

“Stepping Into the New Now”

Rev. Ann Eichhorn

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*pictured is the Eichhorn's great-grandson
photo credit: Casey Boyle*

Readings

Acts: 2:40-47, with paraphrasing by Ann Eichhorn

And he (Peter) testified with many words and impelled them in the direction, saying “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” And those who received his word were baptized (agreed symbolically to be part of the new community). There were that day about 3,000 people! And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (What David had us thinking about last Sunday, as to our current understanding of sharing communion together.)

The rest of the text continues “and fear came upon every soul” (*Oh my gosh, what have I gotten myself into? thoughts, maybe. What’s next?*).

The following verses identify some believers who decided to sell all their possessions and distribute the proceeds to all, as needed. They began to live a common life together that included coming together daily for prayer, communion, eating and working together. Others, obviously of the 3,000, chose other ways to follow the lead and teachings of Jesus. (And as they sought loving responses, searching for what we know as the common good, their numbers grew.)

From David Whyte’s book *River Flow* entitled “Start Close In,” pgs. 360-361

Start close in, don’t take the second step or the third, start with the first thing close in, the step you don’t want to take. Start with the ground you know, the pale ground beneath your feet, your own way to begin the conversation. Start with your own question, give up on other people’s questions, don’t let them smother something simple. To hear another’s voice, follow your own voice, wait until that voice becomes a private ear that can really listen to another. Start right now, take a small step you can call your own, don’t follow someone else’s heroics, be humble and focused. Start close in, don’t mistake that other for your own. Start close in, don’t take the second step or the third, start with the first thing close in, with perhaps the step you don’t want to take.

Good morning. I greet you all, here and wherever *there* is, and I am happy to have been invited to share my thoughts in the message this morning. (I must admit that when you only preach every three years, there is a serious process of elimination you must go through when writing a sermon to make sure it's under twelve minutes long. For those of you who are counting, here's my attempt).

Following our two months camping trip up north, both while up there and upon our return, I have found myself becoming particularly focused on several things that have left me pondering for better understanding. First, by paying attention to my many interactions with the wonderful CCC Nurture Team and the many members they are (mostly virtually) visiting with, my work with Red Cross responders, and conversations with our own family members and other friends, I am finding that even with rising vaccination rates, ever-changing guidelines, and things loosening up a bit, people are profoundly depressed. Most still feel a sense of isolation, of being distanced from family and friends, hesitant to make plans, reluctant to take on anything new, fearful of others, and scared about how long this pandemic might really last as it continues to involve the whole global community. I too have been trying to ascertain what's going on, with me as well as with our world. What is so different? Why does so much feel wounded, sick, critical, broken, gone?

It doesn't take long to list the reasons, and I won't take precious minutes to do it here, but the reality is that *we are still living through a dire time*. It's a time like no other in our lives; it has shut down our previous world, affected everyone, and continues to cause catastrophic chaos, terror, fear, and death.

The second thing I ponder and which intrigues me (particularly, I suppose because of my career and background) is David's attempts to engage members of this congregation (many of whom have no interest in the Bible nor in Christian history) in deep personal faith questions. Last week he focused on the meaning of communion, sharing the eucharist and whether it has any meaning for us now, particularly in these COVID times, when it can't be shared in the familiar ways. Today, I want to take this deep personal pondering a step further and focus on the faith survivors. I want to focus on those ancient survivors as well as those among us, coming out of the unspeakable terror and horror of these recent past times. First, in the verses from the ancient book of Acts (of the Apostles), we are given a clear picture of those early followers as they took steps into a different future. Not only had they just lost their beloved leader and experienced firsthand the targeting destruction of their communities and ways of life, but they also faced the fact that *it was one of their own close colleagues* who betrayed Jesus, putting into play his capture and the brutal end of his life. The text shares with us, immediately following these events, that they felt the acute need to regather, grieve together, reflect on where they were, and then plan and strategize their next steps.

Perhaps our current process of recovery, re-entry, and rebuilding can pull from our known ancient best practices/lessons learned. Rama Kumar submitted the following to the Op Ed page of the Independent Journal this week:

The only hope for humans in general is to replace our age-old habits of war and vicious infighting with a renewed spirit of solidarity and unity as one human race Certainly, intelligent people will disagree about the basic questions of human life and political values, but a *newly awakened human race* can and must manage to disagree while remaining peaceful and friendly with each other at the same time. Working together for our common good is the only possibility that can succeed.

The third thing I am pondering is my observation that *lots of folks are stuck* in the dynamics that have ruled for perhaps even longer than the seventeen-month shut-off of life as we knew it. *They really can't imagine being able to take a step into the new now.* To quote Laura Van Dernoot Lipsky, the founder of the trauma Stewardship Institute, "As hard as the initial trauma is, it's the aftermath that destroys people." Too many among us can't even envision what the new might be.

This is where I count heavily on faith lessons and practices I learned a long time ago, as well as the responses I've been trained to make as both an RN and a Red Cross volunteer. *Following unexpected deaths, tragedies, threats to one's own life, major upsets and disruptions, for survivors, life goes on. In order to survive, to recover, first steps must be taken!* As people of faith, not only must we find new ways to participate in life, we are called as followers *to help make it a different world* from before. It is our turn as survivors to explore opportunities to gather together, to rebuild, to repair, to imagine sharing what we have with "the more" who are without much. It's our unique time to dream new dreams of a world filled with love for one another, with growing peace, where food and healthy, safe living arrangements abound. It's time to develop best practices and listen to important lessons learned. Quite simply, the world has moved on while we have been in isolation. Thankfully, it is not the same, and neither are we.

I would be remiss if I ended there. I want to share a couple of ideas from a recent Costco publications poll that for me exemplifies people taking steps forward to begin to address today's needs. Here are some answers to the question, *How do you support your community, connect where you live?* Their answers were:

I volunteer to walk dogs at my local animal shelter. I volunteer for Habitat for Humanity. I advocate for LGBTQ equality. I vote. I donate platelets and try to be a good human. Our family takes food once a month to our homeless shelter. As an EMT, I volunteer when needed. I donate to families in need and other local causes.

I can add a couple of tiny steps I never wanted to take that occurred a couple of weeks ago at our campground. I learned how to start and use an electric weed eater and portable blower! Much as I still hate the noise they make, I found them a necessity to clear the paths through the new labyrinth that appeared there at the park, as well as a way to add my efforts to keep accessible the beautiful trails in that 168 acres.

In closing, I'd like to add a poem from my favorite poet, Bill Eichhorn, who wrote a response to the David Whyte's poem we started with today. Bill entitled his poem "Start with the Ground I know."

Start with the ground I know, familiar streets, trails, beaches, the mountain.

Walk the neighborhood with quickened curiosity at the precious dawn time,
in the stillness of eventide and between times.

Gather in the sounds at Muir Beach, quarreling gulls, breakers foaming the beach,
wind whisking away worries.

Meander the organic gardens of Green Gulch where Zen Buddhist prayers mingle
with the smell of lavender and fresh bread.

Notice the flash of red above Coyote Ridge, a hawk dropping into a fierce, screaming dive.

With the fog rolling over Mt. Tamalpais, empty the mind, welcome all.

Images become words, arrange themselves into a poem, gifts from walking the ground I know.

Start close in David Whyte's observation is that the first step from the old to the new is maybe the one we don't want to take. We become stuck at the threshold of that first step. Maybe it's not action, but exploration of the new that will expose the *what's next*. Whatever your first step might be, step into and help make new the future.

Amen

