

Sermon for 21 April 2024 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Scriptures: Acts 4:5-12; Psalter:137(*Response 1*); 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

Again this Sunday we read about Peter and John's healing of the lame man right in front of everybody, during temple worship, and hear Peter insist it was the risen Jesus' spirit that did this. And, as we expected, they had been arrested, and told to stop and, as we remember from our earliest Bible study, they wouldn't ... Peter is a changed man, brave and clear-headed, a leader in the church that is now forming and growing.

We stop. What has this to do with us?

This church is one hundred years old this year. This building was built for crowds. Here in Baltimore, our friends, the Roman Catholics, announced last week that this, the oldest diocese in America ... the Archdiocese of Baltimore ... has shrunk from 260,000 members down to less than 5,000, and it plans to close and merge congregations down from 61 to around 20 in a few months.

Our own denomination has decreased roughly 25% in the last few years, and our General Conference will meet for the first time in nearly a decade, beginning on day after tomorrow, April 23rd. That means we here at Bethesda/Baltimore have a call to be praying for constructive adjustments during its ten-day-long session.

I'll say what I think: One more time, like the Bible tells us, and our modern historians remind us, big change is underway.

From sea levels to governments, from medicine to morality, change is the constant ... as it always has been, even though we didn't feel the ground shaking as much as we are going to.

So this talk about Spirit, and this image of sheep for ourselves and a shepherd watching over us, is seriously practical, no matter what the number of those who believe and practice are down to.

I heard it again yesterday. I was at Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church down on Park Avenue for a reception to welcome the new organist there, helped by our Baltimore chapter of the American Guild of Organists. David Dash, who's been organist at St. Mary's Govans ... which is one of the churches scheduled to close, along with St. Francis of Assisi across the bridge down Harford Road ... David said, "I'm glad I won't be alive to see it." Bless his heart, he's only 85 ... what makes him think change won't overshadow him like the rest of us? Things are moving, and we're already awash with the tide, rising or sinking or whatever!

So, let us celebrate that we're here together right now. Thank God we know a bit about being loved and following the gleam already, as the old hymn puts it. Heaven bless this centenary year for our faith . home we have here. Take heart, train the young ones coming up, stay in

touch with the ones already meeting the change with a birthday, or new medications, or surgery scheduled, or a move. We've got resources. We know some good exercises, and here we are practicing to keep them up. Jesus calls us. By thy mercy, let us pray.

Dear Lord, thank you for some of this beautiful weather lately. Bless this May just around the corner, with all its glory already thrilling our gardens and parks and plans for summertime. Thanks for the prayers, the laments and hopeful outlooks, that we send up for General Conference. Teach us Methodists once again what loving and encouraging mean for, all the neighbors who come into our space and time. Give us the right message to make our politicians work for the general good. God, help us stop war! Let us take deep breaths and calm down, moment by moment. Jesus, we are yours. Bring us together with other believers, other religions, and all the energies that heal and thrill and build for good.

Thank you, Jesus.

Shepherd, lead us.

Amen.