

The Great Invitation

Farewell Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

Easter 7

June 1-2, 2019

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

Even though Ed and I enjoy watching British crime dramas, recently we haven't had the time or the energy to devote to an in-depth series. To really connect to what's happening, you have to pay attention.

A while ago, we watched "Secret City," an Australian political thriller set in a world of secrets, lies, murder, and betrayal. What could be more compelling? "Secret City" takes place in Canberra, the capital of Australia, where our older son lives, so it was even more visually interesting to us.

Harriet, a fearless journalist, uncovers a secret city of interlocked conspiracies and unearths a military program so secret even the prime minister knows nothing of its existence.

The looming question is, Who is really running the country?

The story lines are compelling, but so are the characters. I become engaged in the story because of them. They are far from perfect; even the "good guys" are complicated and conflicted, volatile and vulnerable. Often the heroes have shadows from their past that still follow them and get in the way. Broken relationships, mistakes, failures, addictions, and rough childhoods are part of the story. The characters are complicated *and* committed!

When the season is over, and there are no more episodes to watch, I am left to wonder, "What is next?"

Even as a young girl, I remember reading stories in books I enjoyed so much I didn't want them to end. I wanted to keep reading and find out what happened to the characters, to know more about their predicaments and solutions.

When we feel connected, we want more chapters.

Our long chapter of life and ministry together is coming to close. But the Larger Story, and the story of St. Mark's ministry, go on. The story of ministry will continue with many of you gathered here, with Pastor Patrick, Pastor Olson, and the staff. And eventually you will welcome a new senior pastor. This person will be fortunate indeed!

Serendipitously we are at the end of the Easter Season in the liturgical year. Officially this is “Easter 7,” the Sunday after the Ascension. We are in a holding pattern, a waiting time. Jesus is now the Risen and Ascended Christ. And we wait for the next scene, for the promised Spirit, for the time of the Church.

This weekend we read from the very end of The Book of Revelation—and the very end of the Bible. This is it! The end. And ... it is a new beginning.

Revelation ends with an invitation, an open invitation to anyone who is thirsty: Come and receive the water of life as a gift. ANYONE! (I hope you will hold on to this!)

“Thirst” is a way of saying anyone who needs justice ... which is God’s evenness. It means having enough. God’s justice is life-giving acceptance and inclusion. We are invited to receive this and share this, like the great story of the woman at the well.

The story that invites our story is the NeverEnding Story of *Hesed*: Gods’ steadfast and faithful love, lived and promised through the patriarchs and matriarchs, through the prophets and judges. Characters in the Bible are like characters in crime shows: Even the good guys—like Moses, Jacob, Ruth, David, Peter, Paul, and Mary—have shadows from the past, mistakes and failures, sufferings and pain that are not all resolved in one episode.

The NeverEnding Story of Healing Love is one we need.

In the 1984 West German film *The NeverEnding Story* (in German, *Die unendliche Geschichte*), a bullied, shy, and outcast boy named Bastian enters the story and becomes a young warrior whose task it is to stop a dark force called the Nothing from engulfing the world.

As it turns out, Bastian is the human child with the power to bring Fantasia (the land of possibility) back with his imagination.

As he returns to the real world, his task is to chase down the bullies. At the end, Bastian had many more wishes and adventures ... “but that is another story.”

In the film, Bastian enters a new reality. One in which he sees himself as someone who can make a difference. He has the power to stop the Force of Nothing.

Still, the looming question is, Who is running the world?

Sometimes we hold on to old stories about ourselves and the world. We clutch a reality that is not trustworthy or true. We embrace a reality that keeps us from seeing new possibilities of growing and becoming.

When we shake it all out, one of the most impactful messages of Revelation—and, indeed, the whole Bible—is that God works with suffering. Really. John’s apocalyptic purpose was not to instill fear and dread, but to encourage hope and action!

God’s divine desire is *shalom*: well-being for humanity and for creation. The Great Invitation is to participate in this well-being work.

Remember the wonderful Hebrew words for this? *Tikkun olam!* Mend the world!

We are like detectives: flawed but focused. We are like shy, bullied boys: open for new courage and purpose. Our task is to help each other stay in the land of the living. And to remember again and again that, at the end of the game, we are all, each of us, swept up in love!

More than anything, I am deeply grateful for sharing in your stories. I have appreciated and learned from your openness and honesty, vulnerability and genuineness. I am grateful for your partnership and participation, your steadfastness and resilience. Together we have celebrated sunny skies and survived stormy seas.

Over all of the years there has been much growing up ... weddings and divorces, births and deaths, baptisms and illnesses, conflicts and accomplishments, confirmations and accidents, setbacks and successes and surprises!

Our stories have many chapters. We have known sorrow and disappointment, confusion and despair. Sometimes, meaninglessness—like the “Nothing” that threatened Fantasia—threatens our sense of self and purpose.

There are times when we, like some of the churches John wrote to, feel lukewarm, apathetic, or smug: “Ah! We have it all figured out! We are smart enough!”

John warns us: The forces that defy God’s desire for *shalom* are strong and real. If we let fear and anger be our closest companions, we will lose our vision and our identity. Like the iconic Ralphie’s Red Ryder BB Gun in the movie *The Christmas Story*, we need to remember that fear and anger “will shoot your eye out!”

Over the years, at times, the ship of St. Mark’s has been tossed upon the sea of life, as we all are. Our mutual resilience, our desire and willingness to get back up and keep going has made all the difference. Indeed, in the words of the hymn, “Love is come again, like wheat arising green!” [1]

And together we remember what Richard Rohr taught us: If we are not becoming more understanding, more forgiving and more compassionate, we are not growing in spiritual maturity. [2]

The really cool and wonderful thing about compassion is that it works in all directions. It heals the past, invigorates the present, and opens the future. Compassion frees us.

Friends, you are the Body of Christ for the world. Wounded and real.

Our ministry, our work, is not a “program.” We are not the “park district.” This is not a ticketed invitation to sit in a stadium or auditorium and watch a performance. We are not consumers, but a community. We prioritize more than our own anxieties.

One of my absolutely most favorite parts in ministry has been seeing gifts and possibilities in people and imagining what work they might like to do and be good at. I loved that! Sometimes people have been surprised by what they enjoy and what brings new meaning.

Working together with the Spirit, we have made a difference.

So we RSVP to the Great Invitation. We open our lives and ourselves to be part of a community called the Church. We gather to remember God’s promise, to be embraced by grace and connected to each other.

The gathering is a good one.

In a new book titled *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*, author Priya Parker gives some helpful guidance to successful gatherings. Her advice—which was not written for churches—fits.

The first thing she says about hosting a gathering is to “commit to a specific purpose.” Why are we here? What is the agenda? [3]

Well, we have done that. We gather at St. Mark’s for the purpose of being *connected to* and *sharing in* God’s life giving love. Love that saves us and the world.

Parker writes, “As the host you’re the glue that binds everyone together.” [4]

For us, Jesus is the host. His life and death, his ministry and mission welcome and connect us. He commanded us to host as he did. Taking bread, he said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Taking a towel, he said, “Love one another.”

Parker describes the role of the host as threefold: to protect, connect, and equalize. Hmm ... it seems to me this is what happens, or needs to happen, when we gather for worship.

1. Protect the guests. Jesus was the Good Shepherd, and he understood that people need to feel cared for and safe.

Together, we have made this important. Bullying behavior is not allowed! Your safety matters. We have trained our leaders how to respond to possible threats. We are committed to treating all people with respect, dignity, and kindness.

2. Help people connect. Parker writes about a friend who announces that each guest has one task before dinner: Make two new friends.

To really connect to what's happening, you have to pay attention.

We care about real life. We ask about what really matters.
We are not afraid of hardship and sorrow.
We do not judge harshly or hold grudges.
We befriend each other.

3. Equalize the guests. Like Jesus, we are open to all stories. There is no rank, no order. You don't have to be a Lutheran for twenty years in order to participate or be in leadership!

We remember the One who took the form of a servant.
We wash each other's hands and bless them for serving.

The words "human" and "humility" come from the word *humus*: "from the earth." We remember that eventually we are all dust. And to dust we shall return. But! ... in the meantime, we are alive, and we help each other stay this way!

At the very end of Revelation—and the Bible—John of Patmos invited the readers to continue in (or to become part of) the gathered community.

It seemed like a good idea to old John the Seer to wrap it all up with an invitation and a blessing.

A couple of thousand years later, I have to say I agree with him.

"Come ... let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift ...

Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints."

And all the living creatures said ...

"Amen!"

Resources

[1] "Now the Green Blade Rises," hymn text by John MacLeod Campbell Crum, 1872-1958, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #379.

[2] Rohr, Richard. *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, Jossey-Bass, 2011.

[3] Dunn, Jancee. "Throw a Party With Heart," *Real Simple*, June 2018.

[4] Parker, Priya. *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*, Riverhead Books, 2018.

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Reflection Questions:

- When have you felt disconnected from the love of God and others?
- What separates us from each other?
- What are some of the forces that defy the purpose of God? (*Shalom*)
- Does reflection on the chapters of your life give you a clearer view to the wonderful and mysterious ways of healing and hope?
- In what ways do you share your time, energy, and resources to bring well-being to the community?