

We have been introduced to an Easter world, a post-resurrection world, a world where death, and darkness, and corporate blah are not the final word. And yet we're still in a period of transition. We await the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost next Sunday, and the birth of its vehicle, this thing we call Church with a capital-C. And in this morning's passage, Jesus cannot be clearer in instructing and informing our call: We are to be witnesses. Witnesses of the transformative power of Jesus' ministry AND...AND...AND witnesses of what can and will BE...when we follow in the ways of Jesus; when each of us act as Jesus to the world; when we allow the Holy Spirit to move in and through and around each one of us.

And perhaps today, more than any day, our congregation can empathize with those earliest disciples and apostles. For, we too, are in a period of transition. Thanks be to God, that pandemic life, hopefully by this summer, is coming to a close, and that we are, hopefully by this summer, on the precipice of a more whole and healthier world. In the interim, we've occupied ourselves in a waiting room. Behind us, is a thirty-plus year history, the history of Sardis; coincidentally the approximate amount of time that Jesus lived on Earth. It's the story of relationships, and space-making, and actualized love, and a community gathering in and distributing spirit-filled acts. And ahead of us, is the new thing God's gonna do through us – we might be so bold as to say this new thing God's gonna berth out of our efforts.

For the last year and a half, circumstances have forced us think about how we can remain this community called Sardis, how we stay connected, how we ensure that there can even be a future for this faith community. We're in this strange place where we aren't going to be exactly who we were, and at the same time, we don't yet exactly know who we're gonna be. It's an adolescence, even for those of us who have already navigated our awkward teenage years.

Now just about every Sunday, the Spirit, and the job description you called me to as pastoral proclaimer, compel me to exegete the weekly text – that is to draw insight or meaning out of or from within the words of our lection. But... the role you called me to, also, just occasionally, requires me to provoke, and muse, and prod the congregation to where I hear the Spirit calling us. Today's text inspires more of a speech than a sermon. I think, today, you need to hear three things

from me, in order for us to rightly consider this call of witness with which we have been tasked:

- 1) Who do I think we are?
- 2) What do I think is next for us?
- 3) What do I expect from each of you?

Who are we? Why do we exist? What does Sardis have to offer the community?

I believe ours is a story of space-making. Our role is to help carve out safe spaces, physically, virtually, emotionally, spiritually, and any way imaginable, for neighbors to experience the presence of a good and loving God, and to realize their value and potential as God's children, too. To steward such space is to practice being both guest and host to our neighbors; to believe in the power of one conversation or one act of love as having palpable and transformative impact on our world; to lift up relationships over transactions; to create models where sacred gifts are recognized, encouraged, and affirmed in all people, and where such gifts are never labeled as exhaustive or threatening.

The story of Jesus, the witness of Jesus, is one of a person devoted to creating space for every neighbor to connect to the divine. And ours, while not canonized, is the very same story. We exist, we persist, we live out our calling by our determination to make Sardis a space where the people of Charlotte and beyond can experience God at their own pace.

This is holy work. This is sacred work. This is impactful work. This long-term work is worth zooming for; is worth our energy; is worth the time, talents, and tithes we can throw at it, because these kind of spaces are never out of season.

I want you think about your experience here. I want you think about someone who has taken an interest in you, who has encouraged you, who has told you that your matter. I want you think about an issue of justice that matters to you, and how some program or person in this place inspired your desire to work on its behalf. I want you to think about the God you knew prior to this community, and consider how that God has grown or changed in your time here. And I want you

think about the impact of those kind of moments extrapolated over a thirty-year period.

That's our story. That's our relevance. That's our value. That's our experience with God in a spatial way.

So...we are a college of space-makers and space-receivers and space-explorers. What's next? I think, we, as a congregation, have to do the work of self-discovery. The Sardis of pre-pandemic is what we have done. The Sardis of the last fifteen months, and the short period to follow, is the Sardis of what we've had to or have to do. The Sardis of the post-pandemic world is the Sardis we get to be, and want to be, and hope to be.

Let me phrase it another way. When each of us think of the Jesus story, there are often one or two narratives that bring his life into focus: we live into our version of Jesus as a Good Samaritan, a Mary AND a Martha, a lame man who walks, and leaps, and praises God all at once. We have the chance to look back at our history, consider it in the light of the last fifteen months, and parse out those stories, feelings, events, activities, and witnesses that best exemplify our space-making abilities. What's next for Sardis Baptist Church is a future bursting with possibilities.

Who are we, and what's next? We are space-makers, who in the coming months have the ability to map out and explore new ways of making space.

And where do you come in? What do I want each of you to do? Three things, I hope. Ponder. Be intentional. Give yourself permission.

Ponder: make space for yourself to process those things/ministries/feelings/experiences at Sardis that bring you energy, and those that don't. Invest your energy in the life-giving things, and don't be afraid to be honest with our staff, and with others about those things that drain you. Because when you are here, we want you to do those things that make you most present and excited about being in this space.

Be Intentional. The thing that makes a space like ours sacred and safe is our community's universal commitment to honoring the integrity of our shared space. I want to ask you to consider your role as guest and host; to act in ways that generate empathy and compassion for others; to give thought to how every procedure, protocol, liturgical element, process, activity, etc. serves as an extension in the task of creating sacred space.

Give yourself permission. You are enough. You are valued. You have remarkable gifts. You have a voice that matters. This congregation wants you to share yourself and express yourself in the ways you feel called. Ours is a space made better by the uniqueness you bring into it.

Okay, there you have it. I think Sardis is a space-making community, poised to create transformative spaces in the coming months and years. And I, your pastor, am asking each of you to be part of it, by bringing your attention, energy, confidence, trust, and unique selves into this place.

The disciples carved out new space in Jerusalem and made room for flaming tongues and fresh winds to initiate God's spirit. As we await the season of Pentecost, may we, the Church at Sardis, seek to be a new Jerusalem. May it be so, and may it be soon!

Amen.