days

I cannot see the Church with my eyes, but God is teaching me to see the Church by faith.

The Church is alive and vibrant. God's Spirit continues to gather people from around the world, and to work in our neighborhoods, families and congregations. Ministry has been very different for me in these days as so much of my work involved writing and doing videos. I need to remember the response to a message I published which came from a woman in Wisconsin! The Church is moving forward in ways which we cannot see and understand. God has a plan, and God's plans are never frustrated.

We see some of the Church with our eyes, but most of it is to be seen with the eyes of faith. This lesson has been learned by many before me. Consider John the Apostle in the Island of Patmos, exiled for his faith and proclamation. How lonely he must have felt, and how discouraged he may have been. Were there many or even any believers with him there in his exile? Certainly, John must have wondered, and perhaps worried, about the Church from which he was separated. God gave John a glorious vision, and part of that vision was a glimpse of the Triumphant Church with people from every nation, language and tribe. God was showing John that the Church, though only partially seen in this life, is going forth in power.

Circumstances have dispersed the Church, and it is hard to see the Church for this season. Let us not be discouraged, and let us pray that God will give us eyes of faith to see the Church, as John saw the Church, universal and growing. God's Church is going strong! Can you see it?

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light, look favorably upon thy whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; and by the tranquil operation of thy perpetual providence carry out the work of man's salvation; and let the whole world feel and see that things which were cast down are being raised up that those which had grown old are being made new; and that all things are returning into unity through him by whom all things were made, even thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

—Gelasian Sacramentary, 5th century