

Time for Something New
Mark 1:4-11
Center Church
January 10, 2021
Rochelle A. Stackhouse
Final Sermon

I'm here today to say to you that I pray for a peaceful transition of leadership. After Wednesday, I mean that for our country, without question. I also mean it for this congregation. My purpose here from the get-go has been not unlike John the Baptist (though obviously on a much smaller scale!) I was here to work with you to get things sorted and prepared for your continuing ministries and for another leader or leaders to come. Both for John the Baptist, and for me, that didn't mean get things "perfect," just prepared to whatever extent possible. John did his preparation work by preaching about change and the need for people to change their lives and their relationships with God and each other. He took an old ritual and re-made it (something Jesus would later do with other rituals). He ruffled a few feathers; well, perhaps more than ruffled in the case of Herod, because part of his work was speaking truth to political powers and Herod didn't take to it well and eventually had him beheaded. The preparation work is not without cost, though I'm grateful to still have my head on my neck! As I said, John's work was on rather a different scale than mine.

Still. John knew from the beginning that he was not the ultimate new leader. As time passed here, so did I.

Imagine, for a moment, how John's disciples must have felt, as well as those who did not like him at all (like powerful people). Those who disliked or felt threatened by him were probably relieved when Herod killed him, thinking that this little reform movement was over. John's disciples may have felt like it was the end as well, even though he kept telling them someone new was on the horizon, someone right for this time and place and need. He told them God was at work among them with something amazing. But they loved

John, we know, and were loathe to give their loyalty to someone new. They had already changed once in coming to John's circle. They were not keen on doing it again.

Now I don't want to take this comparison too far, believe me. What I want to invite us to do for a few minutes is what I have asked of you more than once since I got here, and that's what John asked of his disciples: trust in God and imagine the future.

We did some of that in retreats and classes and worship services over the past three plus years. You came up with wondrous ideas about how this church could worship in innovative ways in this beautiful old space and elsewhere. You reached back into the church's history and forward into our children's future to imagine this church at the Center of Hartford in ways both similar to the past and remarkably new, ways you have yet to fully understand or envision. You struggled with realities of finance and building maintenance and small membership numbers, and yet most of you continued to believe that God had called you and Center Church here for just such a time as this.

You need to understand that when I encouraged and supported that kind of trustful imagination, I wasn't just spouting words I thought you needed to hear because it was my job to do so. I also believe this about you and this congregation. David Reynolds once said, in response to a comment I made about some odd aspect of the building, that "nothing at Center Church is a 90-degree angle!" We all laughed, but yes, exactly, and that is a feature, not a bug! You are not like any other congregation! You can lament that or seize on the strengths of your uniqueness! Your racial, social, economic and ethnic diversity as a congregation. Your funky sea monster chandeliers and unbelievably good acoustics. Your love/hate relationship with the city of Hartford. Your growing ability to learn how to do more with less. Your openness to listening for God, even when God seems to be saying something odd, because, let's face it, God does that a lot.

Keep doing all those things.

Finally, I want to thank you. In many ways I have been changed by being your pastor, as I always am at every congregation I have ever served, even after all these years in ministry. I can't explain to you every way this has happened here, but maybe a couple. I reclaimed my identity as a historian, learning again that through connecting with the past we can do a better job of illuminating the future; that history is not simply a fusty academic pursuit, but a way to remember ourselves into something new. I had lost a bit of that over time, and you helped me regain it.

Second, to you who are people of color in the congregation, thank you for deepening my understanding of white privilege and encouraging me to raise this up for the congregation and beyond. I owe you. I will not forget.

And last, in this pandemic, you helped me to learn how to worship and work in new ways, encouraging me and Bob and Larry and Marie and others to explore technology and expressing your gratitude for how we were working it out, flawed as that work may have been from time to time. I cannot tell you how many of my colleagues have told stories about ways that their congregations have criticized or fought them on what they did during the pandemic. I feel privileged not to have faced that. Thank you.

You may have figured out that one of the sayings that has guided my life for many years comes from the late General Secretary of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld. He wrote, "For all that has been, thanks. To all that will be, Yes!" I say that as I leave about my own life and ministry, but I also encourage you to claim that in this time of changes all over the place. For all that has been in the life of the First Church of Christ in Hartford over nearly 400 years, thanks. To all that will be in the next week, the next year, the next 400, I pray you will say Yes, again and again. Like Mary to Gabriel or Isaiah to God. Even if the way seems strange or discomfiting or different from what you might have wanted. Say yes to hope and

love and justice and the blossoming of the Spirit here at the corner of Gold and Main, and wherever you may be living out your discipleship as a follower of Jesus.

I love you. I pray for you. I ask you to pray for me. I wish you blessings. Amen.