

Earlier in worship we read from the first 5 verses of the Old Testament book of Genesis. Genesis means “beginnings” and is the account of the creation of the world by God. We read from Genesis that in the beginning there was God. Everything that happens after that is because, in the beginning, there was God.

I asked Jennifer to read those verses because here at Allison Creek we are at a point of new beginnings. We have begun a new year, 2015, and you may have made resolutions which you may already have broken. Here in the church we have elected a new Session or governing body and last weekend they began their service together leading this congregation.

Some of us may be beginning new careers or maybe moving into retirement. There may be people here today who have just moved to this community. After Christmas break our students are in a time of changing semesters.

January is a time of new beginnings. Anyone who was around this congregation last year knows that it was a difficult year. It was a year of some endings. We faced some deaths of people who were active in church leadership and music leadership. We faced the departure of some folks who felt that they needed to move to other communities of faith. Folks who may be friends of yours or family members of yours.

But I think what we discovered here is that God ain't through with this congregation yet. The report of the demise of this congregation has appeared to be an inaccurate prediction. Thanks be to God. God still has plans for Allison Creek Presbyterian Church. Obviously, we are still here after a difficult 2014. And we are looking to the future of 2015.

God's plans for you may be bigger than any of us can yet imagine. God's plans are never limited by human imagination. God's plans are never limited by human sinfulness. God sees possibilities that we cannot begin to fathom.

In the last few months new folks have stepped into music and worship leadership. Megan and I met this week to do some worship planning and I asked her how she is doing with what we have so far in her first week on the job and she enthusiastically told me that we have what we need right now to build for the future. It was a blessing to me as a Dad last Sunday to see my daughter do something which she has never done before and that is to sing a solo in front of others.

You have volunteered to be Sunday School teachers and have volunteered in the kitchen at Bluegrass. You applied for and received a major grant to do some building renovation which you are moving forward on. You may have noticed that the parking lot was recently painted by one of you.

You volunteered to create and share a wonderful Christmas Eve worship experience that was written entirely by youth and that included lots of children and which led to a full sanctuary for the early service. This week I got to see one of your staff members, the preschool director Emily Hurst, as she took care of a family's children for two hours after the end of preschool while the mom went to the hospital with her third child who needed stitches from a home accident.

I heard some folks say that you would never find enough folks to serve on Session. But you did. God led 6 folks to respond to the call to be elders and leaders in this congregation. Last Saturday they met for about 6 hours to seek to listen to what God may be doing through you.

There have been some folks who have said that this congregation would fall apart. But you did not do that. I would say that quite the contrary is occurring. Look at what God is doing in your midst. Rather than looking to the past I hear people talking about the future and what God is doing next through you.

Looking to the future is certainly what I heard from the Session last Saturday as they met together. They spent quite a bit of their time getting to know one another and just laughing and sharing with one another. In fact, at the next Session meeting I am going to suggest that we go do something fun together that has nothing to do with church business.

Last Saturday, the Session talked about people who were active in church communities and how that happened and why people don't want to have anything to do with church communities. We began conversations about how to connect with people who were not like us. The Session began to think "outside the box" of what it means to be a church in 2015.

Rethinking what it means to be a faith community is why the New Testament book of Acts was written. It is called the "Acts of the Apostles" but it should really be called something like "Acts of the Holy Spirit." The original 12 apostles actually get very little coverage in this book.

Acts was written sometime between 70 and 100 AD. As Wil Willimon tells it, the story told here is open-ended because it is a story that continues in the church today. The most basic way to understand Acts is that it is a historical account of the early church. But if we focus on this book as history we miss what it has to say to us today.

Acts came into being at a time when the faith community was in a very scary time. This generation had heard the stories of Jesus and had been told that he would return to earth. But it had been 40, 50, 60, maybe even 70 years since his death and still, no Jesus return.

So the writer of Acts, Luke, the same Luke that wrote the New Testament gospel of Luke, writes down these stories not in order to recall the past but to prepare them for the future. Acts is a collection of stories to help the church to re-imagine themselves and to see that God's Holy Spirit was guiding them even if they did not always see it.

The book of Acts begins with the apostle's gathering together to find the person who is to replace Judas who had tried to kill Jesus but who ended up dying in some gruesome way instead. Another apostle, Matthias, is chosen but that is the last time we hear about him. The story then moves to the story of Pentecost and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the people.

But then Acts move us into a story of politics and power. In chapter 3 we read the story of Peter and John bringing healing to a man who was lame from birth. This act of reaching out and caring for a poor and crippled man leads the leaders of the Temple to become very uncomfortable. In fact, Peter and John are arrested and thrown into prison. Whenever power is threatened then the ones in power will do whatever they can to silence the agitators.

When asked why they did what they did, Peter and John share that they are giving witness to Jesus who is the cornerstone that had been rejected by many. But Peter and John are not ordained pastors. They never went to seminary. They never received any kind of degree or credentials. They are described as ordinary men. Ordinary, everyday, kind of people. Just like you and me.

When faced with persecution for speaking up about their faith, Peter and John pray not for protection but for boldness. Boldness to proclaim their faith in Jesus. They continued to face persecution and threats and were thrown back into prison. But these two continued to profess their faith.

I am going to read from the end of chapter 5 a story of how Peter and John's actions influenced another.

Read Acts 5: 27-42

Some folks have said that God is not a part of this congregation. Some folks have said that you can't accomplish much anymore. I think that many of you are sensing that God is not through with you yet, however. I think that many of you are sensing that 2015 is a time for a new beginning within this body of believers.

When the Temple leaders tried to stop Peter and John, a Pharisee named Gamaliel stood up and said, "If God is with them then there is nothing you can do to stop them."

You are some amazing people that God is using to do some amazing ministry. You stuck together through difficult times and now you are looking out beyond yourselves to welcome new people into the faith.

I can't wait to see what God is going to continue to do through you. You have a powerful witness and place in this community. Trust that and proclaim it. If what you do is of God then you have everything that you need. AMEN.

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-Willimon, William, Interpretation, Acts, WJKP, 1988.

-Given: January 11, 2015 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)