

THROUGH ALL THE SEASONS

25 Years of Grace

There is a moment in the life of the children of Israel that lives illumined in my imagination...

- The nation of Israel has left behind the well-defined life they knew in Egypt.
- Over a period of decades, they've traveled a long distance over some pretty rugged terrain.
- They've experienced changes and catastrophes, delights and discoveries and have had their hearts shaped in many important ways.
- Now they stand at the edge of the Jordan River -- on the verge of entering into what we now know as, THE PROMISED LAND.
- But before they enter into that next season, MOSES, their shepherd for all those years speaks some words of counsel.
- You can read all of his words for yourself in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy.
 - I especially recommend chapters 6-11.
 - But let me key in on these two verses today...

Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments (Deut 7:9).

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way (Deut 8:2).

At our church's Annual Meeting this past March, I took a moment of personal privilege to reflect with the small number gathered there on the remarkable journey of these past couple of decades.

After the meeting, a number of people said: *"I hope you'll share that with the whole congregation. Everybody needs to know how faithful God has been and all he's done here through the years."*

As I thought about that advice, it struck me that there might be some wisdom in that counsel.

- Not everyone has been around Christ Church for the past quarter-century to see how God has led us.
- Not everyone who HAS been here thinks too often about the land we have crossed. We're too busy trying not to stub our toe or fall into a pit on the path ahead!
- I equally recognize that if you are NEW to the life of this congregation, the LAST thing you came here for was to be dragged on some kind of Nostalgia Tour!
 - You're wondering about your life TODAY:
 - *"Will I get through the challenges I'm facing? Where will I find the wisdom or strength I need for the future?"*
 - I get that. We're all about those questions here.

But sometimes – **to go forward with courage and clarity – it helps to look back.** That was what Moses was trying to say:

- Remember the God who got you here.
- Remember how faithful he is and to be faithful to him.
- Put your trust in him and your future will be more than OK.

I guess I should tell you that the date of our Annual Meeting in March was a significant one – at least to me.

- It was exactly 25 years to the day that I was privileged to speak at a Christ Church gathering for the very first time as the senior pastor of this amazing congregation.
- The date was March 8, 1997 and the occasion a Men's Retreat held in the Fellowship Hall of our Oak Brook campus.

I began my talk that day by telling the story of a pastor who was invited up to inspect the new repairs recently conducted on the church roof.

- Now, the roofer was not a religious man. In fact, just the opposite. So sensing the clergyman's reluctance to be standing at such dizzy heights, he saw an opportunity to poke fun at the pastor's faith.
- *"You're not AFRAID, are you, Reverend? I mean, I thought your Bible teaches that God will be with you always. Don't you believe that?"*
- **"No, I don't,"** responded the minister.
"Jesus said LOW, I will be with you always!"

I told the Men's Retreat gathering that day that this story seemed particularly *apropos* because it was a frightening experience to be stepping up to the lofty level of Christ Church's ministry and the amazing people who fill its life.

- I STILL feel that way.
- I also shared that I had friends who thought that anyone foolish enough to try to succeed a founding pastor like Arthur DeKruyter had probably already fallen off the roof and hit his head!
- Over the past quarter century, it has never been my aim to fill Dr. DeKruyter's shoes – he was one of a kind and many of us still miss him.
- But I will say that I have earnestly sought to follow in the pathway our Founding Pastor's shoes were pointing – toward the person of Jesus and the beautiful life of his kingdom.

Along the way, ***God has surely been with us in the HIGH places*** – at great moments of fruitfulness and celebration. If you're newer to this community, you may not know this, but by God's grace, we have had many of those times together.

- Since that March day in 1997, we've become a fully inter-generational church again, with as many younger people as older ones.
 - Only a small percentage of churches in America still enjoy that blessing today. Our youth ministry alone is five times the size of the average North American church.

- But through our church's hosting of leadership gatherings for a national initiative called 10XTen, we're also helping to advance an effort that aims to make faith matter for 10 million teenagers over the next ten years.
- In the last 25 years, we've seen thousands of people come to faith or grow as disciples in the diverse circles of community and education that fill our life. If you're missing some circle and are open to helping to lead that, we can grow more.
- We've added vibrant contemporary worship services alongside our majestic classic ones.
- We've kept pace with the revolution in digital and communications technology that has swept our world. [Six pieces of mail... Palm Pilot story]
- We've seen a dramatic expansion of the role of women as well as men in the leadership of our church's life.
 - From our founding, we've been blessed by terrific male leadership here.
 - In 1997, however, we had only a small handful of women elders, no female trustees, and no female pastors or preachers.
 - We've come a long way, baby.
- In an era where clergy typically come and go every three years or so, Christ Church has also enjoyed unusually long tenure in so many of our staff. We are regularly seeing staff who stay 10, 15, 20, even 25 years -- with all the deep relationship-building, learning and trust that comes with that.
- We've certainly mourned the sunset of many good expressions of church life (I miss Ascend and the Friday Evening Club). But we've also rejoiced in the birth of many new ones. Spirit Village, the ASK Ministry, the Greenhouse, Rooted Groups and Resilient are just a few that have emerged over these years.
- God has also enabled us to renovate and expand our ministry facilities significantly and to go from one campuses to two. How those things happened were miracles of the Lord's grace at work through YOU.
- We've seen our domestic mission impact rise nearly to the level of our global mission influence and together invested through our outreach funds some \$38 million in kingdom ministries beyond our walls. And that's not counting the influence our member households have had on their own.
- I'm grateful that, over the past 25 years, we've gotten to see the Bulls, Blackhawks, White Sox, Cubs, the Sky and the Fire all win national championships – and that the Bears keep us humble and prayerful!

Our glorious God has led us up many mountains and been with us in the high places. But **it's when we've been LOW that we've felt the Lord especially with us, always.**

- Do you recall the national crisis in 1998 when revelations emerged that the President of the United States had had an affair with a young intern – in the Oval Office?
 - By his providence, God had us in the midst of a sermon series on CHARACTER.
- How many of you can flashback to all the panic going on in our culture about Y2K and a feared meltdown of computer systems everywhere?

- We bridged the Millennium with a year-long walk through the Book of Revelation called *God's Word for the End of the Age*.
- Do you remember that Tuesday morning in 2001 when the planes began crashing and we lost Jeff Mladenik and 3,000 other precious souls?
 - Christ Church became the community the media turned to for stories of the impact of 9/11. Dateline did a national special in our Garden Chapel. Oprah interviewed me and Sherri Adams on her show. A photograph from one of our community prayer services was picked up by the AP and carried in papers all across America.
 - Our preaching agenda turned to defining the word, "Jihad," and explaining the differences between Christianity and Islam.
 - God was our **refuge and strength** in those days and he let our church play an outsized role in helping others make sense of those times. (Psa 46:1)
- I recall the national tumult when we entered the war in Iraq and the conversations we had from the pulpit and in public forums here. What exactly constitutes a "Just War"?
- I'm sure you remember how we labored together through the Great Recession a few years later and then so much more...
 - We've journeyed through hanging chads and contested elections.
 - We've seen celebrity pastors stumble and fall. But thankfully not here.
 - We've beheld shooting and looting, demonstrations and debates that have divided people, broken our hearts and reminded us how greatly we need a Savior.
- If you've been around for any good portion of the past 25 years, you will know that Christ Church has not run away from the hard topics but earnestly grappled with what the Bible has to say about them because these subjects matter to God and affect the world he's made.
 - We don't always agree about what's right or wrong, but we believe there is good and evil and we're desperately committed as followers of Jesus to trying to find and advance the good.
 - We don't come to Church to get our existing Point of View reinforced. There are a lot of branches of **Echo Chamber Community Church** to be found; Dr. DeKruyter and I have always believed that the people who come to Christ Church are seriously interested in discovering God's Point of View – even if it challenges all of us at times.
 - If it gets more complicated here sometimes than in some church down the street, it's because we're not a BLUE church or a RED church or any other COLOR church.
 - It would be EASY to be one of those. But we're trying to be a BIBLICAL church.
 - We're trying to reflect in the way we do life together now what Jesus said would make the church like SALT and LIGHT for the world and what the church will look like in ETERNITY.
 - Do any of you resonate with that?
- By the way, have I mentioned that a little thing called "COVID" happened during these 25 years? A lot was needed from Christ Church and demanded of all of us then. Do any of you remember...
 - those daily Touchpoint episodes on Facebook LIVE?

- the 8,000 masks we gave away?
- the tons of food and supplies we rallied to provide?
- the outdoor Worship Wednesdays?
- the temperature readers, and disinfectant misters, and social distance markers?
- the thousands of phone calls our Connections Team made to our older members?
- the amazing video productions by our children and student ministries?
- How livestream suddenly became everybody stream.
- God had a secret plan during COVID, I think. I think he knew that when we couldn't GO to church, we might just rise up and BE the church in a fresh way. We DID.

So... here's the TAKEAWAY from my ramblings today...

- If life feels a tumultuous to you right now, REMEMBER THIS HISTORY. **Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way.**
- Life has not been simple or steady over the past quarter-century – or at most times in the story of God's people.
- We get to see some hallelujah heights and have to go through some devastating dips.

But as God met Moses in the wilderness, and Ruth in her famine, and Elijah in his discouragement, and Mary in her poverty, and Jesus in Gethsemane, our Heavenly Father is especially with us in these LOW places.

- **"Never will I leave you or forsake you,"** he says.
- These low moments have often humbled us and inspired us to LIFT our eyes to Him.
- And in our need -- again and again -- God has met us through his Word and Spirit.
- In this imperfect community of faith and followership that is the local church we've found his power and perspective to keep getting up and pressing on and doing good – always daring to trust God's promise that **"we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."**

For all of you who've been around for any portion of these past twenty-five years (or longer), let me say what a privilege it has been to seek and serve our Lord with you during this time. Thank you for the way that you have loved and encouraged me, Amy, Rush, Cole and Reed.

To close my comments today, I want to answer a question people have asked me often over the decades: ***"Why did you leave San Diego to come to Chicago all those years ago?"***

- There were several reasons and weather was not one of them!
- At the core, Amy and I fell in love with the PEOPLE of Christ Church – and not just faces, but HEARTS.
- There was something wonderful at the center of the people we met here. It was like the words on the church cornerstone had found their way deep into the hearts of the people here.

- This was a church that passionately wanted not just to enjoy beautiful worship and warm fellowship and thoughtful Bible study, but to ***go "into all the world" with the life-changing love of Jesus.***
- Amy and I wanted to be part of that. We still do. We're excited to work alongside of you to fulfill our church's current vision to LIFT 10,000 people toward their God-given potential over these next three years.
- Having watched what the Lord has done through this community over the last 25 years, I can hardly wait to see what he'll do in these coming years.
- **Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments.**

Do you love him? Then trust his faithfulness as we keep obeying his commandments together.