

“Déjà Vu All Over Again”

(Ecclesiastes 1:2-10; Isaiah 43:15-19, 21; John 13:34-35)

It was Yogi Berra, wasn't it, who made it memorable: “*Déjà vu all over again!*”?

We know what he meant: “*Same old thing again.*” What makes it memorable is how, in Yogi fashion, he said it in a way that says it twice--“*déjà*” means “already”! It's as though Yogi had said, “*Same old thing again...again!*”

Like his “*The game ain't over 'til it's over*” and

“If the fans don't come out to the games, ya can't stop 'em.”

But, along with chuckling at Yogi's twisted English, we've all felt the feeling sometime:

“*Deja vu all over again!*” “*Same-old-same-old*”... “*Yeah, what else is new?*”

Ask a friend, “*Hey, what's new?*” and you're not surprised if she says, “Nothing, really”.

It's not a “bad” feeling, but sort of a “*deep-sigh-feeling*”... “*Déjà vu!*”

Maybe she says, “*Well, I got a new smart-phone...all the bells and whistles, but...*”

[Now, yours may be able to turn on the oven while you're still at church,

but it can't yet(!) go to the grocery and choose the roast! That would be “new”!]

Summer 1949...my Daddy came home with a “brand-new” '49 Dodge *Coronet*. “*New*”?...

Well, it still ran on gas, like a '48 before it; ,still rolled on rubber tires, could still have wrecks.

How 'bout a 2017 that runs on sunlight alone, and glides on a magnetic field?

That might qualify for “new”, but it's not out yet.

In some ways, last week and this must feel a little like “*Déjà vu all over again*”.

Mike has retired. He and Cathy are in the midst of moving to Burnsville, fixing up their Wallburg house to sell. There've been the loving “goodbyes”, the wrap-up details.

First Presbyterian will be getting an Interim Pastor,

and then starting the search for a “new” long-term installed Pastor.

Sound familiar? To those who've been here a while, or have heard the history, you know it happens every now and then in God's providence and the Presbyterian system.

Many of you have served on transition teams and search committees.

Many of you will remember when Benjamin Williams left, and you searched and prayed and were led to Mike as your Pastor. Before that Bob Han. And there was Laura

Spangler's productive time here; and--“*a century ago*”, when I retired in 1998.

Some long-timers can remember Homer Pfifer and maybe Tom Young...(I'm reciting that “Rogues' Gallery” of Pastors whose pictures hang in the History Room!)

And, unless this is your first time ever to experience a Pastor's retirement

or Call to another Church, isn't there a certain feeling of familiarity about it? “*Deja vu all over again*”?

I hope you will be taking stock of all the good things that have happened in First Pres and and through its creative influence in Thomasville—

- your remarkable record of generosity in service to the community,
- your prayerful shaping of a “safe place” where people can come with their doubts and questions and not be afraid of condemnation,
- God's gracious ways of reaching out to newcomers and young families who've enriched the congregation and strengthened its witness.

Of course you'll be thinking about things that haven't been finished, yet, and that's all right.

- dreams and plans for new activities to support your spiritual growth, but not there yet;

• ways you've wanted to reach out to folks who have no church family, yet to happen. It may be important to remember that **you have** “been here before”—you've said goodbye to pastors and their families, and sighed a sigh, “*Yeah, we gotta do that again.*”

I guess we need to recognize that we caught Solomon (**or whoever wrote Ecclesiastes**) on a down day—tired and not feeling very hopeful...

“The sun rises...and the sun goes down...the wind blows south...and then blows north...what's happened before will happen again.”

It would be a sore loss if—for whatever reason—you surrender to that feeling of the “same-old-same-old”—in your marriage, retirement, in your career search, in the Church--

“Been there...done that...got the T-Shirt...don't really wanna do it again!”

What a loss to First Presbyterian Church/Thomasville, what a loss to the **Kingdom of God!**... if you begin to think, “*Yeah, we've been here before...We say goodbye to a pastor...*

We get a new pastor...we set new goals and we work hard...and then it'll all happen again...that's just the way it goes! So buckle down and here we go!”

Because I love you all, I invite you to hear that “still, small voice” of God saying, from Isaiah,

“I am the Lord, your Holy One...I am about to do a new thing!”

It'll help to recall what was going on with God's people when God said this:...

- God's Hebrew people were living (surviving may be the better word!) **as internees.**
- They were on **house arrest** in what is (ironically) now Baghdad!
- Their **native land** had been **conquered** by Babylon, the world empire of its time,
- The cream of their citizens carried off **800 miles from home**
(in a day when that might as well have been 80,000 miles!).
- They were **there for 70 years**, their own national capital and Holy City, Jerusalem, burned to the ground, including their “cathedral church”—the Temple, that they had supposed would last forever.
- Houses and businesses destroyed, they had no idea of ever seeing “home” again.

And here comes Isaiah, the preacher saying,

***“Thus says the Lord: I am about to do a new thing!...
It's about to happen!...Don't you see it?”***

To which their understandable response was like ***“No! We don't see it! How could we? Aren't you giving us false hope, Isaiah? The future'll just be more of the past!”***

But listen! There's a clue here: ***“This is the LORD speaking, who makes a way in the Sea”***

“A way in the sea...?”...Yes, exactly what God **had done**, years ago, when God made “a way” in the Red Sea, at the Exodus, when those Hebrews had come walking out of another captivity—in Egypt, on their way to freedom and usefulness!

In Isaiah's words, God is reminding the discouraged Hebrews,

“Remember!...remember who you are...you're the folks I saved from extinction at the Red Sea. You're folks I've already led into new 'promised lands' of service, to new usefulness you never dreamed you'd see!”

Back in 1978, some members described First Presbyterian to Dr. Julian Lake (Interim Pastor after Homer Pfifer's departure) as “*the little church between the two big ones*”.

Dr. Lake said, “No, you're not the ‘little’ church—you're the **meat in the sandwich!**”

Who'd have ever thought it would be First Presbyterian that would light

+ the lamp that has become **Cooperative Community Ministry?**

Who'd have thought that First Pres would be the place

+ where folks get together and discuss Christian themes in hit movies?...

+ where inquirers are encouraged to come, “bring their questions” and find welcome?

+ where adult studies would spark new ideas for ministries in Thomasville?
 + You can add your own memories to the list of things that—10 years ago—you might have thought would “never happen here’...but have happened!”
 “**But**”, says God, “**don’t dwell too long on what has been!**”
I’m STILL doing new things!...Look for them!”

It would be both **foolish and presumptuous** for me to try to predict what “new things” God may have in mind for First Presbyterian Church, at this “changing-of-the-guard” time, and for each of you as members and friends of this Congregation.
 But that’s where you—as early as today—are invited to say “**No!**” to Yogi Berra and the pessimistic prophets who may quietly whisper, ... “**Déjà vu all over again!**...”
Another pastor has retired, and y’all gotta start all over again...again!”

God can and wants to do “**NEW things**” in this town, through this family of faithful followers...

Are there **new ways to reach across the growing walls of racial hostility** across the U.S.A.—but starting here in Thomasville in the warm spirit you’ve learned?

Are there **new possibilities for conversation** with folks who may never “*join this Church*” in the traditional, “membership” sense, but in partnerships with school groups, community groups and neglected neighborhoods, asking, “*What do you need, and how might First Pres be your partner to help some of those things **get started?***”

Are there **ways that haven’t** been tried, for “getting the word out” beyond the church members, about all the good stuff that’s already happening here at First Pres,

- your unique and creative “Movie Night”?
- your delightful covered-dish meals, but tailored to appeal to specific kinds of folks—like grandparents who are raising grandchildren? (So many!)
- offering a workshop on raising healthy kids in an unhealthy society, where you engage a prof from High Point Univ. to come teach, with the public invited?

Could First Pres **leverage grants** from Presbyterian and secular sources to start community ministries, with First Pres not paying the cost, but finding the money?

Who knows what God may plant in your minds and hearts, working with your Interim or your next long-term pastor!

There’s a new book out lately, called ***The Sailboat Church***, by Joan Gray.

Here’s the gimmick of the catchy title...her idea is...

...That some congregations are “**row-boat**” churches, where, when the going gets tough, everybody has to sweat and strain and work harder and harder to try to keep the boat moving...and when there aren’t many sailors, some of them get worked to exhaustion trying not to go dead-in-the-water...**and... --►**

...That some congregations learn to be “**sailboat**” churches, where, with prayer and imagination and brainstorming and searching for God’s designs, they figure out how to “**raise the sails**” of their faith and let the “**wind of God’s Spirit**” blow them into maybe even uncharted waters, where there are schools of “fishes” yearning to be gathered, wandering sheep longing to be fed.

I’m spiritually “betting” that First Presbyterian//Thomasville is a “sailboat church”!

So what’s next? I don’t mean the mechanics, the next administrative steps—that’ll all become clear—if it’s not already—with the help of Salem Presbytery and the solid experience of members who’ve sailed this channel before.

I mean, starting this morning, what posture do you get into to catch the wind of the Spirit?

Some may remember a retired minister in our Presbytery, Bob Freeman, in Salisbury. Bob pointed out one day in a meeting—where things were at best sort of slogging along—that, in all of his preaching and teaching, Jesus never gave but one new commandment.

Ever think about it? Only one thing new Jesus added to what he asks his followers. (The rest is all in the Old Testament!)

Here it is in John's Gospel: "Love each other!"

That's the key—not harder work, more money, more energy that already feels scarce!

Just: **"Love each other, just as I have loved you."**...self-less-ly, freely,
eyes wide open to the well-being of each other.
without expectation of reward or repayment.

Maybe that's not such a strange place to end this message, as we come to The Lord's Table. Here it's **NOT** **"Déjà vu all over again!"** You **don't** have to cross all the bridges today...

...**don't have to** figure out all the difficulties—or **delights**—that may lie ahead.

Just this: **"Love each other!"**--that's right, really, **"each other"**, right here in this
Congregation [look around you...]**—love each other!**

Ask for that as we commune this morning, and the rest will work out.