

In the spirit of Paul, who wrote the letter we read this morning, I want to speak less about what's in today's text, and more about what's on my heart.

At this time, three years ago, Sardis was speeding along – I'm not sure if we were a well-oiled machine, but I can tell you my optimism for this place was as high as I can remember. We had a record crowd at Christmas Eve; We had an especially good year of generous offerings; I started a journey with a clergy cohort at Wake Forest, and while I was away on our first retreat, the congregation here held a joyful Epiphany dinner that went off without a hitch. The year brought us several enthusiastic new community members, for whose presence I still give thanks. We had filled our leadership committees. And we had also finished a number of building renovations including painting the exterior of the church, many of the rooms in the meetinghouse, installing new carpet, and buffing the tile floors. The week of Ash Wednesday, Kathryn and I framed about two dozen pictures to hang around the meetinghouse, and we put the finishing touches on a coffee parlor, stocked with furniture and accessories from a successful church rummage sale. And oh, by the way, the proceeds from the rummage sale paid for three sets of gently used hymnals.

At an absolutely packed-house for Shrove Tuesday, Lucy took her first steps.

And then, the very next day, COVID-19 came to Mecklenburg County, and we would wait more than 70 weeks to gather for in-person worship.

This morning, nearly three years removed from the start of the pandemic, we still feel its lingering effects – every week we have

absences because of positive tests. But it is fair to say the most pronounced and intense stages of pandemic are in the past.

When the pandemic began, to a person, the people of this church committed to several priorities: 1) to be safe 2) to stay connected 3) to gather for consistent, intentional, meaningful, and creative worship 4) to pay our bills as best we could and 5) to simply hold together as community.

I believe we accomplished what we set out to do. It wasn't easy. It certainly wasn't pretty. And it's definitely not something we want to have to do again anytime soon. But we survived. We remain whole. We have been the recipients of generosity – in time, talent, tithe, and spirit. And we have consistently made expressions of corporate worship, and shared acts of love and kindness with our neighbors.

This is commendable. It's more than that. It's remarkable. And I hope you will give yourself credit for this good work, and celebrate all that God has, is, and will do with us in this community.

But priorities are a tricky thing. When we prioritize certain things, it means we have to pay less attention to others. I believe the most profound effect of COVID-19 has been to weaken, and in some cases render irrelevant, many of the tools, programs, and expectations that served us so well in pre-pandemic life.

The COVID pause effectively stifled our committee structure, our budget planning, and even our traditional ways of gathering. I would tell you that we prioritized the maintenance of our Spirit at the expense of our structure. I would also tell you that I would make such a choice 100 percent of the time.

Yes, we've had a set of tools in place for many years to help us be something called Sardis Baptist Church. And yes, COVID-19 threw them all out of whack, just like it has thrown every one of our households, schools, workplaces, and even our favorite eating places and watering holes out of whack. But the blunting of these tools is not an indictment on their past value, nor should it be an indictment on our self-worth. Our value is not rooted in filling committees, crunching budgets, or counting people in pews. Our value is rooted in the presence and Spirit of God that lives and dwells among the people of this place! And friends, the Spirit is here, I promise you that!

In this very letter, Paul reminds the Church at Corinth, and you me as well, that we have every spiritual gift necessary to achieve God's good purposes for this community. We got enough of what's needed.

We throw around the word hope a bunch, especially at Advent, but here's what I think hope is. I think it's dogged, and determined, and persistent. I think hope tells us that the faithful actions of a few dozen, no matter how clumsy or disjointed, if done with love, purpose, and consistency, can bring God's Spirit to life. Our acts of generosity, hospitality, and compassion, repeated over time, generate impact.

Each of you represent dozens, if not hundreds of valentines. Not the candy-kind, or the ones we'll throw away on February 15<sup>th</sup>, but the real ones, the authentic ones, the lasting ones. You speak the I-love-yous that echo, and swirl back around, and nest in all the important places.

Paul's right. We've got enough umph to be Sardis Baptist Church.

I don't believe our challenge is to identify our spiritual gifts. I believe our challenge is the expression, and shaping of those gifts in such a way as for us to live out our collective purpose.

We're standing today, because we held tight to the Spirit these past three years. But we needn't be content with standing. 2023 offers the opportunity to clear a bold path, to walk into a new year, and eventually run, and even sprint into 2024 and beyond. We must discern those new tools, traditions, and programs that will give shape, voice, and clear expression to our Spirit.

It's true. It's time for us to be strategic, and clever, and creative, and innovative about how we're gonna express God's Spirit in a post-pandemic age. And I think we've got a choice to make.

There's one option: We can live in the past. We can lament, and with good reason, the decay and decline of the Church, not to mention all the umph of our own history: committees that clicked; formational activities for all ages; robust social programs; Sunday School rooms that overflowed with high-energy kiddos; an awareness, and an intensity, and a committed presence to congregational living shared by a much wider swath of people. You are right, there were some things, not all things, but there were some things that worked really, really well. And we mourn, and we grieve, and we are frustrated by their reduced stature and presence. Change shakes us to our core.

But we don't have to be paralyzed by pandemic, nor by the grief and anxiety of change. Perhaps we could consider that the events of the last three years have been a pruning of our structure. And we have the opportunity to build a new creation, to grow new branches with even further reach, and even more pleasant shade. We can create tools for

2023. Not as an indictment on the tools of 1993, and not as a reaction to pandemic. But, but, but...as an active, assertive, totally-healthy, totally-in-the-present decision to do those things that best align our resources with our spirit.

Buechner says our calling is the place where our deep joy meets the world's great needs. Isn't it time for us to discover constructive ways for us to be happy while serving one another?

To that end, I want to make you aware of two things.

Our trustees have worked for many months, and with great effort, to produce a budget for our annual ministry plan in 2023. They have not only endured the feedback of a vague and cantankerous pastor throughout this process, but they've also worked to forecast a plan to meet the unknown: how will people give, and be present, and do church in a world where we don't anything like we did just three years ago?

Danny will be presenting a document for your review today, and in a few weeks, we'll vote on its passage. I would ask that you put your faith in the wisdom and discernment of the people who have crafted this. It reflects their sincerity, their authenticity, and most especially, their love and hope for Sardis. Put your faith in their work, and put your faith in our ability to live out that work.

I also want to make you aware that in February, Sardis will engage with Rev. Dr. David Brown of Pinnacle Consulting in a discovery process. David and his team help churches think about how they can best align their resources to meet their needs. They also have experience in coaching congregations toward vibrant leadership models that engage

both lay and clergy alike. With the help of several Sardis members, we'll work with David to craft a proposal for a visioning process – a year-long engagement to create the new tools Sardis will need to thrive in 2023 and beyond. The process will provide a budget, action items, and deliverables. At the completion of this process, we'll present our findings to the congregation to determine our desire to move forward.

I am encouraged that we have a budget to frame the work for the year ahead. I'm even more encouraged that we have a process in place to begin discerning how we, as a whole congregation, will engage that work in the future. I'd say that's a whole lot more than standing around, and I'm incredibly excited!

Here's the last part of the invitation. Each one of you has agency. And voice. And gifts – so many varied and wonderful gifts. And you have God's Spirit.

Will you join us, as active agents, in shaping this new future? Will you think about, will you pray about what connects you to this place, and gives you energy and joy? Will you think about the spiritual gifts you can share to help reveal the potential of Sardis Baptist Church?

I thank my God for each of you! And I thank my God, for the faith She has in our bright future. May we begin to claim such a future with joy and gratitude, and may begin such a pursuit today!

Amen.

***Walking Again***  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Second Sunday of Epiphany, 1/15/2023**  
**1 Corinthians 1:1-9**



a spiritually  
progressive  
community  
of faith