

**SLD03.05.17 First Lent, and my last sermon as installed pastor of
Emory Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 43: 15-19
Jill Oglesby Evans**

“On The Road Again...”

Isaiah 43.15-24

¹⁵ I am the LORD, your Holy One,
the Creator of Israel, your King.
¹⁶ Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
¹⁸ Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

This is my last sermon as installed pastor here at Emory Church. Talk about performance anxiety. What on earth does one say during a ‘last sermon?’ What would *you* say? Thanks? I love you? It’s been real? I wouldn’t trade it for anything? I wish you well? May God help me honor my restraining order?

My last sermon. It’s like the final words on your death bed, which for most of us is...aaargh! But we *want* our last words to be something wiser, more profound, more instructive.

There’s another parallel with death for me about this transition. Not that you or are gonna die without each other. But we *are* facing the death of what we’ve shared, of how things have been, of all the comfort and delight and predictable annoyance we’ve

offered one another. All of this is ending. If it's not the end of life, it's certainly the end of a *kind* of life.

But we're Christians, right? We're not afraid of endings, not even of death, right? Fearlessness in the face of change, of endings, of death - as far our faith is concerned, this is the whole 'dealio,' as Heather is fond of saying - because of our confidence that God is invariably doing a new thing, whether or not we perceive it. Right?

At the same time, we faithful are not exactly renown for our fondness for change, are we. Indeed, "resistance to change is common among us church folks, who tend to love the past more than the present or the future."¹ And this despite the fact that Jesus' very first sermon was about change. "Repent!" he commanded his followers, which, after all, is just another word for 'change.'

Only change is hard, at least for me. Too much change overwhelms me. 'Course, *everything* overwhelms me. But, still, too much change is really hard for me to handle. Last week my therapist led me into a different room than the one in which we usually meet, and I nearly decompensated. "*This* isn't our room!" I cried. "*That's* our room! I don't even know where to sit in here. Where are *you* going to sit? Gosh, you're so far away. And the window's in a different place. Where's my pillow? Don't you think I'm dealing with *enough* change in my life already? Why are you *doing* this to me?!"

Have I mentioned I'm a little emotionally volatile these days?

And my therapist – you know how therapists do – that knowing smile they give you as they calmly nod? I hate that.

¹ Richard Rohr, Falling Upward, p. 11.

Anyway, I'm happy to report that I survived the room change just as you and I will survive this change in our relationship. However, what I've discovered is fundamental to navigating such disruptions with at least a modicum of sanity and grace is...ready?... spoiler alert...it's the overarching theme of my *last* sermon...the key to navigating change with a modicum of sanity and grace is ... trusting God.

Yup. That's it. Trusting God. In the face of all the changes we face, in whatever form, the key to getting to the other side somewhat intact is trusting God. I've needed some reminding about this here of late, that *the* fundamental challenge before me and thee is trusting our creating, redeeming, sustaining God to do some new thing on the other side of all these changes. It's the Cliff Notes of today's sermon, so let's go eat some deviled eggs.

Only, wait. Easier said than done, right? Maybe lunch'll have to wait.

What if God *doesn't* do a new thing? Or what if we don't *recognize* the new thing God is doing? Or, worse, what if we don't *like* the new thing God is doing? What if we kind of liked the way things were, thank you very much. *I* liked the way things were.

But as we know, things change. It's built in the system. Living things either change or die. And, Lord knows this church is a living thing. And so am I. And whether we like it or not, living things change. The challenge is to trust that our God, who always *has* created new possibilities, redeemed our brokenness, and sustained all that is life-giving, will *continue* to do so. Our faith teaches that this is what's built into *God's* system, quite possibly the *only* system in which past performance guarantees future results.

Only, tell me, do *you* know what new thing God is about to do in your life or mine? If so, clue me in, 'cause *I* sure don't. People keep asking me what am I going to *do*, and I keep making up answers: iron the linen napkins from Xmas of 2014. Exercise more frequently. Clean up my garden. Pick up trash in the neighborhood. Maybe I'll write. Maybe I'll make art with a little 'a.' Maybe I'll live a quieter, simpler life. Maybe I'll get a face lift – I've got jowls now; what's up with that? Whatever I do, I hope to make myself useful, but also to allow time to catch up with this busy, full life of mine. But the truth is, I don't *know* exactly what I'll do, though on my better days I'm pretty confident that God does.

And you know, I could ask *you* the same thing: what are *you* going to do after I retire? Thankfully there's a very wise structure set up for the process, but the truth is, you don't know. You'd just be making stuff up, like I am.

"*Finally* we'll get a pastor whose voice we can hear! *Finally* we'll get a pastor who doesn't swear from the pulpit. *Finally* we'll get a pastor who likes to teach, who preaches off manuscript, who remembers visitors' names, who will be happy to maintain the website." But you don't know. You don't know any more than I do what God's got up the divine sleeve for you.

Teilhard de Chardin says that "only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be. Give our Lord the benefit of believing that God's hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete."

Or try alcohol and antidepressants. I certainly have. Or give faith a shot. Or trust. Or, just for the novelty of it, try surrendering to whatever the hec God is up to.

Still, how do we come to trust God? Because someone tells us to? Because the Bible tells us so? Because everybody else does? (Not) No, if you're like me, the *only* way you come to trust anything or anyone is with experience, and, pretty much, in retrospect. The only way you come to trust God is with lots of experience with not having a clue about what comes next, or how to get there, and then looking back and seeing how God worked it all out. I've experienced this a lot in my life, and so have we as a church.

What I'd like to share with you this morning is how my experience with this church has taught me to trust God, not least because it has been one of the hardest relationships of my life. 'Bout as hard as my marriage, though we've lasted longer. Arguably, an eccentric, hypersensitive introvert like me didn't really belong in either institution.

Just ask the psychologist at Columbia's Career and Counseling Center who tested me extensively for my suitability for parish ministry. Bottom line of her report to Presbytery's Committee on Preparation for Ministry? Just say 'no.' And I quote:

"Ms Oglesby Evans indicates an 'overall 'aesthetic makeup characterized by a need for self-expression, individuality, non-conformity, and creativity. She might find the expectations of the church for ordained ministers confining, at least, and often at odds with most of her attitudes and beliefs. She indicates a significant uncertainty about her call to ordained ministry. I, as well, question whether it would be in her (or the church's) best interest."

She has a point. It's not that I dislike people, it's just that I prefer solitude. It's not that I'm a bad public speaker, it's just that nobody can hear me. It's not that I can't write, it's just that I'd as soon hand my sermon to someone else to deliver. It's not that I can't express myself, it's just that I'm inclined to be too candid. And, sometimes, too

coarse. It's not that I don't appreciate bible study; it's just that I prefer academic inquiry. It's not that I lack faith, it's just that I prefer questions to answers. The list goes on.

But here's the *real* clincher: for some reasons I understand, and some I don't, I never, ever wanted to be 'installed' as a pastor, and I *certainly* don't do 'permanent.'

Maybe it's because I'm an Air Force brat. Two continents, five cities, and six houses before I was 10. Which doesn't touch what my big sisters endured.

There are all kinds of pluses and minuses about military life, but here's what's indisputable: you get used to transition early. A lot of transition. What you *don't* get used to, at least as far as I was concerned, is long term commitment.

So when...3 continents, 2 careers, 5 cities, 17 houses, and many, many serial monogamous relationships later, I decided to become a pastor, of course I decided to become an *interim* pastor. Because transition is what I do well. 'Love 'em and leave 'em,' this is my m.o. on many fronts of my life. The way I saw it, interim ministry was a pretty good compromise between the needs of the church and my own neuroses. So I contentedly served 5 different churches as an interim pastor, including this one back in 2000. And appreciated both the deep investment of time and energy – for a while – as well as the opportunity to cycle out and recover – for a while. All in all, it was a pretty good arrangement.

Only somehow I cycle back here to do a brief temporary gig. And for reasons beyond my personal understanding, preference, or control, eventually y'all want me to be installed, not once, but twice, first as designated, then as permanent, pastor.

'Installed.' I don't even like the word. 'Installed' is what you do to appliances, not people. "If your right hand causes you to be installed, cut it off!" Isn't this what Jesus

teaches? And permanent? 'Permanent' is the chilling language associated with installation, and I never wanted any part of it. For as I said earlier, what is permanent? *Nothing* is permanent, that's what.

Therefore, when I met with y'all's Pastor Nominating Committee, I presented a list three legal pages long, hand written, single-spaced, of all the reasons they should *not* call me. There were some pretty ugly things on that list, too. I'll spare you. I was pretty frank. Bottom line? I really, really, *really* did not believe I was the pastor for this church.

Only, that pastor nominating committee? They did. Unanimously.

What?! Did they not hear me?

Honestly, I can't explain it. Maybe they can. Oh wait, only two of them are even still around, only one routinely active. So who's to say which of us was right? Except, the other side of the story is that my ministry here at Emory Church has also become one of the *greatest* relationships of my life.

It hasn't been easy, to be sure – we've been through a lot together, you and I. Put up with a lot, endured a lot, worked and prayed and laughed a lot, accomplished a lot. Forgiven a lot...I hope. But in the end, in retrospect, over the last twelve plus years, this church has been extraordinarily formative for me, personally.

If I ever thought that being an interim was even close to being installed, I was mistaken. The richness, the relentlessness, of preaching week after week, month after month, year after year. The discipline of lectionary. The challenge of sermon series. The privilege of administering sacraments. The joy of baptizing a parishioner and

watching her grow up. The poignancy of burying old friends. The precious embrace of community. It's all been great.

Really? No, of course not.

There's also been the interpersonal tensions, the staff conflicts, the spiritual crises, the budget deficits, the failing infrastructure, the fussy neighbors, the random miserable who knock at our door, never mind every afternoon about 3:15, a very loud and invariably off-key high school marching band.

No, it's hasn't all been great, but it *has* all been rich, and real, and challenging, and precious.

So, in retrospect, when that PNC called me so unequivocally all those years ago, not only did they give me the gift of seeing in me what I could not see, they also gave me the opportunity to grow into their vision. The chance to grow into, and UP to, leading this particular, peculiar, body of Christ.

Which, the way I see it, is precisely what this community does – routinely give anyone who invests in it the opportunity to grow into, and UP to, this particular, peculiar body of Christ. And how precious is that? To be offered the welcome, the support, the tolerance, the encouragement, the opportunity, and the time, to become fully what God calls you to be?

I mean, who deserves that? Yet this is consistently is what I see God doing through this body of... what?... .believers? ...doubters? ...seekers? ...stumblers? fruit cakes? And I am so grateful for it. I am so grateful for *you*. There is great healing in being loved into who you're meant to be.

But the title of this sermon is 'On The Road Again.' Yes, the inspiration comes from the song sung by Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson. And, yes, I'm tempted, but for your sake, will restrain myself, from serenading you. But let me remind you of some of the lyrics. Not the part where Johnny and Willie can't wait to get on the road again - that doesn't speak for me, anymore - but the refrain: "on the road again, goin' places that I've never been, seein' things that I may never see again" – this is the orientation I hope for you and me to embrace...eventually.

Certainly on this first Sunday in Lent, Jesus is on the road again...and to God's glory... eventually. Though not without first enduring an unfair prosecution, an unseemly death, and three days in hell. Trusting God never comes easily; you have to earn it, endure hard times, and experience outcomes of which you never could have dreamed. All of which you and I in this church have, in spades, have we not?

But to get from angst to anticipation requires time, patience, endurance, resilience, imagination, and trust, trust of our persistent, indefatigable God who, whether or not we perceive it, is forever doing new things in and among us. Chardin again:

"Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And so I think it is with you. Let your ideas mature gradually – let them grow, let them shape themselves, without undue haste. Don't try to force them on, as though you could be today what time (and God) will make of you tomorrow."

Meanwhile, as I said in the beginning, regarding our twelve plus years together - Thanks. I love you, and feel your love for me. It's been real. I wouldn't trade it for anything. I wish you well. And may God help me respect my restraining order.

To the glory of God. Amen.