

I’ve had the honor of serving with you for two years, four months, twelve days; but who’s counting?

This has truly been a good time for me, to be part of this great church in this time of transition, to see all that God is doing through you and with you, and to think about all the wonderful things that will be happening here in the name of Jesus Christ.

That’s why I think I understand what Paul was feeling when he wrote this letter to the Thessalonian Church.

In his case, he had helped start the church, and he wasn’t there long, but he’s writing them, and this is where I connect with him, he’s still excited about being part of what they are doing, as he says, *“Everybody in the world knows about your faith, we don’t have to say anything.”*

He’s not writing about what he did, what had happened. He wasn’t looking back. He’s writing to encourage them to keep on, to look ahead, to the future of the church, their future as Christians in their world.

The transition between installed ministers has been a time to do what Paul is writing about: to discover how a church like this will continue to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

I want you to look around you today. Try to imagine sitting here in 1857.

As a church, you’re in a new sanctuary, completed a little over a year ago, and you moved into it from what had been your church home just inside the arch on the university campus for nearly thirty-five years.

A new location and a new building being paid for with all the anxiety that brings, and then imagine someone trying to tell you about the Atrium, the Fellowship Hall, the courtyard, the choir rooms,

the Weekday School, the Children’s ministry suite, or the PIT, or anything else about this magnificent facility and all the wonderful people.

It would be so hard to believe.

But you have to ask yourself this question: why is it still here?

Why has this church been maintained, renovated, and its doors thrown open for nearly two hundred years for so many people to serve and be served the gospel of Jesus Christ?

When the Riverside church in New York City was dedicated in February of 1931, it was and is one of the most impressive church buildings in the United States.

And Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the great preachers of the 20th century, when he stepped into that pulpit on that first Sunday, he began with these words: “It is strange to remember that all of this was built in honor of a Galilean carpenter who had no place to lay his head.”

That Galilean carpenter, Jesus of Nazareth, he is why you and I are here in this place, why this church was started, why this church will continue.

Isaiah connects us to that congregation that sat here in 1857 and connects us forward to that congregation who will be here long after we are gone.

The prophet said it this way, *“The grass wither, the flowers fade, but the word of our God will stand forever.”*

This verse is important to me, especially as an interim, to understand the transient nature of life and help you to see God in it.

No matter in what pulpit I preach, with all the changes we as a church move through, it is the word of the Lord that endures forever.

No matter how long you've been here, some of you who grew up in this church, so many of you who have moved here, however you got here, whatever it was that brought you...

My coming here started with a phone call I received when I was serving as Interim Pastor with a church in Austin, Texas back in 2016.

I think it was April, and the question was if I might be interested in an Interim ministry with First Presbyterian Church in Athens, Georgia that would begin late that summer.

Athens, Georgia...about an hour and a half from our grandson in Atlanta...I'm in Austin, on the far side of the universe from our grandson in Atlanta...would I be interested? Duh!

We all have our stories of how we got here, but Isaiah is saying that we are part of a divine tapestry that began long before we were born and will continue on long afterwards.

This church is here because of that carpenter from Galilee, and the mission of the church has been, is, and will be to model the life of Jesus Christ.

I like the way somebody put it that we as disciples of Jesus Christ should be able to say to anybody:

“Whoever you are,
wherever you are in your darkness,
we bring light;
into your loneliness,
we come with friendship;
into your sorrow,
we bring comfort and caring;
into your frustration,
we bring hope;
and we say to you, brother and sister,
we are in this boat called LIFE together,
and we love you
because he first loved us.”

A lady was telling the story of when she was a little girl, playing in her grandmother's living room, which was really not a play room, but a room full of antiques and family heirlooms.

And what you expect to happen happened.

She broke a golden vase that had been in the family for years; a family treasure that was to be passed down to her mother and then to her and then on to her children.

She said, “My grandmother ran into the room, saw the vase in bits and pieces on the floor, and I began to cry.”

But then, she said her grandmother gave her a gift that had been with her ever since, “She picked me up, wiped my tears, looked me in the eye, and said, ‘I thought you had been hurt.’”

The gift, the lady told us, was that her grandmother made it very clear that she, not that vase, was the family treasure; she was what was priceless and of great value.

Think about that.

This church has had the opportunity for two hundred years to show the world that each person in it, each person we serve is a treasure beyond price, because each human created in God's image is of great value to God; so that all we do, all we say, is a labor of love for God who loves us so much.

We need to remember the values and experiences that have shaped us and nurtured us and brought us to this time, and to remember that God is always leading us to the new thing God does in Jesus Christ.

And so you have been waiting...nervous and exciting...and two weeks ago, a call was made for your future!

A pastor was trying to counsel and give comfort to one of his parishioners who had lost his job. But the man ministered to the pastor by saying, “I'm looking ahead. I learned a long time ago that there is more glass in a windshield than there is in a rearview mirror.”

The reason windshields are larger is obvious. It is more important to see where you are going than it is to be preoccupied with where you have been.

It is a matter of losing ourselves in Jesus' call to discipleship.

Again, from Harry Emerson Fosdick as his congregation moved into their church, he said:

“My friends, it's not settled yet whether or not the new church will be wonderful. That depends on what we do with it.

If we formed here a religious club, greatly enjoying ourselves, though we tripled our membership the first year, that would not be wonderful.

If in this city...we could lift some burdens and bring light in some dark spots and help to solve the problems of some of our communities, that would be wonderful.”

And so it has been, so it is, and so it will be for First Presbyterian Church of Athens, Georgia.

Somewhere in my mind I have it that Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote some words that are good for ending this sermon and for where you are beginning this new thing, this new time:

*With every power for good to stay and guide me,
Comforted and inspired beyond all fear.
I live my days with you (God)
in thought beside me,
And pass with you into the coming year.*

Listen again:

*With every power for good to stay and guide me,
Comforted and inspired beyond all fear.
I live my days with you (God)
in thought beside me,
And pass with you into the coming year.*

Maybe you are a little bit anxious sitting in these pews in 2019 about the new thing God is doing, and that's why I pray you remember, “*The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God will stand forever.*”

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.