

***Keeping the Flame Alive***  
***(Time to Go Deeper: The End of Christendom)***

Stephen Van Kuiken  
North Congregational U.C.C.  
Columbus, OH  
May 21, 2023

Ancient Witness: Zephaniah 3:11-13, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Last year the United Church of Christ sold the building that housed the national offices and decommissioned the Amistad Chapel that was housed in the headquarters. The denomination now leases some space in downtown Cleveland in a move to downsize.

I was kind of sad to hear this news, but I can't say that I was surprised. The Christian church in the United States has been shrinking for decades. In recent years, even evangelical churches have been losing members. Thousands of churches are closed doors each year.

And it appears that the COVID pandemic has dealt a devastating blow to American Christianity. Recent studies indicate that a sizable numbers of people are not returning to church. The numbers have leveled off, and it is estimated that about 30% of church attenders are not coming back. (Christianity Today, March 2022)

And we can ask ourselves, will the flame go out? Will the faith survive? Does it matter? In Europe, the church as been near death for years. Great cathedrals have been kept open as museums with gift shops. Now we see that the church in America is not far behind.

Now there are some who may think that the death of the church might be a good thing. After all, Christianity has been responsible for some horrendous things. Lands have been conquered; people subjugated; individuals persecuted; the list goes on and on. And today, we hear some of the voices in the church denigrate gay, lesbian and gender nonconforming people. We see a merger of the faith with white supremacy. We acknowledge various forms of Christian nationalism. So people may, quite understandably, want the church to die. One could say that much of the church is already dead, rotted and corrupted from within. In the book of Revelation, John referred to these churches as dead, lukewarm, without life. Jesus used the term, "whitewashed tombs." Only a thin veneer of the faith covers self-centered desires and disguises other agendas. And many of the outwardly successful churches are already dead within, serving to protect a way of life and privilege that the larger society recognizes needs to change.

As someone who cares for the church and devoted my life to it, this is heartbreaking. I see being part of the church as an essential part of being a Christian. It's not optional. Paul called the church "the body of Christ," and urged the early Christians to do everything they can to edify, to build up, this body of Christ. The church is the way that the faith is kept alive, transmitted from generation to generation. Bishop Desmond Tutu once said that you can't be human in isolation; you are human only in relationships. Likewise, you can say that one cannot be Christian alone; we are Christian only in community. Being part of a church is one of the essential practices of our faith.

People are not going to stop doing good things when the church dies away. There will still be acts of generosity and compassion. There will still be movements for social justice and fairness. And people will still find pathways to God, to The Sacred, to spiritual awakening. I'm not worried about that.

But I am one who believes that the existence of the church, the body of Christ, is a profoundly good thing, an important thing, for all of its faults. It would be a sad for the Christian faith to fade away and come to an end. For the faith carries within it the seeds of healing for itself, but also the world. There is something within this narrative that is vital to survive.

Next Sunday is Pentecost, and some celebrate this as the "birthday of the church." And if we were to sing Happy Birthday, I hope we would add at the end, "and many more."

Paul's statement, "You are the body of Christ" is a *fearsome* thing to say. These are words that can only be uttered with fear and trembling. You are the body of Christ. It's up to *you* now. What happens if we fail? If we drop the torch? If the story runs out?

It sounds dramatic, but through the centuries there have been critical times when it looked like the story of our faith might die out. In the second century BCE, under the brutal rule of Antiochus Epiphanes, the Jewish tradition was struggling to survive and was hanging on by a thread. And there was a resistance movement called the Maccabean rebellion that kept the flame alive. Two hundred years later, the Jewish faith was almost extinguished again when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman empire. The siege of Masada happen around this time, which became a symbol of their struggle and resistance. A small group of intensely devoted people keep the story going. In the first and second centuries CE, the followers of Jesus were hunted down, persecuted and almost were extinguished. Many of them took refuge in the catacombs, the burial tunnels under the city of Rome. Some intensely devoted communities, such as the Essenes, took refuge in desolate places, such as the cave at Qumran. But the flame did not go out. And in the Dark Ages, the body was kept alive by the resilience and tenacity of monastic communities throughout Europe.

In these times, what kept the flame alive were these small groups of highly committed people, people with intense devotion and perseverance in the face of hardship and persecution. In Christian theology, we refer to these times of crisis and the survival of the faith as due to a remnant. Remnant theology says that all that it takes is the faith and dedication of just a few people to keep the flame alive. We like to focus on size and numbers. But remnant theology says that size and numbers do not matter. God's purposes can and will find a way. Like the grass growing through the cracks in the concrete.

In the Bible, a remnant is what is left of a community after it undergoes a catastrophe. Throughout the thousands of years of biblical history, there are times when the people of Yahweh dwindled down to nothing and almost were extinguished. In the Joseph story in Genesis, the catastrophe is a famine. And Joseph comes to the realization, saying to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors." The prophet, Isaiah, lived in another catastrophic time of the complete destruction of Jerusalem and the forced exile into Babylon. And Isaiah named his son, Shearjashub, which means

“a remnant shall return.” Jeremiah also looked to the day when Yahweh would gather people who had become refugees and scattered to all the different countries.

Likewise, in today’s reading, the prophet, Zephaniah, saw that calamity was on the horizon for the people of God. Like a refiner’s fire, all the proud and haughty will fall away, all those not really committed to following the ways of God. “For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord—the remnant of Israel.” Small in number, but high in commitment, those left are serious about seeking God. The quality of the community was transformed and elevated: “they shall do no wrong and utter no lies,” he writes.

In one article on these troubling trends I came across a striking statement by Becca Bruner, a co-pastor of a Presbyterian Church in the Philadelphia area. She talked about how the people who run various ministries are tired and exhausted, but that the disruption of COVID may end up being clarifying. Bruner said, “COVID sped up what was already happening — the end of Christendom. We no longer have the same number of cultural Christians. That was happening already. The level of commitment of people who are here is much higher. Ultimately, for the sake of the kingdom, that’s OK.” (Religion News Service, 2/21/22)

It used to be assumed in this country that everybody was Christian. The question wasn’t *would* you attend church, but *where*. Christianity was part of the culture. It was the thing to do. It was automatic. There was not much thought about it. If you wanted to fit in and conform to the norms, you went to church. This is what Bruner means by “Christendom” and “cultural Christians.” It was a Christianity with not much depth.

Almost two centuries ago, the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote against Christendom in his country of Denmark. The greatest enemy of Christianity, he argued, was “Christendom”—the cultured, respectable and watered down Christianity of his day. He wrote, “The greatest danger to Christianity is, I contend, not heresies, heterodoxies, not atheists, not profane secularism – no, but the kind of orthodoxy which is cordial drivel, mediocrity served up sweet.” Christianity has always been a counter-cultural movement. And when it becomes mainstream and identified with the culture, this is the beginning of its slow death. “Christendom,” wrote Kierkegaard, “has done away with Christianity without being quite aware of it.” He would say that it transformed Christianity into something that was too easy, inoffensive and trivial, and he said that it was his calling to “make Christianity difficult.” He wrote, “In the Christianity of Christendom the cross has become something like the child’s hobby-horse and tin trumpet.”

Speaking to our generation, Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, makes a similar point:

*For I believe the crisis in the U.S. church has almost nothing to do with being liberal or conservative; it has everything to do with giving up on the faith and discipline of our Christian baptism and settling for a common, generic U.S. identity that is part patriotism, part consumerism, part violence and part affluence.*

The faith has been absorbed into some kind of generic civil religion that is no different from its surrounding culture. Yes, the halcyon days of a prosperous, impressive church are over. We are now fighting to keep the flame from going out, and to keep a faith with humility alive. But this is

not a time to lose hope. For a remnant will emerge and survive, as it has done for generations. Perhaps we'll realize that we've been going at this the wrong way, emphasizing quantity and not quality.

As in other times of crisis for the faith, it seems to me that we are in need of that faithful remnant mentality. It takes just a few who are devoted to keep that flame alive. Focusing less on the outward numbers and signs of prosperity and stressing more the purity and truth of our hearts and the message. This is what will survive.

I like the image of the tree. Yes, we need to be engaged in action. The things that we can see. The branches, the leaves and the fruit. But what faith is about is the roots. That which is hidden. The assurance of things unseen. The tap root of life and truth and wisdom. It is the blessing from which all blessings flow. It is the crucial focus on the deep interiority of our lives.

It's time to awaken to a new remnant perspective. Margaret Mead's famous statement should help guide us. She said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed individuals can change the world. In fact, it's the only thing that ever has." Without that small, resilient, committed core, the rest will simply fall away, and the story will run out. And I find hope that this kernel of faith will not be crushed, but will persevere. Indeed, it will bring a restoration of the faith to something deeper, something purer, something truly life-changing that has been largely forgotten.

Now is the time, it seems to me, to go deep. We need to develop our own remnant theology for today, confident that God's purposes can be realized in the smallest, most insignificant looking church. The time is coming to go deep, underground, into the catacombs, perhaps unnoticed by the rest of the world. The time is coming to focus on quality and commitment and resiliency, and less on numbers and quantity. The time is here to go deep, time to develop our roots and less focus on what is above ground and seen by others. Deeper in our practices—in our prayer, in our study, in our worship, in our time together, in our searching and taking refuge in God and God's kingdom. Time to connect with the tap root of life and truth and wisdom to keep the flame.

Thanks be to God. Amen.