

The Doctrine of 'Showing Up'

Pastor Laurie Hartzell's Sermon at First Presbyterian Church, Benton Harbor,
Sunday, September 22, 2019

Zephaniah 3:14-17

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter, Jerusalem!
The Lord has taken away the judgments against you,
He has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion:
Do not let your hands grow weak.
The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
A warrior who gives victory;
He will rejoice over you with gladness,
He will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.*

Luke 1:46-55

*And Mary said,
My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
According to the promise he made to our ancestors,
To Abraham and to his descendants forever.*

Friends, as most of you know, this fall we have started a sermon series on the "Fruit of the Spirit." The impetus for this series is a sincere desire to learn more deeply how to be God's people – the people who follow Jesus during times of deep division in our country and world.

But, as you also know, our church is now in a time of leadership transition as I announced my resignation this week. Oh! I have learned a lot from you and as I've ministered here to and with you these last, almost 10, years. A former pastor of this congregation, Rev. Dirk Ficca, once said this church reminds him of the old poem from Robert Fulghum, "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." Dirk says all he really needs to know about doing ministry he learned here at First Presbyterian Church in Benton Harbor. And, I, too, feel that so much of what I know about the church and being vehicles of God's presence in the world, I learned and experienced

here among you as a layperson for almost 15 years, and then these past 10 years as your pastor.

So, as I preach my last sermons as pastor of this great church, my intent is to weave fruit of the spirit in with some of my learnings in these coming weeks.

This week our fruit is “joy.” And Arianne Baker has created a lovely watermelon to represent JOY in our fruit basket this morning.

These two texts we heard are typically connected with the concept of JOY. The text from the prophet Zephaniah is written to an old, sick and suffering nation of Israel. Under the long and violent reign of Manasseh between 696 and 642 B.C., a man who defied God in his ambition, hoarding of wealth and abuse of power, the people of Judah had become weak and broken and lost their faith. They had forgotten who they were and whose they were. These words from Zephaniah are a promise that God will restore JOY to the people. “The Lord IS in your midst,” the prophet says. The idea that the God will show up again and bring joy is one of the deep messages of this text. For a people who were beaten down by an evil king and didn’t know what was going to happen to their country, this was quite a promise of hope. Joy is gift that comes when hope is born. It comes when a people who think they are lost realize that they are not forgotten. It comes when a people who thought they had no future are promised A FUTURE from the living God.

And then, the text from Luke. This is Mary’s song. She is pregnant with Jesus. She, a lowly, backwater Jewish girl living when the Romans ruled the roost and had all the money and power and didn’t worship the God of Israel but a host of stone gods. Think of a girl born into poverty in say, Galien, or Benton Harbor. That’s who Mary was. And God chose her to be the mother of our Savior. When she sings this song, she is with her aunt Elizabeth, an elderly poor Jewish woman, who is also miraculously pregnant. And Elizabeth says the baby in her, who will be John the Baptist, by the way, leaps for JOY when Mary walks in carrying the Savior of the world. Elizabeth’s spirit and her baby’s spirit recognize what God is doing.

And Mary burst forth with joy. Again, JOY here is a gift that comes as hope is being born again. When a young girl who was a nobody realizes that she is a somebody. When two women on the margins of society are used by God to bring forth a new day. When a people who thought they had no future are promised a future from the living God. That’s when JOY bursts forth.

Both of these texts tell of responses, from a prophet and from Mary, when God shows up to bring hope and new life – against all odds. The JOY comes from the recognition that YES, amid it all and sometimes against all odds, God shows up again and again and again.

My friends, one of the biggest things I’ve learned all these years with you has to do with this idea of “showing up.”

There are two parts to it: God shows up. Over and over and over again, as we have lived into our ministry here, God has shown up. As twin sisters Darlene Hawkins and Allene Smith say, "He doesn't always show up when you want him, but he is right on time!"

So, that's the main part. God shows up. God is faithful, and God always shows up. But the second part is that we human beings are invited to show up, too. Really show up. And as I and we have been given the grace to really show up in this community and with each other, community grows, and God does things that are beyond what we can ask for and think of.

So, holding these passages in our hearts this morning, let's take a little rabbit trail and talk about what I'm calling "The Doctrine of Showing Up."

On my very first day in the pastor's office here at First Presbyterian Church, when my boxes were still unpacked, George Barfield, a beloved deacon of the church, bought me a cup of Starbucks and came into the office to have a talk with me. "What's your vision for the church, pastor?" We are excited you are here but we want to know your vision. If you want to lead, you have to have a vision, he told me. I wanted to say, "Gee, George, I've not even unpacked my boxes yet. I'm grieving the loss of our pastor, Doug Petersen. Our dear Margaret Beach just brought a huge freezer into Goff Hall, which is causing quite a stir. Honestly, I don't have a clue about what my vision is."

But I didn't say that. I honestly can't even remember what I said. But his question got me thinking. If I wanted to have a VISION for our community, I needed to SEE it. If I wanted to have a VISION for our church, I needed to SEE it, too. And how do you see something? You show up and look at it. Really look at it. Really seek to be present with it.

So, I started showing up places. Just going places. Trying to really SEE. I went to the Boys and Girls Club. I hung out at Morton School across the street. I started going to your houses. I started showing up was at Benton Harbor Ministerial Alliance meetings. My friends, the Ministerial Alliance didn't quite know what to do with me. Not necessarily because I'm white, though white people have so often unintentionally, and sometimes intentionally, done damage, that being a white leader in a predominately black community makes the job of listening even more important.

But the main problem with my brothers wasn't that I was white, but that I was a woman. You see, the bylaws of the alliance in 2010 indicated that it was a brotherhood. Women could not be part of the alliance. But I was called to be a pastor in this community, and First Presbyterian has always partnered with local churches. I didn't really know what to do, so I just started showing up – to every meeting. I started going to some church services in town in part because I love worshipping in black worship services. The spirit touches and nurtures my spirit deeply in these services. Most times in the first years, the poor church people didn't know what to do with me. Mostly, they asked me to sit with the first ladies of the church rather than with the pastors. But no matter where I was seated, I was always received with grace.

And showing up, I learned, is more than just occupying a place. To show up, you need to really be present. Watch people, show interest in people, seek to learn what is going on, listen for the written and unwritten rules. Not force yourself, but be present. And mostly, LOVE. And as I showed up at the alliance meetings and saw men who struggled to pastor their churches and who had battled racism and other problems for decades in their lives and in our communities, I began to love them. Yes, like all of us, they have idiosyncrasies and problems, but there are so many deeply devoted men doing ministry in this community. Many have sacrificed more than we know for the sake of this community.

And as I kept showing up, an amazing thing happened. They began to accept me and my ministry. They always loved First Presbyterian. But as I showed up, God showed up and did a new thing. After a couple years they changed the alliance bylaws to include women. They even elected me to serve as secretary of the leadership team for a few years, and I'm honored to show up in the community with my brothers. And now, mostly, when I enter the churches, they escort me right up to the platforms to sit with the other pastors. I'm so honored!

And it is not just in organizations that it is important to show up. It's important to show up for people. Many of you do this naturally. I don't need to tell you that, in our community racial divisions are deep. In our community political divisions are deep. I have learned among you that even when there are differences, we keep showing up, and God will break down barriers.

Many of you remember Doris Jones. She was a woman who lived across the street from us here, and she became part of our church for a year before dying from cancer. She had a friend in Benton Harbor who was homebound and really needed prayer. Doris asked me to pray for her and warned me that she didn't trust white people and might not like that I am a woman pastor. I remember asking Doris, "Do you think I'm the one who should be doing this?" Doris told me that God told her I was the one.

So I went with Doris to this woman's house, and while the reception was a little icy at first, we talked briefly and prayed and I asked her if I could come by and pray the next week. She reluctantly said "yes." And I did. I did this a number of times. I never stayed more than 10 minutes. To show up, you don't have to always stay long. The woman has now moved to another community. After Doris died, this woman stopped by the church one day, threw her arms around me and told me how much my prayers had meant to her. Something healed between us. Not because of a program or a vision I had, but because I was invited to show up.

Now, I need to say something important here. I didn't bring a new program or idea for change. I didn't, and still don't, have major ideas for how to fix some of the deep ailments in the culture of poverty. Problems facing women, employment disparities, transportation, the aching wounds in our school district – oh, there are so many problems, and after my 25 years in Benton Harbor, while many things have improved, in other ways things have gotten worse. Don't get me wrong, we must continue to have outreach ministries that we do by ourselves and in our community.

But my call, and, I believe, our call, is not necessarily to fix anything – but to show up. Jesus took on flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood and showed up here among us. And my call, our call, is to keep showing up. We often don't have complete clarity about what we are doing. But we show up anyway, seeing people, loving people, letting them love us, receiving the gifts of hope, joining the work people around us are doing, receiving the gifts of tenacity, deep worship and family love that this Benton Harbor community has in abundance.

When I read the story of Mary that we read, I realize that she fully showed up. She didn't know fully what this call God placed on her life would mean, but she entered into it, showed up for it fully. And in showing up, she was filled with joy.

My friends, I have learned among you that there is deep power in showing up. And I will take that gift with me to Grand Rapids as I begin my ministry there. There will be many days when I don't know fully what I am doing. But I will keep showing up. And, as I show up, I know God will lead and guide and do things grander than I can imagine.

And I encourage YOU in this time of transition and uncertainty here at First Presbyterian Church: Keep showing up. You know, when things change, we sometimes go into our closets and hide for a bit. You know what I mean. You may need to do that for a spell, but don't do it too long. Keep showing up here in worship, in the ministries you are called to do. Keep showing up on Morton Hill and in the community. Keep showing up for each other. You are good at that. Don't stop!

And I want to emphasize some very good news about God. We can show up because God always shows up! Right on time.

Around the year 2002, this church was going through a very tough time. It had had two pastors who just "up and left" the church – one after an affair with a woman in the neighborhood, and one who simply just packed up after nine months of ministry here and never returned. The church was wounded and confused and had been praying for a new pastor. Being smaller and poorer than we are now, it was hard to find someone.

One day, a tall white man whom nobody knew tried to slip in the back row during worship. It's hard to be incognito in our church, as you know. This man was a Presbyterian pastor who had heard about the pain in this congregation and also the power of its ministry. He showed up. And even more, God showed up. God dropped the pastor this church needed at the time, Rev. Doug Petersen, into the lap of this church at just the right moment. God showed up.

And, in my time here, I can tell story after story of when we needed resources or people to do a ministry God was calling us to do and we were given what we needed. One story that comes to mind has to do with our Summer Youth Leadership Program. George Barfield led that program, and then George and his wife, Sara Shambarger, moved. We prayed about what to do and who would lead it. We thought we had found the perfect person, and then learned this man had a long prison rap sheet and, in spite of his gifts and new life, we simply couldn't let him serve. So,

we had like 5 weeks until the program was to start – and no leader. Long story short, we found Gentry Phillips. Again, it felt like God dropped him in our lap at just the perfect time, and he did wonderful work here with Julie Kelly for over six years. God showed up and brought us what we needed.

As you know, God is not going to call us to something and not give us what we need to do it. We may have confusion and have to struggle and wait and wonder and pray, but that is all part of it, isn't it? I've learned among you over and over again that as we show up to our confusion, as we struggle, as we wait, as we pray and as we continue to show up the best we know, God shows up, too. In fact, God has usually shown up ahead of us, preparing the way!

And, like Mary, God uses the likes of us. We are not called to birth a baby into the world, but we are given the grace to bear the love of Christ to each other and to the world. The likes of us! In our faith and doubt. In our joy and sorrow. In our despair and hope. No matter what color, gender, sexual orientation, political persuasion. No matter what! God uses the likes of us to birth the love of Jesus into the world.

And that gives me JOY. I cannot tell you. I cannot put into words, the JOY it has been for me these past 10 years to show up WITH YOU and FOR YOU and TOGETHER. So, thank you for teaching me. This Doctrine of Showing up is deeply connected to JOY, and I leave it here with you to keep growing, and I will take it with me in ministry until the day I die.

Alleluia! Amen.