

### ***Post-Christian***

St. John's Evangelical Protestant Church

United Church of Christ

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### **Isaiah 11:6-9**

*<sup>6</sup>The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. <sup>7</sup>The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. <sup>8</sup>The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. <sup>9</sup>They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*

### **Mark 16:1-8**

*1When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. <sup>2</sup>And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup>They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" <sup>4</sup>When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup>As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup>But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. <sup>7</sup>But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." <sup>8</sup>So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

Some wise person once said, "We are living in someone else's dream." I discovered the truth of this statement anew this past Thursday when I went to visit someone in Dublin Riverside Methodist Hospital. It was the first time I had ever entered this relatively new hospital, and as soon as I arrived I found myself thinking about Nana, my maternal grandmother. I remember Nana is a vivacious, energetic, hard-working, creative, optimistic, and faith-filled woman. It wasn't until more recently that I realized that Nana was also a woman of great vision. She could

see what other people could not. Back in the 1950's, Nana had dreamt of Dublin Riverside Methodist Hospital.

Nana was the head Registered Nurse for a hospital in Chicago. Working as a nurse in an era when there was a surge in modern medicine must have been exciting in many ways. Though the arrival of penicillin, TB treatments, and the polio vaccine helped millions of people regain their health, the emphasis in hospitals at that time rested squarely on hygiene. Nana would go to work in her starched white uniform, white stockings, and cap, and she would work in a hospital that was sterile and austere.

Intuitively, Nana appreciated the importance of a more holistic approach to healing. When she would come home at night, Nana would often journal about how hygiene alone doesn't heal. Through her writing she would paint vivid images both of the sterile environment in which she worked and how she envisioned hospitals could be. She dreamt of natural light and elements of nature – plants and trees and running water within close sight so that patients could draw strength from nature and from God's creation. She dreamt of more human touch and sounds that would soothe, rather than irritate, patients who were trying to muster their own internal strength to get well.

Back in the 1950's I am sure that the idea of putting a tree inside of a hospital would have been quickly rejected as absurd. In fact, I can imagine the thought stirring up some fear – who would put a pile of dirt in a building that was supposed to be sanitary? What would happen to the patients?

As I entered Dublin Riverside on Thursday, I felt like I was entering a greenhouse, and I immediately thought of Nana. In the lobby are at least a dozen live trees that reach up toward the sky, and the expansive area is flooded with natural light. There is a running wall of water that creates a gentle, rhythmic sound that is calming and peaceful. As I walked the halls, I would turn and encounter beautiful art, atriums with more light, and a flower vase outside every patient's door with a gorgeous yellow Gerbera daisy inside.

As I watched, a frail elderly woman in a wheelchair wheeled up to the waterfall in the lobby. I watched as she settled in to just sit there for a while and take in the peaceful sights and sounds. I watched as a gentle smile spread across her face and she leaned back in her chair. And, as I watched, I realized that this frail elderly woman was living into my grandmother's dream.

In the 1950s we didn't get it. But we do now.

When the three women arrived at the tomb on that Easter morning, they didn't get it either. They thought Jesus was dead! They had dealt with death before, and while it was difficult, they knew what needed to be done. They brought all of the proper anointments and were prepared to do all of the things one was supposed to do in a circumstance like this. But when they got there, they were alarmed by what they didn't see and didn't know what to make of it.

They had been told that this would happen, but hearing it hadn't been enough. When Jesus had told them that he would die and rise again, it was too much for them to take in. It was outside of any experience they knew. And, when they were confronted with his absence—when they were confronted with what they had no understanding of—they were afraid.

Today we have the benefit of hindsight. We can make sense of the guy who was there at the tomb and told the women that Jesus had gone ahead of them, because we know the rest of the story. We have the post-resurrection stories and, more importantly, we have the book of Acts that recounts the beginning of the church and the spread of Christianity. We know that God moved ahead while the women and the other disciples tried to catch up and make sense of it.

On this Easter Sunday, God is still moving ahead of us, and we are still trying to catch up and make sense of what God is doing and how God is speaking to us now. We are slowly and gradually living into God's dream for us.

Yet, not everyone thinks so.

I must admit that when I saw the cover of this week's *Newsweek* it made my stomach feel funny.

The cover is black with red lettering, and the title is **The Decline and Fall of Christian America**. Inside the author, Jon Meacham, interviews the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, R. Albert Mohler, Jr., about recent religion polls indicating that those in America who claim no religious affiliation has risen since 1990 from 8 to 15 percent. The rising number of religiously unaffiliated Americans are more apt to call themselves "spiritual" rather than "religious."

In the article Mohler was quoted as saying, "A remarkable culture-shift has taken place around us ... the most basic contours of American culture have been radically altered. The so-called Judeo-Christian consensus of the last millennium has given way to a post-modern, post-Christian, post-Western cultural crisis which threatens the very heart of our culture."

The term post-Christian is not new. In the 1960's Tom Altizer, a religion professor at Emory University, traced the term to the theologian Søren Kierkegaard who lived in the 1800s. For Altizer, a post-Christian era is one in which "both Christianity and religion itself are unshackled from their previous historical grounds." Mohler finds this troubling: "The post-Christian narrative is radically different; it offers spirituality, however defined, without binding authority."

In light of our gospel reading, however, I am forced to look at these statistics differently. I am forced to ask, "Might God be moving ahead of us?" Is there something we can't see that is being born? It is a troubling thought when I think I know just how to be a faithful Christian. It is a troubling thought when the only way I have ever "done church" is through a lens we call Christian.

Yet the world into which Weston Arbour was born is quite different from the world in which my Nana was raised. Today in America we have a many cultures represented, many expressions of faith, many ways to worship and serve God.

Many of us talk about the value of diversity. It is a great buzzword. But, if we are honest, many of us think diversity is welcoming someone who is different from us and tolerating them until they see the light. I don't think that is God's vision.

The beautiful passage from Isaiah that Jennifer read this morning moves me every time I hear it: *<sup>6</sup>The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together.* Irwin Kula wrote about a man who visited a zoo, and when he got to the lion's cage he saw the literal fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: a lion and a lamb inside

together. Amazed, he calls over an attendant. “How long have you had a lion and a lamb in a cage together?”

“Over a year already.”

“How is this possible?”

It’s easy ... every morning we put in a new lamb.”

And then there is Woody Allen’s take on this, “The lamb and the lion will lie down together, but the lamb won’t get much sleep.”

That is not Isaiah’s vision. Isaiah’s vision is for the lamb to be fully and wholly the lamb, and the wolf and the lion to be fully and wholly the wolf and the lion.

Might God have gone ahead of us and be leading us to a place where Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Bahá’í, Jews, Christians, and more might all be together and be fully and wholly themselves, each contributing to our further understanding of where God leads?

If all we know is Christianity, just the thought of contemplating life without it, as we know it, is scary. Similarly, if all we know is life, we are scared of death.

Irwin Kula writes about when he was a new rabbi. Sam Goldenhersch was one of the first people he accompanied through the dying process. Sam was a gruff, hard-nosed, building contractor in his sixties. He was a strong personality with a loud voice, and he really didn’t want to have anything to do with anything that anyone would name as “spiritual.” But, he was a friend of Kula’s, and so Kula kept in touch and kept visiting.

Diabetes was slowly taking his life, and Sam had one limb cut off after another. Sam told Kula that he couldn't give up, not until there wasn't anything left: no toes, no feet, no legs, no matter how much it hurt.

Every time Kula saw Sam he became more depressed and more frightened. He writes this: "Of course, as a spiritual leader, 'I knew better' than Sam: If he would just stop fighting and let go he would be so much happier ... but there was no taking him on. His strength and resolve were palpable. Even when he was confined to a bed."

Kula would visit on Friday afternoons, timing his visit so that it was his last stop before he had to get home for the Sabbath. One day, after his usual brief visit, Same challenged him:

"Leaving so soon?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did you ever notice how you conveniently visit when you have to be home for the Sabbath?"

"Sam, you just think that because you're so tough you don't need the Sabbath."

"That may be, but I smell fear. I think you are more afraid of what is going on with me that I am, which means you must be pretty frightened. Why don't you sit down?"

Over the next three months, Kula had some uncomfortable encounters. Each time an amputation occurred, Sam encouraged Kula to look at the stump. To experience the reality of the disease.

Fear, sadness, bitterness can be healthy parts of dying. Sam taught Irwin that fear and fighting can be as spiritual and life-affirming as serenity and acceptance. He taught him that death is not the last, worst, or final word.

When all we know suddenly seems different, it is scary.

For the people in Rwanda, when the genocide that happened fifteen years ago left 800,000 people brutally murdered in 100 days, it felt like it was an end. There is no question that the survivors were left trembling, some unable to speak for years. But even in the midst of that terror, God moved ahead.

A Bishop and the Chair of the Rwanda Prison Fellowship, Rt. Rev. John Rucyahana, said, “Reconciliation is not magic. It is a slow and painful process that has many ups and downs. It is our reality and we must move forward. We don’t have time to wait until all the healing is done. We must dig with one hand and do the work, while we wipe away our tears with the other.”

Today there are extraordinary measures being made for reconciliation. When militia who had been involved fifteen years ago hear about offers to help rebuild their lives, as well as the lives of the survivors, they often run further into the bush, fearful that this a hoax to lure them back for retribution.

Yet Aloise, who spent 9 years in a prison for his part in the genocide, took an opportunity to confess to his crimes. Afterward, he was assigned a home in a Rwandan village in 2003. He

said, “I used to ask myself how could we live side by side with people we hurt so much? There was a wall of separation between us and them. We started by sharing meals and with the help of God it has been possible for us to live together. They accepted to forgive us. We were all in a similar position. We did not have homes. Everything had been destroyed.”

When challenged on how someone who had been traumatized by the genocide could reach out in care to a Hutu who had once been a perpetrator, a Tutsi woman simply said, “We have to. It is their country, too.”

We are living into someone else’s dream. And often it feels scary. On this Easter Sunday, we know that while we may stand trembling before emptiness, God has gone ahead of us and is working in ways that we cannot see.

The Christian Bible tells us so.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.