

Rodeo Phones and Other Relics

Preached by

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For Reflection “...disconnecting from change does not recapture the past. It loses the future.”

Kathleen Norris

Hebrew Scripture Reading: *Isaiah 43.14a, 15-22*

¹⁴Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: ¹⁵I am the LORD, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King. ¹⁶Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: ¹⁸Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. ¹⁹I 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. ²⁰The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, ²¹the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles is one I was led to for our consideration as we anticipate a new year of ministry and the beginning of the labors of our Change Work Group. This is the story of the last of twelve of Paul's sea voyages recorded for us. Made during a stormy season, it was rough sailing as was frequently the case in history and in Paul's experience. Please consider why this story might be for us in our time and place.

Reading from the Acts of the Apostles: *Acts 27:31-36, 38- 40*

³¹Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.” ³²Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the boat and set it adrift. ³³Just before daybreak, Paul urged all of them to take some food, saying, “Today is the fourteenth day that you have been in suspense and remaining without food, having eaten nothing. ³⁴Therefore I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive; for none of you will lose a hair from your heads.” ³⁵After he had said this, he took bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. ³⁶Then all of them were encouraged and took food for themselves. ³⁸After they had satisfied their hunger, they lightened the ship by throwing the wheat into the sea. ³⁹In the morning they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned to run the ship ashore, if they could. ⁴⁰So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea. At the same time they loosened the ropes that tied the steering-oars; then hoisting the foresail to the wind, they made for the beach.

Meditation *Rodeo Phones and Other Relics*

A friend of mine was the executor of her 90-year-old aunt's estate. Closing the house, she found a rotary phone. The next time her grandchildren came to visit, she plugged it in and asked the eldest, who was about 8, to call his mother. He quickly figured out dialing versus pressing numbers,

but when he had all the numbers dialed, after looking at the phone from several angles, he turned to her and asked, “How do I press send?” When her grandchildren were leaving, the six-year-old dashed back in to ask, “Nonny, can I take the rodeo phone to my kindergarten class?” which led to another group of engaged youngsters who had never seen a phone with moving parts.

We’re not sorry we cut the cord to rodeo phones. Yet somehow, we always act as if cutting the cord to a habit or tradition, even if it’s not working for us, or even if it is, but the task could be done more effectively—that cutting the cord, is bad, a reason for grief or fills us with a misplaced Marine-like sense that no relic should be left behind, no matter how dead the thing it represents.

Change is so rapid a thing, a daily thing, we can not clearly mark seasons of change as the school year once did, marking summer apart from spring and fall. Change is all arounds us, every day, all the time. As the Board endorsed Change Work Group begins its labors this week, we would do well to remember it’s not all on them. Research has been going on for months. More information will be gathered. Suggestions will be made. Experiments will happen. But no more than a pastor or a Board can be the church, can a work group. We all need to be willing to listen, to participate, to experiment, to dream and be creative along with them. We also will need to put a lid on, out of the starting gate, negativity and grief. We need to look for the positive and see how we can build on what we have. It is incumbent upon us all to frame or re-frame our attitudes about change. It is incumbent on all of us to acknowledge and accept our roles in being part of a transforming and transformational ministry—so that Christ’s work will be done here for generations beyond us.

We might do well to name some of the rodeo phones and other relics of life gone by that we can leave behind with humor and minimal grief; how we might live and grow together in a world of change, even when we are saddened by the passing of an era or a custom.

Let me be really clear that things such as worship, music, education, caring and mission ARE NOT RELICS TO BE ABANDONED. Let me say that again. worship, music, education, caring and mission ARE NOT RELICS TO BE ABANDONED. They have been and will continue to be a vital part of Christian witness, service and ministry. Nor are we leaving one another and our relationships behind.

However, the way we have offered all those aspects of ministry—the structures, schedules, technology and other aspects are likely relics of a way of life and culture that no longer exists.

Our manner of providing services and engaging in ministry was predicated on a world where:

1) Sunday mornings were protected. Businesses were not open. People were not expected to work on weekends. Sports were not played. While there was more variation in the shape of households than we like to admit, contrary to popular opinion, “Leave It to Beaver” was not a documentary. :) Our practices were formed in an era when the majority of folk were in what we might call traditional households and the majority of women did not work outside the home. Extended families tended to live nearer one another; people did not generally live as long with major disabilities or illnesses. Therefore, weekend travel to provide intergenerational support was less frequent.

2) Another factor was that once upon a time the church was the center for post-high school or college education. If you wanted to learn about things faithful, or things in culture, politics or other areas, the church was the place you got that information. Clearly those days are behind us and planning weekly events no matter how excellent and informative, won’t work.

3) Third, once upon a time the church was the center for social life. Now, households tend to be more insular and inner-focused. Social engagement, if it happens at all, is typically organized around family, children’s activities or work obligations.

The resulting relic of all these things: Anticipating people will be able to set aside three hours

on a Sunday morning where we can provide worship, musical and faith education and fellowship in one block of time that is going to suit everyone's schedule. Even the best programs are not going to draw people on a weekly basis, not because they don't care or are lazy or not as faithful as people once were, but because the circumstances of their lives simply won't allow it. Even before the pandemic, that model had not been as successful as it once was.

You have already seen information about two experiments in alternative models. We will be doing monthly education and mission activities for young people. We are holding on to the traditional Fall Brunch, but there will be casual in-home desserts throughout the month of October.

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We also need to be exceedingly honest with ourselves about how the realities of today's world affect our ministry:

We must consider the impact demographics have on any organization, including the church, including our congregation. Let's be respectful and realistic about our human resources. We have fewer numbers and all of us have less time to give to causes we value highly and the church we love. Therefore, as we are planning those events, we need to be creative about developing events that are far less labor intensive than they have been in the past. Killing the fatted calf should be reserved for a few events, not the goal for all of them. We need to create simple occasions that bring people together and don't leave them too exhausted to ever want to do it again.

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Another critical change in our culture, is that once upon a time, the church was the main recipient of charitable giving. I don't need to actually look in anyone's mailbox to see how many opportunities everyone has. Now church is lucky to get on the list.

We need to reorient ourselves in our attitudes about money and the church; to remember that giving to the church is an expression of gratitude to God for all that we have; and faithful recognition that what we do have is not because of the work of our own hands or minds.

Nor is church giving pay as you go – some result of mathematical machinations calculated according to what a household considers itself to personally have received. (I can also guarantee you the bulk of those calculations are woefully less than what is actually received.)

Further, we need to be practical and recognize that being church costs money. Nothing we have is free to us. National Grid is not donating the power for fans and lights this morning and they will not be donating heat this winter. Therefore, while our time, commitment and energy has personal, but not immediate financial cost, nothing we give away is free. Somewhere along the line someone foots the bill.

We need to reorient our thinking and teaching about the church and money. In today's world, it seems the only place where people still say "God will provide" is in the church. We need to recognize that "God has provided" and consider how to be effective and generous stewards—which also means more education about finance. Even though we like to think the church is above talking about money.

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Lastly, for today: The church used to be the primary place for folk to do volunteer work or community engagement. We need to dial way back on a focus on numbers of members, especially in an age when the word "commitment" is anathema to many, and no longer just a TV joke about recalcitrant grooms. Fear of commitment is a way of life. We need to develop ways to engage community members, their energies and yes, some of their giving, in ways that are invitational about a long-term commitment but not requiring one or laying that out front as an expectation.

There is more, but I suspect that is more than enough for today.

We can minimize the natural griefs and tensions such adjustment creates by recognizing that none of these changes are written in stone. We are entering this time with a spirit of experimentation and I hope playfulness—by maintaining a rodeo phone relic sense of humor about what we are leaving behind for the sake of all that we might gain.

This is not a license for lone ranger style experimentation. To be successful we need more, not less, consultation with others; we need to expect mistakes and further change and move on from them, instead of sticking around for the blame game. We shouldn't be pointing fingers anywhere but at ourselves. We need to be able to discern as individuals and as a community what are values worth standing up for and what are personal preferences or opinions from which it is time to stand down.

These are challenging days, but we are part of a faith community that has stood the test of time for two and a quarter-centuries, has navigated change, war and pandemic long before we arrived on the scene, but handed over to us this ministry to carry into another age. If they could do it, so can we. Because we are people who are powered not by ourselves alone. Because we begin these days, just as the early church and its neighbors did so long ago.

Paul urged all of them to take some food, saying, "...it will help you survive; ... none of you will lose a hair from your heads." He took bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. Then all of them were encouraged—that is, given the courage, poured into them from outside themselves—to cast off anchors, loosen the ties that bound the oars and cast themselves to the wind trusting that they would be carried safely to a new place.

Let us eat and drink so that we might be encouraged to cast off the rodeo phones and other relics that anchor us to a faded past, loosen the grip of fears that bind us, turn our direction into the future, and cast ourselves into the wind of the Spirit, trusting that we, too, shall be carried safely to a new place.