

Three Things . . . no, FOUR!

Jude 1:20-25¹

Well, what do you say in such a moment as this? This is a moment that we all know is coming from our very first day together, and yet our hearts are reluctant to acknowledge that the moment has finally come.

More than ten years ago, as I was nearing the ten-year mark of pastoring another congregation, it occurred to me that I was sixty years old, and if there was going to be another chapter in our ministry—Jill and I together—I'd better get after it. Resumes were cast upon the Internet, and by God's overflowing grace, you chose to invite a fellow in his sixties to join you on the Journey here. What a wonderful Ride it has been! We have loved one another from the very first moment, and I have thanked God every single day for the Joy of serving with you.

It has been my experience that God gives a special love to pastors for the congregations they serve. I used to tell my pastoral students at the seminary something like this: "If on Sunday morning as you look out over your congregation and see people whose private pains and secret hopes only you know, as you look at those who are your strongest supporters and those who are your most frequent critics, as you look at those whose commitment to the Body of Christ is unwavering and at those whose commitment is lukewarm at best, if in that moment you do not feel a love welling up in your heart for every one of those people that is so strong that you know it could only come from God, then you have not been called to such work as this."

Everything I have ever done or tried to do as your pastor has grown out of that kind of love for you, including my decision to retire at this point after nine years together. As we've noted many times before, it would have been lovely to do at least one more year and to complete ten years with you before retirement. But the intrusion of colon cancer and prostate cancer into my world two years ago turned things in a different direction.

By God's grace, both cancers appear to be in remission, and I feel great; but it became clear to me last year that I need to get our two households consolidated so Jill will be in the best possible position should my health take a nosedive. And part of what I want to affirm to you this morning is that if God is any part of this transition, then God is in every part of this transition. If God is at work in my life—and God is—then God is also preparing your next pastor for "new orders," which will become clear both to you and to him or her in God's time.

Although I will soon be yielding my role as your pastor to someone else, what we have done together and experienced together during these nine years will not be lost through my retirement. One of my deep joys in ministry is to visit churches I've served decades ago or to talk with friends in those churches and to learn about the good things that God continues to do in and through those congregations.

When I hear such news, I am grateful that God allowed me to make some contribution to those congregations as part of the foundation for what God is doing today and will do in the future through those saints. And I look forward, five or ten or twenty years from now, to visiting Columbia or to talking with you and hearing about the good things that God continues to do in this place. As John wrote to the churches long ago, I will have no greater joy than to hear across the years ahead that you continue to walk in God's Truth and are faithful to it.²

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on December 27, 2020. My last sermon as pastor of CBF.

² 3 John 4

This year of COVID hasn't been what any of us would have chosen, and it's been challenging for us individually and together; but God has been at work through it all, and Pastor Andrew has led us to do amazing ministries with and for our neighbors during these months of grief and quarantine. For my part, I've done my best to leave things in the best shape possible for my successor, and we have an outstanding cadre of leaders ready to carry on in 2021, and beyond.

While pastoral transitions are bittersweet, a pastoral change provides a unique opportunity for a congregation to reevaluate ministry priorities and to rekindle passion through the catalytic presence of a new leader. A New Chapter begins, and that's exciting!

In this final sermon, I want to revisit four words we've already looked at during Advent: FAITH, HOPE, LOVE, and JOY; but this time we're going to look at them a bit differently.

FAITH. Given the unusual nature of this particular service, I feel today a little bit like Moses must have felt as he and the people neared the edge of the Promised Land. God allowed Moses to look over the Jordan to see the land the people would soon enter, while also telling him that he would not be the person to lead the people into that land.

As we sit here this morning, it's as though we're looking across the Jordan as a people and wondering who it is whom God has chosen to lead us into that good land. Faith is trusting that God is at work in the circumstances of our lives even when—and especially when—we don't have all the evidence of that we'd like to have at the moment. The writer of Hebrews famously told us that "*Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see*" (Hebrews 11:1).

And I'm reminded of God's Word to Israel after Moses was gone and Joshua had been anointed as their new leader: ⁷ "*Be strong and very courageous. **Be careful to obey** all the law my servant Moses gave you; **do not turn from it** to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. ⁸ *Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. ⁹ *Have I not commanded you? **Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go***" (Joshua 1:7-9).**

We've recently commemorated the anniversary of Pearl Harbor. Two years before that event, as World War II was just beginning, England's King George VI included these words from poet M. Louise Haskins in his CHRISTmas message to the nation:

"I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied, '**Go into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way!**' So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone east."³

My friends, we serve a BIG GOD who has BIG PLANS for a BIG KINGDOM, and what we yearn for is a RENEWED VISION of our part in the Great Commission work of winning the lost and making disciples in the world that is being born around us. On this day, as on all days, our faith is not in ourselves, and not in any human leader, but in our loving God who calls to us from a future fashioned by Faith and designed by Grace.⁴

³ M. Louise Haskins, "God Knows," cited in John Bartlett, *The Shorter Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, ed. Christopher Morley and Kathleen Sproul (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 1937; Pocket Books Edition, Doubleday, 1953), p. 158.

⁴ 1 Peter 1:21

HOPE. During Advent we've been reminded that God's answer to human hopelessness is that the Story that began in Bethlehem's manger has rewritten the end of all our stories. The Manger of Bethlehem, the Cross of Calvary, and the Empty Tomb have opened up a future before us that we hardly dare to let ourselves even imagine. Peter wrote that "*In his great mercy [God] has given us new birth into a living **hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.*"⁵

My friends, the Resurrected Power of Bethlehem's Babe is the guarantee of our Hope, the proof that "*no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ.*"⁶ Paul summed it all up in just four words as he began his first letter to Timothy: "**CHRIST Jesus, OUR HOPE!**"⁷

One of the things I'll do back in southwest Virginia is to renew my previous practice of skeet shooting with a shotgun. I miss the smell of gunpowder! The key to skeet shooting is to "lead the target." That is, you don't shoot at where the clay pigeon is at the moment you pull the trigger. You aim at the point where the clay pigeon will be when the pellets arrive.

That's the same idea hockey champion Wayne Gretsky famously made in his comment that "I don't skate to where the puck is. I skate toward where the puck is going to be." "Skating toward where the puck is going to be" is the task that is before CBF as you look with renewed Hope toward the Future.

Many years ago, now, Pastor Steve McNeely led our congregation to organize ourselves in what's known as "the Saddleback Model," often illustrated with the familiar "baseball diamond" of WORSHIP, FELLOWSHIP, DISCIPLESHIP, MINISTRY, and MISSION. We're organized that way, still, and the way we often say that for ourselves is:

WORSHIP! CONNECT! GROW! SERVE! GO!

It seems to me God's Compelling Vision for us over the next few years—maybe even the next *ten* years—is to continue our efforts **to transform the Village of Oakland Mills into a community that others wish to replicate.** And my next point describes how that happens

LOVE. John wrote in his first letter that while "*No one has seen God . . . [but] if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*"⁸

My friends, when we stand before God's Judgment Seat, God is not going to ask us about theology. God is going to ask us about love. God is going to want to know about how well we loved our neighbors, especially the poor and the outcast.⁹ And God is going to ask about how well we did loving each other in the Body of Christ, which is the Church.¹⁰

CBF is well-known as a loving congregation, and that reputation is well-deserved. Yet I think there are at least two ways in which we have room to grow in love.

The first "growth in love" that I suggest to you is that CBF can do an even better job than we've done so far of supporting Pastor Andrew's work with the youth of our neighborhood. Many studies have noted that most of the young people who are active

⁵ 1 Peter 1:3-4

⁶ 2 Corinthians 1:20

⁷ 1 Timothy 1:1

⁸ 1 John 4:12

⁹ Matthew 25:31-46

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 1:10; Galatians 6:10; 1 John 4:20

in church youth groups as teens do not continue their relationship with the Body of Christ much beyond high school; and one of those researchers has a theory about why this happens:

“I believe part of the reason is that nobody outside the youth ministry has built a relationship with the youth. So when they leave the friendly confines of youth ministry there is no one in church who knows who they are, what they want to do or anything about them. . . . So how many students in your church’s youth ministry (who are not related to you) do you know by name? How about what their interests are or where they go to school or what extracurricular activities they are involved in?”¹¹

My first challenge, when COVID lets you get together again, is that you work together to find ways to build deeper bridges of friendship with our youth. And my second challenge to “growth in love” is similar, but may be harder

Many churches these days have the feeling that they need to reach more people, younger people, and younger families, “So our church doesn’t die.” With this in mind, it may surprise you for me to observe that no church has the intrinsic right to live forever.

Worrying about survival is the wrong worry. We need to worry about our obedience, and about the level of genuine love we have for our neighbors who do not yet know Jesus. If a church is doing what God has called it to do, it will experience God’s blessing. We don’t have to worry about that.

You may have heard the principle that “Any system is perfectly designed to produce what it is currently producing. If you want a different output, you’ll have to supply a different input.” The reason many churches are declining is that they’re organized around survival and around the comfort and preferences of those of us who are older adults, not around the needs of the generations following.

My Dear Ones, if we really want our church to grow, if we really want to be about the Great Commission right here in Oakland Mills, God’s Love may call us to change our congregational “inputs” so we get better Great Commission “outputs.” I don’t know just what that might look like, but I challenge you to seek God’s guidance and then to follow where God leads. Adventure awaits!

Such work as this is not done overnight, nor is it accomplished easily or cheaply. But such work is the essential nature of the Kingdom of God, and through such work, God’s Kingdom comes on earth—and will come in Oakland Mills—as it is in heaven.

JOY! Finally, the end result of our collective pursuit of Faith, Hope, and Love . . . is JOY. Then, when we stand before our Lord, we will hear the words we long to hear: “*Well done, good and faithful servant! You were faithful over a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Share your Master’s Joy!*”¹²

It was in anticipation of that moment that Jesus told us, “*I have told you [these things] so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*”¹³ You know, of course, that my favorite Bible verse, Zephaniah 3:17, is about Joy. And my favorite anthem, *And the Father will Dance!*,¹⁴ is based on that verse. Here are some of the words of that anthem:

¹¹ Joe Ball, “Lessons from a Hunter Education Course,” *Western Recorder*, November 14, 2006,

¹² Matthew 25:21

¹³ John 15:11

¹⁴ Mark Hayes, “And the Father will Dance!” (Chapel Hill, NC: Hinshaw Music, 1983).

“And the Father will dance over you in joy! He will take delight in whom He loves!
Is that a choir I hear, singing the praises of God?
No! The Lord God Himself is exulting o’er you in song!

Sing, O daughter of Zion, with all of your heart! Cast away fear,
for you have been restored! Put on the garment of praise, as on a festival day.
Join with the Father in glorious, jubilant song!”

My friends, we don’t know today, and we can’t see from here, how our paths will run until that **joy** overtakes us, either individually or together. But because we are in Him, we are able to live through His Spirit in Faith, Hope, and Love until that Joy comes. And so, I offer one more time this blessing to you:

And now ²⁴ *To him who is able to keep you from stumbling
and to present you before his glorious presence **without fault and with great joy—**
²⁵ *to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority,
through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore!*
(Jude 1:24-25).*

Amen.