

# THE REIGN OF GOD 3: OUR CHURCH

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*Camrose United Church*  
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Isaiah 40: 21-31 - Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength  
Psalm 147: 1-11 (responsive reading), *Voices United*, p. 869, Part One  
Mark 1: 29-39 - Expanding the mission

The story of Jesus is a little bit surprising if we listen to it carefully because it starts off talking about the healing ministry that is just thriving. And then suddenly Jesus says “Okay, we’ve got to move on. We’ve got to talk to more people.” And isn’t that a dilemma in our lives and especially in the life of our church? When you just get things going the way you think they should be going and it all feels really good, someone says “Wait a minute, let’s do something else.”

So today’s sermon is part of the series about the Reign of God; today, specifically what the Reign means to the church as an institution, as an organization. This is intended, of course, to be a little bit of a primer for the Annual Congregational Meeting next week. Laura [Servage, chairperson of our Council] has been particularly anxious to see a little more vitality in that Annual Meeting so people will realize the importance of our taking a look at who we are, how we have come, and where we are going. It is important for us not just to pass the budget and make sure everything is copasetic, but also to look at the life of the congregation in the context of the Reign of God and what God is calling us to do. Like I say, sometimes, even though things seem to be going well, God calls us to move on to something different. How do we make those choices, how do we know what is the emerging call of the spirit for us as a church?

Today’s story from Mark is striking enough if one thinks about it, but it reminds me of a dramatic piece that Mary Ann and I created for Maundy Thursday a few years ago. We called it “Judas and Mary.” In it we were trying to imagine a conversation between Mary and Judas when Jesus was in Jerusalem and was on the verge of being arrested. We tried to imagine the struggle and tension that must have gone on among the disciples, especially between Mary and Judas because of course he was the one who had challenged her on wasting all the oil anointing Jesus’ feet. And then Judas betrayed Jesus. How did he come to that choice? I got thinking what if Judas isn’t just the black hat, the bad guy. He was, after all, a disciple for three years. What if it was a real struggle for him, and what got hold of him? I imagined that Judas was really excited about the ministry, the movement that had been gaining momentum up in Galilee. They were healing. They weren’t working with the authorities, but rather with the common people, and there was a movement growing. People were beginning to understand and to follow, and the healing was happening.

The movement was still new and young and fragile, and all of a sudden they had decided to go to Jerusalem. That was the most dangerous place, and it was where Mary anointed Jesus--a symbol of royalty--and if people start hearing that Jesus was king, the Romans would put an end to him right now. Just imagine Judas thinking “Wait a minute; what a waste that would be. We’ve got this going, why don’t we go back to Galilee and just keep it growing the way it is? This is crazy to be down here.” And then Mary tried to say to him “No, I don’t know where this is going, Judas, but I’m just trying to respond to Jesus with love and support, and I feel the spirit moving us in some way. I don’t know where it is taking us, and maybe it will be painful but I just have to follow.”

So here we are in this struggle. Now it may sound a little bit too dramatic to portray an Annual Meeting as that kind of struggle but it is, folks. As some have said, the financial budget is the most profound theological statement a congregation ever makes. So I want to invite you to open your eyes and see in those numbers a declaration of the faith of this congregation, and its sense of mission--or at least to ask yourself as you listen to all those reports, "Do I hear this congregation responding to the leading of the spirit? Is it there or not?"

To help us break that down I want to talk about it in terms of a three-part model that I find very helpful in thinking about how an organization grows and directs itself and evolves. This is not just for organizations; it applies to our personal lives as well. The model's three parts are simply "strengths," "problems," "possibilities." The idea is that we need to be looking at all three, and that we lose our way if we focus on just one of them or leave one of them out.

The first part of the model is, therefore, "strengths." As an organization, as we direct ourselves into the future--indeed, in all of our living as we endeavour to live faithfully to God--we need to celebrate our achievements and our strengths. They must be right out front so we can build upon them in a way that allows our movement into the future to be deeply rooted in what of our past is good and strong. Just take a look at this church. I asked myself what are the strengths, what is the heritage, what is the foundation on which we have something really solid to build here. I remember the anniversary celebration the first year I was here. Mary Ann and I went around to all the stained glass windows, looked at the scripture readings as well as the names of the people, and used that as a basis of our anniversary message to celebrate the heritage. Even now we have these stained glass windows as well a new one that has gone in there [the balcony's east side]. We also have a refurbished organ. The beauty of this architecture and the strength of the music program here in this church are just examples of the strengths that come to my mind right off the top of my head.

And it's not just an abstract idea. I hear people who are new coming in here and looking at the sanctuary--for example a couple arriving for a wedding or a newcomer entering for the first time--and commenting on the beauty of this sanctuary. It's not just a surface beauty. It has a depth; it captures a sense of the heritage and the eternity of the church and its life. The church in its music, its architecture, its worship, its whole life, is more than just something new this year or last year. It's that sense in which there is a church that has existed for hundreds of years and will continue to exist for hundreds of years. We're talking about the Reign of God. We're not talking about some short-term or immediate thing; we're talking about that long heritage of the church. We celebrate that and build on it. When we go to the Annual Meeting, listen to the conversation and read what is being presented, one of our questions is "Do I hear that deep-rooted eternal presence of Christ that is the church? Do I hear that presence celebrated and recognized and cultivated and built on and strengthened?" So that's the first part of the model.

The second part is "problems." Sometimes we can't think about both strengths and problems in the same breath because the one seems so positive and the other seems so negative. Sometimes we decide to think only about the positive and not pay attention to the negative. But we need to do both. We really do, because sometimes a congregation becomes apathetic--has lost its feeling--or feels like it has run out of momentum and there's so much inertia it can't get moving. The reason may be that so many problems have been avoided and denied and swept under the carpet that all the energy is drained right out of the organization. And so we must face the problems.

What are the barriers, what are we tripping over, what is frustrating us? We need to face those head on because problems are not just negative. You know the old saying that crisis is a combination of danger and opportunity. The crises, the problems we face, contain opportunities as well as dangers. We can lose this wonderful heritage of the church just by avoiding our problems, and at the same time we can discover the energy that it takes to revitalize the church by

facing these same problems and realizing that some of our energy, some of our life energy as a church, is bound up in exactly those problems.

I had an experience some years ago when I was at St. Paul's in Sidney, B.C. The church had a Sunday School but it was dwindling. It no longer had youth, and it was about to lose the junior-age children which were declining steadily year by year. I called a meeting of the Sunday School leaders and said "We need to deal with this crisis." That made a world of difference because they hadn't thought about it as a crisis; it was just a slow dwindling. But you could see the eyes come open when the leaders realized that, yes, this was a crisis that had to be dealt with as a crisis. The leaders started doing some deeper thinking and some freer thinking. And what eventually emerged was a plan to replace the Sunday School program with an early worship service designed for the children. We did that for two years, and it was one of the most exciting worship experiences of my life. The service was there for children and a whole new life was emerging around the life of the children.

But the early worship service didn't happen right away. Six people worked about one-quarter-time to revamp the Sunday School to get a whole different approach--a whole different style. And they turned it around. It was growing, but at the end of the year they said they didn't have time to keep this up. It was then we said how about a worship service, and it evolved from there. The result was a whole new dimension in that part of the congregation's life. It began simply by taking a problem and facing it head on and saying we are in crisis and we'll find the opportunity in that crisis. So there are strengths and there are problems, and both have to be engaged.

But there is a third part to this model, too. We need to engage the "possibilities." The church's life isn't just about what has happened and about keeping it going; it's about brand new possibilities of things that have never happened before. That's the exercise of our imagination: "What if we did this?" "Could we try that?" "You know what I would really like to do?" You hear those words. I hear them from some of you. "Wow! Imagine what could happen if we could do" such-and-such. The question is "Could we?" And underneath that, what I often hear is "But of course we couldn't because we've never done that before." Or so-and-so "wouldn't like it." Or there's that deep sense of "Hmm, we can't really be that free, can we?" There's a whole system of congregational management and leadership that is based on permission-giving. It's not based on a church board that runs everything; it's based on opening and encouraging people to bring those imaginative ideas and then, instead of putting barriers in the way, saying "Yes! Go for it. What resources do we need? How do we integrate that with everything else?" As I see it, this congregation is on the verge of a whole array of new possibilities. There is still a little bit of a sense of "How do we do that?" "Can do that?" You're not quite there, but you're on the verge of hearing the permission to go ahead and do what your imagination tells you to do because that's the spirit leading us as well.

Our Sunday School, for example. Look at the energy in the Sunday School with our leadership. Some real changes have been made around leadership style. Mary Ann, of course, is working more closely with the parents and leaders and children. The Sunday School parents are gathering. I have sat with them a couple of times and that's where I hear "You know, what I really think we need to do is" this and this and this, "but can we?" It's that sort of "but-can-we-do-that?" thing. It was like the décor in the Sunday School rooms a few years ago. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had bright colors in there? Can we do that?" "Yes! we can do that!" There's just a matter of giving the permission to say that vitality is what we want and you can do that. It can happen.

I was also struck, shortly after I arrived here, by the story of the Open Door. The Open Door is a ministry or mission to youth who are homeless or in other ways in crisis in Camrose. It had its genesis with the Church of God. Here was a congregation taking a look at the community and

saying there is a need. “Here is a place where people are really hurting. Why couldn’t we as a church, as a congregation, start something. Here is a need, here is a possibility, let’s just do it.” So it’s that kind of energy.

Listen again to the three different kinds of energy in the three-part model we have just considered. First, the strengths: that deep heritage, solid foundation of what we do well. Second, the problems: facing those problems--the part that we don’t want to think about, the crises that seem to threaten or divide us. And third, the possibilities: the imagination. Just picture an organization, a church, or even your own personal life, in which attention is being given to all three of those at the same time, with none being ignored. That’s the true way of vitality in an organization.

The Annual Reports are downstairs for you to pick up after church today. Hopefully you will all pick them up, take them home, and look at them during the week. As you read the Reports, keep in mind the three parts of the model--strengths, problems, possibilities. Ask yourself: “Am I hearing the celebration of our strengths and building on that?” “Am I hearing the problems and the crises being confronted in a creative and bold way?” “Am I hearing the possibilities and the imagination at work and being affirmed, so that ‘Yes! we can do what the spirit leads us to do even if it takes us in some whole new directions that we never before imagined.’” And remember. All three fit together; they don’t contradict each other. You don’t have to make it “either-or.”

This is the kind of work that many people are doing, especially in Alberta and Northwest Conference. Clair Woodbury and Joyce Madsen are two consultants who work for many congregations on church development. They have published a book entitled *Wings Like Eagles* which goes through the basic dynamics of church development. Our congregation’s Council has read the book which has become a source of direction for us as a Council. I was struck by the fact that the title comes from today’s Old Testament reading from Isaiah. It talks about energy, and says when we turn from the Lord even the young men get tired.

And I thought sometimes the congregation starts to feel like we are getting tired and there is just too much to do. There are too many blank spaces on the roster [a reference to the list of committee vacancies being circulated among the congregation each Sunday], nobody has time to do it all, and we just feel tired. We wonder if it’s because we’re old. But you know something? It’s not because we’re old. Isaiah says it’s not because we’re old. Even young men get tired when they lose a sense of vision in their lives. But when we turn to God and wait on the Lord, when we reclaim a vision for our lives, for our church, for our organizations, then we run and we don’t get weary. We rise up on wings like eagles. Just listen to one of the quotations from the back cover of this book:

*Wings Like Eagles is the name we have chosen because we want congregations to soar with all the energy and passion, all the tranquility and spirituality that eagles bring to their magnificent flight. We have seen too many churches that are happy just to trudge along, slowly declining in numbers as members lapse into deepening states of lethargy. The book is for those who are willing to risk being different, who want to reach out to people in their community, who want to fly with the eagles. This is for congregations who take Jesus’ offer of new lives for old seriously.<sup>1</sup>*

And so that’s the blessing that is there for us today.

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor

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<sup>1</sup>Clair Woodbury & Joyce Madsen, *Wings Like Eagles*, “How to be a thriving congregation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (2000, Edmonton), back cover.