

Rosy Retrospection in a 21st Century World

Isaiah 43:16-21 and Revelation 21:1-5

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September 13, 2026

I love the first weeks of a new church program year just like I loved the first few weeks of a new school year when I was a teacher. There is something so exciting, even exhilarating about a new start! Today, our kids' and youth programs start up again. Next week will be our annual kick-off event - our chance to reconnect with church friends and activities after the change of pace that summer brings. Our staff have been busy preparing new spaces and scheduling events and activities. I've been working on this year's sermon series ideas. The choir has started preparing music to enhance our worship as well as a performance of Haydn's "Creation" at the end of the month. This is a time full of hope and possibilities, plans for the future, and anticipation of what God will do in our church and in our lives during the coming year!

It's funny how no matter how old we are, September always brings this sense that we have a new beginning, a fresh start. But then, we human beings have a pretty funny relationship with time anyway. Sometimes, like right now, we are very oriented toward the future. We look forward to the milestones in our lives, to holidays and celebrations, visiting places we haven't been and having experiences we've never had. We have a great love for what is new, and our focus is on what has yet to come.

Yet, at other times, we tend to glorify the past. There is actually a psychological phrase for it - rosy retrospection. It means that we can easily look at the past through rose-colored glasses, remembering the good things and minimizing the bad. Those of you who have birthed babies know this is true. Labor is horribly painful and goes on for hours and hours. Somewhere in that time, many women have said, "I'm never doing this again!" Yet, after the baby is born, the wonder and amazement of bringing a new life into the world overwhelms the memory of how painful the process was. And for many, it's not long before a second baby is on the way.

Every day and throughout our lives, we make choices about how we view ourselves and our lives within the context of time. Perhaps you've noticed this in your own life. You may look back at your teen years and think those were the best years of my life. I was carefree, having fun, hanging out with the best of friends. Or you may look at that time in your life and think thank God I never have to go back there again. You may look to the future and think, "oh my gosh, I'm getting old. I'm scared. I don't know how much time I have left." Or you may look to the future and feel like a kid at Christmas, full of anticipation for what your life will bring.

Most of us will experience a little bit of all of those things. Sometimes all at the same time! The point is that we have control over how we orient ourselves in time. We choose whether to look to the past with regret or with gratitude, whether we look to the future with fear or with hope. Our faith offers us guidance as we navigate this road. Always, we see God teaching God's people to honor the past. Perhaps that is most obvious in the commandment God gives the Hebrew people to retell the story of the exodus every year to their children so that each generation will know what God has done from them.

Yet, overall, ours is not a backward-facing faith. By the very nature of who we are and what God calls us to do, we focus on the future. God is about building the kingdom of God - a future world, equitable and just, peaceful, compassionate, and abundant. God's work is always about drawing us closer to that kingdom. God transforms, God resurrects, God heals, God forgives, God comforts all to bring us closer to God's future vision for the human community.

We see this reflected in our two scripture readings for today, as well. In Isaiah, God says, "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?". The new thing is the kingdom of God. God calls us to join in building it. In the passage from Revelation, we see the kingdom fulfilled - a new heaven and a new earth where God dwells with God's people in a worldwide beloved community.

In his book entitled "Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the Sake of the World", J.R. Woodward writes, "When we read the Scriptures, we learn that it is God's mission to set things right in a broken and messed up world. God's mission is to redeem the world and restore it to its intended purpose. The church exists to fulfill God's mission, and when we participate in God's mission, we become living signs of God's intended future for the world".

So, we are called to honor and learn from the past while always looking toward God's preferred future. This year we will have an opportunity to practice just that. For one thing, 2027, just a few months away, is the year of our church's 200th anniversary. So, of course, we want to celebrate this church's history and accomplishments! Be sure to stop by the 200th anniversary table at the ReConnect event next weekend to learn about some of our plans.

Also, after more than seven years, I am excited to say we are now ready to start a congregational process of dreaming, brainstorming, and refining a vision of what our church building and property might look like as we enter the next 200 years.

For those who need a little background to this, in March of 2019, not long after I became senior pastor, I called for a church-wide strategic planning retreat. One hundred people from across the congregation came together on a Saturday morning, and together we identified priorities to strengthen and sustain our church in the coming years. One of those priorities was to consider how we could diversify our sources of income, so we weren't solely dependent on congregational giving. We formed a team with two charges - one was to look at how we might add income right away (could we rent out space in our building, charge for parking, etc.). The other was to consider whether we should and could redevelop the property here on the corner of State and Huron to give us an additional revenue stream while also supporting our mission.

The covid pandemic brought progress to a halt, but eventually, we reconvened, and now it is time to start creating a vision of what our church building and property might look like for the next generation of Christ-followers. There will be ample opportunities for you to be part of this process, to dream your own dreams for our church, to have your voice heard. In six months, we should be ready to go to developers and say, "here are our ideas, our hopes, our needs, our boundaries. What are yours? What can we do together?"

As we begin to discern future possibilities for our building, I hope we will enter this work with both respect for the past and hope for all the possibilities before us. Many of us love this

building - its gothic architecture, stained glass, hand-built pulpit and baptismal font, the memorial garden where so many of our saints are laid to rest. And there will definitely be aspects of this building we choose to preserve for their sacred meaning and history. Yet, God's church is not the building. God's church is what we do together, as a community of faith, to transform lives and grow the kingdom. So, even as we bring along the best of our heritage, we will also need to think about what church will be for future generations.

Come 2027, we will appropriately celebrate the history and accomplishments of First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor. We will give thanks for the saints who first met two centuries ago to share their faith journey together - and those who have loved, nurtured, and sustained this amazing community of God for 200 years since. We will praise God because 200 years is a remarkable gift.

And we will remember that 200 years is not a finish line. It is a foundation. Those who came before us built this building to meet the needs of the church at the time because they believed God had more work to do. They trusted that there would be kingdom-builders after them who would carry the kingdom forward.

And now we are those people. One day, another generation will stand where we are standing. They will look back at us. They will know that we had decisions to make. They will know that we inherited something precious. What will they say about us?

Perhaps they will say, *They were afraid to change*. Or perhaps: "They dreamed." "They trusted God." "They remembered where they came from, but they weren't afraid to go somewhere new." "They believed the Holy Spirit was still speaking." "They understood that the church belonged not to them, but to Christ." "They considered us and left us a future."

That is the legacy I hope we choose. Not a legacy limited to preservation. But one of courage and imagination as we grow into the church God is calling us to be. So let us remember the past with gratitude. Let us celebrate it with grace. Let us refuse the seduction of nostalgia. Let us dream wildly enough to give the Holy Spirit something to work with. And when we are tempted to say, "*But we've never done it that way before,*" may someone gently remind us:

Exactly. God is doing a new thing. May we have the courage to perceive it. May we have the faith to follow it. And may the next 200 years begin not with fear about what we might lose, but with wonder about what God might yet create. For the God who made a way through the sea, the God who raised Jesus from the dead, the God who says, "*I am making all things new,*" is not finished with this church. Not even close.

Thanks be to God. Amen

