

“MORE TO COME”
Acts 3:12-19; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
April 15, 2018

When I was growing up in the 1950’s, church people were often encouraged to view themselves in negative terms, as “sinners in the hands of an angry God”; so Christian congregations back then were characterized by a general sense of guilt. Twenty years later, when the world had become more secularized and more skeptical of religious truth-claims, these same congregations were characterized by a general sense of doubt. Today the temperature has dropped still further. Pastors may now presume, no matter where they preach, that the congregations gathered before them are beset with a sense of discouragement.

Discouragement has many fathers and mothers; it can enter our lives from a variety of sources. But I am convinced that the main cause of discouragement today is the inability to believe in a future that we can reach.

You and I can experience discouragement at a personal level. By the time we arrive at mid-life, we realize that some of our best-laid plans and lofty goals will never be fully achieved. Perhaps we’ve aspired to become financially prosperous, but here we are in the prime of our careers still trying to make ends meet. Or, we’ve aspired to become spiritually mature and emotionally healthy, but we find ourselves still struggling with the same old sins and hang-ups – with little hope of changing for the better.

You and I can also experience discouragement at a corporate level. Many of us have dreamed of “peace on earth and good will among people,” but we’ve repeatedly watched these dreams turn into nightmares, in places as distant as Syria and as close as Sandy Hook. We live in a world marred by violent individuals and broken relationships. We also realize that the institutions which could bring healing and hope to our troubled world, like the government and the Church, seem to be stuck in neutral or going in reverse, failing to reach their full potential.

Ironically, the more idealistic one is, the more susceptible one is to discouragement. Only those who have expected much can know the bitterness of hopes denied. This helps to explain why discouragement infiltrates the ranks of the people of God today.

Discouragement does not spare the pulpit any more than the congregation. On any given day, I can look in the morning newspaper – or in my own bathroom mirror! – and the future can appear as grim to me as it may appear to you. However, I’ve been given a sorely needed lift by one of the lectionary readings for this 3rd Sunday of Easter. This passage penetrates our mood the way a key penetrates a lock. “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are . . . Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 John 3:1-2).

Notice: the writer of 1 John tells us that our hope for the future is grounded in a present reality: “We are God’s children now.” Not that we call ourselves such, for that would be arrogant and presumptuous. The wonder is that God should call us his children. Yes, as God’s

offspring we are sometimes more lazy than productive, more rebellious than obedient, and more naughty than nice; but God still claims us as his children, his kinfolk. And since our identity is grounded in God, we never need worry about disqualifying ourselves, for we were never qualified in the first place.

This is the most important fact about anyone who believes in Jesus Christ: each of us is a child of God. It is more significant that we are children of God than to be children of John Wesley, or children of George Washington, or children of our own parents. Now, as you and I strive to be our best selves and repeatedly fall short; now, as we disagree occasionally about the direction we should be headed as a church; now, in the thick of culture wars and government deadlock; now, in the midst of racial and gender discrimination; now, as each day claims new victims to gun violence and sexual harassment, we are God's children.

In this confidence about who we are in the present, you and I dare to long for the future God is bringing to us. "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed." This passage from 1 John is an Easter text because the writer is referring in part to the resurrected life we will share with Christ, the exact shape of which is uncertain. John only gives us hints, saying that in the next life "we will be like [Christ], for we will see him as he is" (v. 2c).

Notice that John looks to our future life in God's presence with a sense of mystery: he can't forecast the form or design of it in graphic detail. At the same time, he looks to our final future with a sense of expectancy: whatever it is, it will be better than we can imagine or hope for, because it will be a gift from God. As the old saying goes, "We don't know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future."

Now, lest we forget: the Easter promise of a better future is for this life as well as the life to come. You and I live in discouraging times when some of our hopes and plans seem to have reached a dead-end. But John reminds us that there is more to come. There always is! You and I are not simply playing out the string. God is not finished with us yet. We are God's workmanship and God is still building.

In fact, in the perspective of the long run, we have hardly started. For each one of us in this room today, there are unrealized capacities to recognize and develop. There are stubborn sins and weaknesses to overcome. There is knowledge to receive. There is love to give and take. As I understand John, the self to be is hardly recognizable from the self that is. "What we will be has not yet been revealed," and it won't be fully revealed until we see Christ face-to-face.

But the good news is that you and I don't have to wait until "the sweet by and by" for this transformed self to take shape. What theologians call "sanctification" – the process of becoming like Christ – begins here when we believe, not there when we die. The more clearly you and I see Jesus, the more nearly we resemble him. Once we have known him, we can never be pre-Christian again. As one believer put it, "The person whose sickness is 'Jesus' can never be cured." You and I have a future, says John, and it is good. It does yet appear what any of us will be.

Because this is true of us as individual Christians, it follows that it has not yet been revealed what the Church will be, for the Church is nothing more than believers in community. Today, the Church as a whole is discouraged about its future. Organized religion has lost much of its credibility and influence in our society. Many congregations here in the Northeast are

aging, declining, and dying. Over the past ten years, worship attendance in the New York Annual Conference has declined by nearly 20 percent, leading some to speculate that United Methodists in our region are headed toward extinction.

The Woodbury United Methodist Church would appear to be an exception to this trend. Signs of vitality are everywhere, from the lively presence of children and youth to a growing music program to a calendar brimming with purposeful activity. And yet, I sometimes hear people question whether our own church will survive into the next decade. Our worship attendance and financial giving dipped slightly in the past year, and we were forced to adopt a deficit budget for the current year. We are now tapping into reserve funds to pay our monthly bills, and these funds are finite. The concern expressed is that if we don't reverse these trends, the time may soon come when we will have to scale back our ministry or even close our doors.

Well, the fact is that someday our church and all churches will close their doors! According to the New Testament, the time will come when the Church will be phased out; it will work itself out of a job. Another writer named John says that in his vision of the new Jerusalem, the city of God come down from above, "no temple" is there (Revelation 21:22). "No temple" means no church building, no church staff, and no church program. The Church in its present form will no longer be needed because God will create a new heavenly community in its place.

But prior to that, the Church here on earth has a lustrous future. The apostle Paul, who knew as well as anyone how petty and mean and frustrating the Church could be, declares that it is God's intention "to present the Church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – so that she may be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:27). I don't know how the Church will get there from where it is today, but that is God's business, not mine. Christ not only gave himself for the Church, he gives himself to the Church, so that increasingly the Church might resemble his will and fulfill its own high potential.

There is no assurance here that the Church as we know it today – its organizational forms, its worship forms, its programmatic forms – will be conserved. In the year 2050, will Methodist congregations still have a Church Council, a Sunday School, and a Staff-Parish Relations Committee? We don't know; God only knows. We share John's sense of mystery about the exact shape of the Church's future. "What we will be has not yet been revealed." But alongside this sense of mystery, we also share John's sense of expectancy, believing that the Church's future is still viable and still promising.

Friends, I am here this morning to declare my faith in the future of our own church. Yes, we face challenges with our finances, our organizations, and our facilities. We need additional income just to balance our regular budget; we also need extra money to finish the improvements we want to make here in our sanctuary. Where is this infusion of cash going to come from? I don't know. But I do know this: any church that survived the trauma you experienced more than a decade ago; any church that has persevered as you have through times of transition and turmoil; any church that is renewing its strength today by purchasing a new sanctuary organ, developing a choir for children and youth, and sending nine of its members on a mission trip to Ecuador, shows no signs of being a dying church. You look to me like a congregation for whom there is more to come. Why, then, should we be discouraged? Our future may be a mystery, but we can face it with expectancy.

I once read about a minister on the West Coast who gave his beloved cat an unusual double name. The animal in question was a marmalade-colored Persian cat, so its first name was Marmalade, reflecting its appearance. However, the cat's second name reflected its posture. It had a long neck that was usually stretched out to the full, and a nose that most of the time was pointed up in curiosity. Its body was ever poised to press into new and unknown places. And that's how Marmalade Apokaradokia got his name.

If the name Apokaradokia doesn't ring a bell, it's because it's an obscure word from our Greek New Testament. It appears, for example, in the epistle to the Romans, where Paul talks about how "the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" (Romans 8:19). The word *apokaradokia* means to watch with head erect and outstretched, to direct attention to anything, to wait in suspense. It connotes constant expectancy.

Well, forget the cat. Forget the word if you must. But remember the posture. We are called as the Church to live on the stretch because there is more to come. There always is. Our role is to wait for it, to watch for it, and to work for it. "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed."