

A friend of mine once said, “You should always walk a mile in someone else’s shoes. It will give you a good understanding of their life. Plus, you’ll have a new pair of shoes and you’ll be a mile away!”

I’ve had occasion to think about shoes a couple of times this week, first in the context of my move as in “where are my shoes?” Then in the context of this “Covid pause” as in “oh my gosh, these shoes don’t fit!” I don’t know about you, but during this Covid time of mostly staying in, I’ve been wearing slippers, sandals, and sneakers. I haven’t had too many occasions to wear high heels around the house. After not wearing them for a while, I realized that I’d been cramming my feet into shoes that are too small. I felt like Cinderella’s sisters trying to get into the glass slipper. Ouch!

Because I’d been doing it for so long, the discomfort had become part of my routine and I didn’t recognize it as problematic. The ‘Covid pause’ in my routine gave me space to stop wearing the shoes, so that when I put them back on, I realized they no longer serve me.

I have to tell you, First Parish, that it has been a joy to walk with you for these last 21 months. We have come so far from where we started! We journeyed through our entire history as we sought to preserve the land that has been so carefully tended for centuries. In the face of adversity, you stood tall, with dignity, and began talking to educate yourselves and others about the land agreement with the town. You have cared for other land, too, with recycling, composting, and beach cleanups. You have solidified a communication policy and done outreach in the community, stretching beyond your comfort zones in creating kindness rocks, having book club meetings at the library, meeting with others on Zoom, and watching video worship—sometimes on Sunday mornings while wearing your fuzzy slippers and sometimes on Wednesday nights or Friday at lunchtime.

God walked with the Israelites as cloud and fire and God has walked with us too even in this wilderness time. The God who has been with you forever—even before you were you—will continue to care for you. There will be difficult times, but you will emerge safely.

Over your lifetime and particularly over these last six months, there have been some tumultuous times--and God has gotten you through. Don’t literally forget the past, but don’t get stuck there. You’re not living in the past. You’re not the same church that you were 2 years ago. And you will be different 2 years from now (heck, even 2 weeks from now).

Isaiah isn't saying 'forget the past'. He's saying don't get stuck there. When we cling tightly to the past, our hearts and our hands aren't open to seeing new possibility or trying new things. Thank you for opening your hearts and homes to me. Thank you for trying new things with me. I pray that you'll do the same with Rev. Eric as he joins you for the journey.

Church pastors are often called to shepherd their flocks—that may mean to provide direction or to protect them, but it always means to walk with them. I came across a note my father had sent me at some point. It said 'people are in your life for a reason or a season'. My season with you has come to an end. Rev. Eric will be here soon and you will embark on exciting journeys together!

I'm in the United Church of Christ because I believe the slogan, "God is still speaking"! I expect that God would have me tell you that God is still here, leading, guiding, comforting, protecting, and always walking with you. And you have called Rev. Eric and with the team of Rev. Eric and Pastor Dan, you will do new and wonderful things together!

This passage from Isaiah was written at a time when the Israelites had journeyed out of Egypt into the Promised Land and had been exiled into Babylonia. They've been through a lot. Things were bad. Then they were worse. Then they were good. And then they weren't. But God was still with them and getting ready to do something new. Things would be good again, but not in the same way.

First Parish, this 'covid pause' has been a burden and a blessing. While it curtailed our regular operations for a time, it also fast-forwarded many of us into using technologies that are nothing short of miraculous. Gone are the days of people missing meetings because they can't get a babysitter, or because it's snowing, or because they prefer not to drive at night. Gone are the days when snowbirds miss their churches for months and people that move out of town have to leave their Bible study groups. Today people can come together, whether across the house, across town, across the country, or across the world via video conferencing options! "Zoom" is no longer just a PBS show.

Church has forever changed and will continue to evolve, not just during or after the pandemic, but always, because the world changes and part of our charge as Christians is to respond to the needs of the world.

You'd never attempt to walk somewhere with your head turned in the direction behind you, so face the future, head on, with a smile on your face and excitement in your heart.

Don't stand still. Don't stay where you were or even where you are. Keep moving on. Christ is alive. So is the church. And *if* we are living in today, we are living *for* today and tomorrow (not yesterday). When we compare the present with the past and we find the present lacking, we're only hurting ourselves needlessly. The present is a gift from God.

Every year about this time, we change over our closets. We do this because we're entering another season and our summer clothes (and shoes) no longer suit us with the changes in our environment. Church, (Christians), it is time to look at the current environment and to respond to the needs. Just as our needs change, so too do the world's needs.

Look to see what new needs have emerged. It is a new season for First Parish Church! When we think of traditional mission projects, we tend to think of food pantries, thrift stores, and foreign aid. How else might we respond as Christians?

Do you know any grandparents caring for their grandchildren b/c their parents are unable to do so? Do you know any parents who are at a loss for childcare due to new school schedules? Do you know high risk children? Do you know people struggling with anxiety? Do you know people caring for elderly parents? Do you know folks who need socialization or mentoring?

It is said that St. Francis of Assisi heard these words in a dream, "Francis, rebuild my church". There was an old stone chapel down the road in great disrepair. He believed he'd heard a call from God so he mobilized people and stone by stone, they rebuilt the church. It was a long, hard process, but they did it together. That night, Francis fell asleep, happy to have answered God's call. And he heard these words in a dream, "Francis, rebuild my church." Church isn't a building. Church is a gathered community of Christians.

*Do not remember things of old.* The church of today and tomorrow will likely not look the same as it was and it will not be the same as it was. *I am doing a new thing, do you not perceive it?* Just as God was with the Israelites in their captivity, so is God with us during the Coronavirus and during a pastoral transition. Just as God spoke to the Israelites about new things God was doing, I believe God is doing new things now and calling us to see not only how and where God is working, but to notice where and how WE can be working for God.

You and I know that Pastor Dan has good strong hiking boots and we know that Rev. Eric has a lot of experience walking with churches. I know that, together, you'll make great strides. And I will carry you in my heart as I walk away, toward whatever God has in store for me...and I'll be doing it in comfortable shoes that actually fit! Blessed be and amen.

