

“First Things First”

Sermon Preached by The Rev. William H. Critzman

West End Collegiate Church | January 13, 2019

Scripture References: Isaiah 43:1-7 & Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The tree is down. The lights are all put away. The garlands and tinsel and ribbons are all safely stored in our memories for another year. We’ve long since left that lowly manger, and even the magi are safely back home in their distant palaces. This is the time, Howard Thurman famously tells us, when the work of Christmas begins. So here we are—here we *all* are—staring down 2019 wondering what God might have in store for us this year. We’ve had a first full week back in the office. The kids are all back in school. I wish I could say the same about our government, but we’ll leave that alone for the time being. Visiting relatives are back where they belong, and here we are, just us, ready for the year ahead. What dreams and hopes might you have? What resolutions have you already amended? Where do we begin? Are we ready to begin?

One of our elders sent me an article this week positing how Millennials live in a perpetual state of burnout. As never before has a single generation had so much effect on the generations above it—changing the way we work, how we work together, how we consume information, the speed at which we communicate—that extrapolating a bit I might extend this theory of burnout to all of us. Burnout is different from exhaustion, it’s a psychological state not a physical one, and it’s not the sort of thing that can be cured by a week on a beach or, as the article says, a meditation app or any of our propensities for selfcare. Burnout, as first defined by psychologist Herbert Freudenberger in 1974, is a situation of “physical or mental collapse caused by overwork or stress.” It manifests itself in the inability to do little things like going to the post office or listening to a voicemail; it also has the effect of flattening our affect, of taking the joy out of things that should and usually bring us great pleasure. While the word “burnout” is only a couple generations old, contemporary psychoanalyst Josh Cohen traces similar sensations to the book of Ecclesiastes and its prevailing tone of melancholia and world-weariness. Cohen suggests that the similar symptoms were “diagnosed by Hippocrates and endemic to the Renaissance...and also to the late 1800s when the pace and strain of modern industrial life” was enough to cause what we would now call ‘burnout.’¹ In other words, burnout or whatever ancient people might have called it happens in times of rapid societal change and times of great disparity. Perhaps the most daunting thing about all of these conditions is that they’re not short lived or easily fixable; they’re more endemic, they become chronic, and it’s affecting all of us.

All of us respond to email around the clock and over the weekend. How many of you just rolled over unused vacation days because you didn’t get around to taking them all in 2018. All of our to-do list never gets any shorter and how many of you have that one pesky item just keeps rolling over from week to week when really it will only take five minutes. Another article I heard discussed this week was on the death—no pun intended—of the sick day. Gone are the days when a bad head cold or a stomach flu meant you could curl up on the sofa with *The Price is Right* and a cup of Lipton’s noodle soup. We still get sick, of course, but now instead of taking sick days, we work from home. We pack up our laptops and cellphones—under the guise of benevolence saying “I don’t want to get anyone else sick”—and respond to emails, skype into meetings, or join conference calls from home. We’re not at our physical best, we’re actually sick, and yet we keep pushing and pushing, unable to even take a day to simply rest and heal.

This is one of the ways that burnout differs from exhaustion. Exhaustion is the state where you reach your limit—physical or emotional—and you stop. Burnout is the state where you reach your limit and you keep going, you keep pushing, you take that call, you answer that email, you go to that event all because we feel we have to or something might go horribly wrong.

So perhaps my invitation a few minutes ago to imagine where we might begin this year, to think about the work of Christmas we can now begin, maybe that doesn't sound like such a nice question at all. Though we can all get on board with more hope, more goodness, more justice, maybe somewhere inside there's also a voice that ever so slightly groans at the thought of having to do one more thing. "Oh alright, let's do it," is what we speak even when "Uhh, seriously, now this *too*?" might be our internal doubt. Or even deeper, even darker, what if that internal voice says something like "what's the point" or "will it even matter?" That there, that's burnout's trick; the devil in the detail takes away our joy, our optimism, our potential.

Around 30 years after Mary gave her cousin Elizabeth the shock of her unborn child leaping in her womb, that same child was living near the river Jordan. Not in a nearby town or river-view condo, actually very near the river, in the wilderness the river flowed through, perhaps in a cave or other natural dwelling. This was a time of great hope and all the people were filled with expectations about what was going to come. They had heard of this man named John who ate locusts and wild honey and who spoke words of prophesy and repentance that made the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. They knew that he was out there in the river baptizing people and they had questions. How does he begin this, they might have wondered. Who is he and how do we know we can trust him? Is this, could it be, is this the Messiah? This, they said, this is the guy that's going to do great things for us; this is the guy all of our expectations have been awaiting. Here we are! Let's go! Let's do it, John. And for his part, John was excited too, excited for the possibility and expectant for the joy to come. John's energy was just a bit different from the people's, though, for John knew one thing they didn't. John knew he was no miracle worker. John knew he wasn't the Messiah. While the society was anxious, John was steady and calm even while excited and ready. John knew precisely who he was, who he wasn't, and how he could play his role in this great human drama. With cries of not being worthy, John tells of the baptism he will provide and of the baptism someone else will share. John's a baptism of water. Jesus's a baptism of fire and the Holy Spirit. John's a sacrament; Jesus's a Pentecost.

As an all too human pastor, I'm a big fan of John the Baptist. He knows what he can do, he's modest in his expectation of himself, and he's resourceful to point us to one far greater than he. This feels like a good way to not get burned out, and John the Baptizer doesn't. He knows he has a role—an indispensable one, a special one—in creating beloved community, *and* he knows he is but a part of that community. He knows that one of the things he must do is baptize the people, as many of the people as request it, and he is all too happy to do so. Baptism is a sort of new beginning itself: a rebirth, a claiming of one's life for good, for God. In the very human baptism that John—that any pastor—offers we share in the good news of God for all people, that we should not fear, that we are redeemed, that God calls us by name and we are God's. This promise, this celebration of baptism, is a free gift that is available to all of us; that many of us have already claimed, that at least a couple of us will soon receive. Jesus too, Jesus fully human, Jesus claims this gift, as well. Thirty years after that first Christmas, grown-up Jesus comes to John the Baptist so that he too might receive his heavenly gift. John baptizes him. And the voice of God is heard by all assembled saying "this is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well

pleased.” Thirty years after his birth, Jesus passes through the waters of Baptism and begins his public ministry. First, baptism; then, changing the world.

What waters might each of us need to pass through this day? Isaiah tells of a God who promises to be with us when we pass through the waters, and through all the rivers of our lives. This God who will be with us, calls us into the water. The water—simple, every day, ordinary water—that blesses us, that blesses those ancient expectant people, and that blesses even Jesus. Water like a bath that cleans us. Water like a swimming pool that delights us. Water like an ocean at sunset that captivates us. Water like waves on which we can ride or that into which we can dive. Water, the currents and streams that invite us to float, to float above the rocky bottoms and to let go of our tensions. This is the water that comes in this New Year, the water that will sustain us for the work ahead.

We, West End Church, have our work cut out for us this year. We have a full year to do it, and we will do it together, God help us. In February, we’re going to have some serious conversations about the work of being a church, which is to say the human, organizational, business aspects of what we do when we come together and how it is that we function. Throughout the spring, you’ll hear from some of the other Collegiate ministers as well as from pastors of our denominations whom I’ve invited to share our pulpit. We have some budgeting work to do. We have a lot of financial sustainability work to discuss. We have a whole building sitting empty next door that needs our vision. We have tables that need to be sat at and meals to be shared. We will welcome a new associate minister and make some changes to help us function as a 21st century church. We have babies to baptize. And weddings to celebrate. We have youth that need some fun, and children who need our help, and elders who need our care. We can all be here together. There’s a whole world of programming for fellowship and Social Justice and seniors and community outreach that needs envisioning, engagement, and enactment. The work of the church will take all of us. There will be holidays and seasons of rejoicing. There will be times of lament and grieving. All told it will be a year, a year like any other, a year like none other. But first, the water. The water that baptized us. The water that baptized Jesus. The water that connects us and sustains us.

ⁱ Petersen, Anne Helen. “How Millennials Became The Burnout Generation.” *BuzzFeed News*, January 5, 2019. Accessed January 13, 2019.