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Sixth Sunday of Easter

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Where Do We Go from Here?”

The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine



“The church really needs people who know enough to know that we really don’t know it all. It needs people who know that we don’t see the way completely this side of paradise but that we don’t have to see the whole way. We have to have just enough vision to trust God and know that our vision is incomplete.”

~Mark Ramsey

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Isaiah 43:16–21

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.

Matthew 28:16–20

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

“Where Do We Go from Here?”
Isaiah 43:16–21; Matthew 28:16–20

In his first letter to Amazon shareholders in 1997, founder and CEO Jeff Bezos wrote, “this is **Day 1** for the internet and, if we execute well, for Amazon.com.” Twenty years later, Amazon is one of the biggest, most successful companies in the world – by certain standards – and in his letter to shareholders written last month, Bezos shared that he was recently asked by someone who noticed that he still talks – *relentlessly* – about Day 1, “Jeff, what does **Day 2** look like?” His answer: “Day 2 is stasis. Followed by irrelevance. Followed by excruciating, painful decline. Followed by death. And *that* is why it is *always* Day 1.” Bezos spends the rest of the letter explaining how you fend off Day 2 and maintain the vitality and drive of Day 1. It’s well worth reading. One of the points he makes is that the **larger** an organization becomes and the more **history** it has, *the harder it is to maintain a Day 1 state of mind.*¹

Today, in Matthew’s gospel, we witness a Day 1 moment for the early church: the post-resurrection Jesus telling the disciples: *Here’s what’s next. Here’s where you go now.* The writer of Matthew’s gospel made a conscious choice to end his version of Jesus’s life and ministry this way. This particular gospel was written for a community of believers who had roots in the Jewish faith, which is why Matthew constantly references the Jewish scriptures to prove that *Jesus was the one the Jews had been waiting for.*

But the early church community for which Matthew wrote was also a group of people struggling with **internal division and conflict**. It was a community **longing for direction** in a complex world, a community desperate for a **sense of mission and call**, a community trying to figure out how to maintain **the vitality and drive of Day 1** and not slide into the complacency and decline of Day 2. In other words, *it was a community of believers not so different from our own*, or from the thousands of churches across our country today, gathering together to worship God and wondering, “Where do we **go** from here?” “How do we **make disciples** when we are still figuring out for ourselves **what discipleship looks like**?” “How do we, with our limited human and financial resources, **make any difference** in overwhelming social issues like poverty, racism, human trafficking, and political division?” “How do we **maintain our relevance** in a culture where there are many ways to find meaning and purpose?”

¹ <https://www.amazon.com/p/feature/z6o9g6sysxur57t>

With the final words of his gospel, Matthew gives his community, and, by extension, all of us who call ourselves Jesus' disciples, **a Day 1 mission and a calling:** *go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them* in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then, and now, this is our task: to **go to the nations**, in other words, to go to the other, the stranger, the ones we don't know, to go to them and **share the good news:** *you belong to God, you are God's beloved*. This, after all, is what baptism is all about. In baptism we proclaim that we are God's and we are here to love God by loving others. ***Go and make disciples***. Then, and now, this is our Day 1 calling. The problem is, we live out this calling in the midst of incredible uncertainty...which is the nature of a Day 1 mission: **it is not yet written**. We have to figure it out as we go.

Sheryl Sandberg is the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook and a bestselling author. She is known for her attention to detail and her organizational skills, the hallmark of which is her attachment to color-coded sticky notes. Several years ago, while on vacation, her husband Dave dropped dead at age 47 from an undiagnosed heart condition. Sheryl's life was immediately thrown into the chaos of **shock** and **grief**, which was compounded by the fact that Sheryl not only had her own grief to process, but that of her two children, ages 7 and 10.

In a recent interview, Sandberg reflected on this time. "...until this happened, certainly I'd faced challenges. Everyone does. I'd gotten divorced very young, and that was something that was hard for me to get over and process. But **there was no order to [Dave's death]** because it didn't make sense that a grown, healthy man who woke up in the morning and went on a hike ***could just die*** — literally could go to the gym and die — and out of nowhere at 47 years old. And my story, and I think the story of so many people facing hardship is this balancing between no control, no order, accepting the grief, accepting your emotions, and trying to find things we can do that give us **some sense of control**."

Not long after Dave died, Sandberg found herself in a conversation with a friend who worked as a documentary filmmaker. Seeing her struggling to gain control over her grief and loss, he told her that when making documentaries, he'd had to accept that he couldn't write the stories of his films in advance. ***He had to let them unfold***. "Sheryl," he said, "you have to let your grief unfold."

You cannot put it in a box and wrap it up. *There is no sticky note for this. There is no Excel spreadsheet. You have to let this happen.*"²

When those first disciples received their Day 1 mission to go and make disciples they must have been both **exhilarated** and **terrified**, because this mission Jesus gives them **leaves out an awful lot of details**. They would have to let it unfold. And although he promises to be with them, it will be in spirit, not body, so they are also **grieving** his loss all over again. *Grief, exhilaration, fear*: these feelings are the hallmark of a Day 1 moment. Such moments always involve standing on the edge of something completely **unknown**, where the next step forward is a leap of faith. When we look back at such moments, we tend to see them in a positive light, but at the time, the experience of living through them is painful.

Day 1 moments reveal to us that **we have much less control** over our lives than we like to think we do. Theologian Richard Rohr reminds us that **suffering** of some kind is the only way the human ego will give up control. Because the ego steadfastly refuses to hand over control until it has to. So suffering becomes *a necessary step on the path of true transformation*. But who of us would take on suffering voluntarily? It pretty much has to be forced onto us.³ Throughout the Bible, we witness God's people, again and again, confronting suffering that they don't choose, but that ultimately leads to *transformation* and *new life*. Abraham and Sarah's inability to have children. Moses, stolen from his birth mother and raised in the royal household only to discover as a young adult that his people were the ones enslaved by his adopted family. The Israelites wandering for forty years in the wilderness, then reestablishing themselves in the promised land only to be conquered and driven into exile in Babylon.

It is to these people of God in exile that the prophet Isaiah speaks the word we heard today. And what Isaiah says is that if they want to *make sense of the present and have faith in the future* then they need to **look to the past**. Because it is in the past, when we look back at those Day 1 moments, where we discover that **God has a habit of showing up** in our most *desperate* moments to lead us into a future we never could have imagined or predicted. What's confusing is that right after the prophet calls the people to remember the past he says this: "**Do not remember** the former things, or consider the things of old. Behold, I

² <https://onbeing.org/programs/sheryl-sandberg-and-adam-grant-resilience-after-unimaginable-loss/>

³ <https://onbeing.org/programs/richard-rohr-living-in-deep-time/>

am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?" Now these verses have been used and abused liberally to justify and manipulate communities into trying something new and different.

But we can't understand them outside their original context. Isaiah is speaking to exiles, refugees, people struggling to make sense of the **trauma** and **grief** of losing their homeland. They have lost all sense of the urgency and vitality and joy of being God's chosen people, because it feels like they have been singled out for suffering. For them, it feels like Day 2: a place of stasis and irrelevance, followed by slow, painful decline, then death. Into this grief and despair Isaiah reminds the people *who they are*: **God's chosen ones**, the one whose lives God transforms, against all odds and in ways none of them could ever have imagined, again and again. *God is the one who makes a way where there is no way*. So which is it: are we supposed to look to the past to help us figure out how to move forward? Or are we supposed to forget the past and try something completely new?

Isaiah would say yes to both questions, and add that we look to the past, not to figure out **what** we should do or to do what we did back then but to remember **who we are**, our baptismal identity: *we belong to God*. As individuals and as a church, we are in God's hands. Isaiah calls us to remember God's work in the past, but at the same time to let go of exactly how that work was accomplished. Because from the very first Day 1, the way God works is and always has been *to create life out of nothing, to create love out of hate, to create hope where there is only fear, to make a Day 1 out of what looks to all the world like Day 2*.

Did you know that our oldest original congregation, Second Presbyterian Church, failed the first time it formed? The twenty families that left Old Stone Church to form Second could not sustain the church, either with members or finances, so they returned to Old Stone. Five years later, members of Old Stone felt called to try again, and the Second Presbyterian Church was reorganized. This time it grew...and grew until a new church building was built to accommodate the two hundred-plus members, and with a new building, membership grew steadily ...until the church was **destroyed** by a fire. Everything was lost except a lecture room in the back of the church, which is where the membership continued to gather for Bible study and Sunday School after the fire. Eventually, a new building was constructed on Prospect and East 30th Street, funded by generous members living on Millionaire's Row.

These are just a couple of examples from our nearly 175-year history, but there are many more. Jeff Bezos might teach that an organization with a long history is challenged to maintain a Day 1 state of mind, but I disagree, and I think Isaiah would too. Isaiah calls us to look to the past as a way of remembering who we are and how God works. When we do this we will see all the way God has taken what looked like Day 2 moments for this community and turned them into Day 1.

So if it feels like you're are standing on a precipice, if your future feels murky, if you're wondering *how it's all going to work out*, if you're not sure *what's going to happen next*, may you – may we – look to the past, not to figure out *what* to do, but to remember *who* we are and who we follow. And looking to the past, may we find the courage to do just that: to *follow*, relinquishing control, letting go, opening our hearts and minds to where God is leading us. This is how we continue to be people and a church for whom it is

always,
every day,
a new *Day 1*.

Amen.