

It All Depends On The Lens You Use

PRAYER: Lord, may the message that I am about to bring forth be acceptable to you and to all those who hear it. May the appropriate words find their way to those who need them most and may we all find peace and harmony in what is about to be said. In your holy and precious name we pray, Amen.

Well good morning once again and thank you for joining us on this beautiful Sunday morning! It's so nice to see people during worship again! Hopefully this trend will continue and we will be back to full capacity in the near future. I'll bet some of you didn't know that prior to the pandemic, we used to have standing room only attendance. So, that's a goal we can shoot for once again. And now, you can settle in and get comfortable, because we are going to be here for a while. I'll let you ponder if I mean in general or the length of today's sermon.

There's something to be said about mornings. The freshness of the day, the opportunity for a new start, the possibilities of something great happening. Every day is a new chance to live your best life. I love the potential of a new morning. It's probably why I am such a morning person. Well, that and the fact that my cat does his best rooster imitations at 5:30 AM every single morning! Trust me, there's just no going back to sleep after hearing the yowling of an aging feline while the sun rises in your bedroom.

One of the best things about mornings, is the reinforcement that you have made it through another night. In the darkest of times, the Lord has seen you through and granted you with the gift of another day. There's a lot of promise in that. This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it! I try to live that motto every single day. There is always a lot of hope in every new morning. That hope can be a great motivator.

2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 17 states: Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. That's how the start of a fresh morning feels to me sometimes. BEHOLD – the new has come!

So – what have you all been up to for the past year? It seems like we hardly see each other anymore. What have you been doing? Did you learn a new language? Did you take up some new hobbies? Did you get to the end of NETFLIX? Were you able to do all of those things that you said you would do if you only had more time? Or maybe you took some time to reflect, pray, and analyze your current situation to determine how you would come out stronger.

As we reach the light at the end of the tunnel and start to think about things returning to a steady state, I've been reflecting. What did I learn during my time in solitude? What have I figured out whilst sitting at home pondering if I would ever be able to attend a live event again? There has been a lot of praying, a lot of searching and a lot of wondering. What can I learn from all of this? What is the Lord teaching me during these times? I could have been bitter and wondered why God allowed this to happen, but instead I wanted to know what the lesson was. And thus, I did a lot of thinking. And my thoughts led me to the fact that I had become depressed. Just beaten down by all that has happened in the last 14 months. And for a positive, upbeat, outgoing person like me, depression is very hard. And I've had to slog my way through some days and force a smile on my face during working hours, and muddle through. Thankfully, I've had my faith to lean on to pull me through some of the most difficult times. Deuteronomy 31:6 tells us: "Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or dread in them, for it is the Lord, your God, who goes with you. He will not leave or forsake you." Faith is grand! It makes us stronger, comforts us in our time of need, and helps us know that things are going to be okay because we have

the love of our Lord, Jesus Christ to light up our life and carry us through troubling times. And there have been a lot of troubling times lately.

But now – it appears that we are about to turn a corner and some of the things that we've missed are going to be coming back. It's like waking up to the promise of a new day. The start of a fresh morning where opportunity abounds. If we look at it the right way, it's our chance for a do-over. This is our new start – what will we choose to do with this gift?

And not only are we getting a fresh, post-pandemic start, we are also getting a fresh start here at our church. If you recall, when the lockdowns started, we were on the cusp of searching for a new pastor. And we were thinking that it in a matter of months, a year at the most, we would place the call. Obviously, that didn't turn out like we expected. And maybe that's a good thing. Perhaps we will have a stronger pool of candidates to choose from than we would have had a year ago. Some may argue that perhaps we will have worse candidates, but I choose to remain positive. It all depends on the lens you use to look at things. And as I've been told many times in my life – I choose to see the world through the lens of rose colored glasses.

The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 18, verses 20 – 22 says: "For wherever two of three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." I've always interpreted that phrase to mean that church can be anywhere. You just need two or three like-minded individuals.

Have you ever stopped and wondered why you attend worship service? Why do you come to worship, or worship from home, every Sunday morning? Think about it for a moment. What brings you to worship ever Sunday morning? Is it the pastor? Is it the prayers? Is it the music? Is it a combination of all of that and more?

For me, it's all about the message. I love our Sunday services – even the ones we've had through the pandemic. I do miss the choir and the beautiful anthems they sang – but with a little luck and a lot of God's will, perhaps they will return soon. And while I love our Sunday services, when I come to worship on a Sunday, I am all about the message. What is God calling me to do this week? What is it that I need to hear from our Lord to prepare me for the week ahead?

There's no right or wrong answer to this, everyone comes to worship for their own reasons. BUT – if you come to worship for a particular TYPE of pastor or a particular TYPE of message, do you ever ask yourself why? In this modern age of post-apocalyptic internet church, you can worship with anyone anywhere at any time. Even our Sunday worship services are available to stream on Facebook all week long (and longer). So why THIS service? Why THIS Pastor? Why THIS message? And I know, some of you are saying, well we didn't have a choice, Ryan, we HAD to hear you today – we didn't get to vote on it.... And I get that. But why do you attend a worship service?

Now, here's another question. Why do you come to this church? Why are you a member of the First Presbyterian Church of Hackettstown New Jersey? You see? That's a different question than why do you attend worship service? Why do you belong to this church? Is it because it's the only Presbyterian church near your house? Is it because your family went here, or because you've been coming here since you were a kid? Why do you belong to this church? Heck, you could even ask why you belong to any church these days – the reports out there about people not affiliating with any church at all are frightening! But I digress. Why are you a member of this church? There's no right or wrong answer – every person has their own reasons – but just something I want you to ponder.

For me, I belong to this church because it's my family. Now that wasn't the case when I first came here. I admit, Cathy and I came to this church because we wanted to find a Presbyterian church in our area. And Pastor Archer, our pastor at the time, is the reason that we came back – again and again until he finally asked us to become members. And by then, we knew we wanted to be members – we had forged some friendships, we enjoyed the sermons, we liked the church and the family friendly environment. But as time went on and we got more and more settled, we became friendly with a lot of the members of the church, and then we became friends with a lot of the members of the church, and then they became our extended family. Even the ones that we don't always get along with all the time – they are family too. And that's what this church is – it's a family. And like any family, we are going to have our good times and our tough times. We are going to have our ups and downs. But it's important to remember we are also always going to have each other as long as we put in the effort and stay committed to one another. And like any family, sometimes we need a family meeting or a family gathering to remind us how important we are to one another.

And I know, we haven't been able to have gatherings lately. We've done our best in the virtual environment, but that's a far cry from being in person, sitting next to one another, and laughing about how many times I go up to the buffet line to get more food. And if you want to know the exact number, ask Bruce, he keeps score for me. I like to eat, what can I say?

I miss gathering with everybody on Sunday. I miss men's breakfast. I miss all the fun things that we used to do as a church family. And I know those days are coming back (hopefully soon) but when they do return, they are going to be different. WE are going to be different. And are we ready for what awaits us on the other side of all of this? A lot of things that seemed so important pre-pandemic just seem like petty

nonsense now. The change that has occurred over the last 14 months (and counting) has taught me a lot. And even still, I have so much to learn.

It is a fragile and delicate time here at our church. We are in between pastors. We just said goodbye to an interim that we've had for two years – and one of those years was during a pandemic. We don't know what lies ahead. We don't know what is next. But we do know that it is being worked on. And while it is being worked on, we need to pull together and carry each other through tomorrow. We need to bond together as a family unit more than ever before, because right now, we are all we have. WE are the reason this church will continue to grow and prosper and thrive. We chose to be members of this church, we chose to be part of this family, and now, in our time of need, we need to choose to be there and do everything we can during this period of transition.

There are a lot of churches out there that are struggling right now. Some didn't survive the pandemic. Some won't survive much longer. We have been blessed, we have been able to make it through the tough times. And we can't stop now. We can't allow any annoyances or anger to block our progression. We need to pull together and move forward toward a brighter future. This is our fresh morning and we need to rejoice and be glad in it!

There is so much that we can do to help. Let me put my stewardship hat on for a moment – and don't you groan at me! For those of you that are able, please continue to give what you can. As we come to the light at the end of the tunnel and slowly start to make our way back into the church, there is much that needs to be done and those needs tap into our resources. We will need to replenish those resources. So, if you are able, please consider donating what you can. And don't forget about the Per Capita – I know it's not everyone's favorite subject, but

that money does go to help churches in need during difficult times, and sadly there are a lot of churches in need right now.

If you don't have the financial means, help out in other ways. Call on the members of session or deacons to see what you can do to help. Get involved, however that may be, even if it is something as simple (yet powerful) as prayer. Pray for the leaders of our church. Pray for our church. Pray that we may find the right pastor in a short amount of time. You don't want to be stuck listening to me up here once a month do you?

Jen said something in her sermon last week that has resonated with me ever since. It was something so small and so simple, yet so profound --- she said that we need to let go. Let go! And that phrase can be interpreted in a lot of ways, but I chose to view it as the need to let go of what is hanging over my head and bothering me and just move forward. You can do a lot of damage if you constantly cast yourself in resentment and anger. The amount of stress that would add to an already stressful situation may become unbearable. Let go indeed! It's good advice and while I have a hard time letting go, I'm trying. I'm making changes that need to be made – I'm forgiving more, setting healthy boundaries, and moving on. If we don't forgive we can never get past the issue that is blocking us from moving ahead. And we have a great deal of things that we need to accomplish before the end of this year, so we need to remove those roadblocks as quickly as possible.

There are three sides to every story. There is your side, my side, and somewhere in between there is the truth. A LOT is going to be said in the next few months. A lot about our church, our history, and our future. There will also be a lot of STRESS in the coming months as we pull together to call our next pastor. We aren't going to agree on everything – and that's okay. But we have to trust the process and we have to trust each other.

We can sit here and be angry. We can refuse to participate. We can be mad and upset and wish to reign powerful vengeance down upon those that we feel have wronged us, or we could look at it from a different perspective. We can use a different lens to view what has happened and choose to see this all as a learning opportunity. We can also choose to forgive which is the most Christian thing of all. People make mistakes. It happens. And most of the time, those mistakes aren't meant in a nefarious manner to destroy us – they are just mistakes, made in anger, or pain, or confusion, or doubt. And like our blessed Lord, we can choose to forgive, take action, and move on.

I don't agree with everything we've done here. But we elected leaders to the session to handle the tough choices for us, and I trust in them. They were chosen, by us, to lead this church through one of the most difficult times we have – calling a new pastor. We need to be patient and we need to trust our leaders and trust the process.

The work isn't done, brothers and sisters, it's only just begun! Don't give up hope. Don't give up faith. Brighter times are ahead! And brighter times are here as well, depending on how you look at things. I need you to be patient. I need you to be mindful of our situation. I need you to pray – a lot. We can be joyful if we choose to be! We can be the light in someone's life for a minute, an hour, a day, or more. We can bring the hope and the faith of the good news to anyone and in any way that we choose. Spreading the love of Christ doesn't mean that you have to stand a rock and scream "Repent! Repent! Jesus is King!" It can also mean reaching out to someone to see how they are feeling. Comforting friends in need. Being the support system for someone that needs you most. It can mean having a nice dinner with friends or family and reminding them that are loved. Spreading the joy can be done in a multitude of ways – it all depends on the lens that you use.

Let's go out into the world with our positive lenses on. Let's make the most of each day and let's spread the joy and good news as best we can. Let's be the light in the lives of those that we meet! Let's fill our community with the love of the Holy Spirit! Let's spread the good news and let's help one another this day and every day forward. For that is the good news. Amen.