

Rivers in the Desert  
Isaiah 43.1-13, 18-21  
Saturday, May 25, 2019  
Final Commencement of BTR  
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

President Bridges, Faculty, Staff, Trustees, Alumni, Friends and Families, newly transferred seminarians, and 2019 Graduates, it is an honor to be here with you on this marking day. This morning we celebrate the accomplishments of these 21 students and their commitment to service in the church and in the world. Today we also hold some sacred space for what has been and what will be.

We are all over the map when it comes to our thoughts and feelings today, and I find it's a whole lot better to name that and make some space for it—set a place at the table for these complexities—than it is to pretend everything is okay. Different than most any other commencement across the country this May, we are standing in the middle of all kinds of transition moments right now. Some of us right here in this room and watching online from a private spot are angry, many are heartsick, others are calmly stating what must be. The pioneers among us want to blaze a new trail and show us all the possibilities of an innovative and vibrant future. I suspect some folks really want to keep holding a road map that might take us back to what was familiar and good for a time. And then there are the ones holding the burial shrouds who are prepared to bless an ending.

We are all over the place. And that's okay. We can still bless and love each other in the midst of our grief no matter how it is manifesting. I want to start with a word of blessing for every person who is part of this story. Whether you are holding your ground as part of an insular tribe or are hoping to love your way through all of it as you reach out to everyone who is dear. Whether you are weeping your way to the end or white knuckling your rage and despair. Whether you are numb with resignation or deeply feeling grief or wildly open to the range of emotions on this day. Peace be with you.

Thank you for welcoming me into this space today not as one who has been part of these most recent years in BTR's life but as one who is grateful for her legacy and as one she trained to be the teller of an old, old story.

And guess what, class of 2019? This is the Church into which you are being sent. This is the Church many of you are already serving. This is the state of the Church we love.

Has anyone told you that? If not, let me be the first to welcome you to the life and work of the pastor in 2019. I would teach a very different course than Dr. Cecil Sherman did. I'd venture to say that those of us in transitional ministry settings (standing between what has been and what will be) have no idea what we're doing half of the time. In any given week at the historic St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church in New Orleans I am a building manager, an entrepreneur, a social justice warrior, a community organizer, an institutional innovator, a therapist, a development director, a wounded healer, a custodian, a really bad bookkeeper, a nonprofit executive director, a midwife, a hospice chaplain, and a preacher.

I am simultaneously preparing something old for burial while trying to assist in the birth of something new; pastoring in the ways of the 20th century while chasing the Spirit's guidance for the 21st. I have a lot of moments of thinking maybe, just maybe, my congregation and I are gonna pull this thing off and make a sustainable way forward. But between you and me, sometimes all it takes is one of those days when New Orleans gets a hard rain for six hours, the building floods, and I am nearly as confident we'll put a for sale sign in the yard and watch the whole thing go condo. Everything is changing in American religious life. It isn't all changing at the same pace or in the same ways, but the institutions we knew and loved (the very ones that formed and shaped and sent us) are changing forever. And you, my friends, are called to work and serve and love for this season of transformation.

Dr. Phyllis Rodgers Pleasants spoke over and over and over and over and over again of paradigm shifts. We wrote the papers. We studied the tome. We knew conceptually that the paradigm was shifting. Dr. Phyllis Tickle made famous the image of the church's rummage sale every 500 years, and we preachers have found some comfort in bringing that image out every now and then to remind ourselves and each other that what we are experiencing has happened before and will happen again; church is bigger than our collective memory. Paradigms shift. Rummage sales are necessary. Ah, but then Dr. Dan Bagby and Dr. Israel Galindo taught us of human nature and family systems that seek homeostasis. We creatures don't like change. We don't enjoy paradigm shifts. And we don't particularly enjoy rummage sales.

In this rummage sale, we're releasing that which no longer serves in order to make room for what comes next. That sounds nice and hopeful and promising. But if you've been through the process of cleaning out your childhood home and deciding who gets the love letters in a box found in the attic, who gets the beloved Christmas ornaments, what to do with your mother's 75 church hats, who will deal with your father's hoarding problem made evident in the garage, and putting your sister-in-law in her place when she tries to put her name on the heirloom armoire, well, that's

decidedly more complicated. The life and work of the pastor in 2019 is decidedly more complicated than it was 30 years ago when BTSR came to life.

Graduates, whatever your career may end up looking like, know that you are serving the Church in a season of simultaneous death and birth, and that means you will be making a lot of things up as you go. There is no road map for this; no MDiv course or MTS focus or practical theology training can fully prepare you because we are experiencing all of this in real time. But we are experiencing all of this in real time together. Colleagues surround you and will tell you the truth when they say, "I have no idea what I'm doing, either. Let's figure this out together." The way forward is collaborative. Wherever all of this is going next, we are going together.

And that's one of those threads we pick up and follow across our sacred texts—God is calling a people. You are not alone. We hold in our hands these sacred texts that whisper to us: Do not be afraid, I am with you. Behold, I am making a new thing. Do you not sense it?

These words were first whispered to folks who had lost everything but each other. Far from home, nowhere near temple, no power, no prestige. Exiles afraid they had lost their God, too. It is into these moments of utter crisis and despair and fear that the Divine speaks most boldly. Not only does God whisper to them of a new thing that is coming but invites these frightened and far-from-home people to be part of the new thing coming to life as witnesses to the sacred impossibilities of God. Crooked made straight. Low lifted up. Rivers in the desert.

Oh, friends, you are witnesses. You are witnesses to the power and presence and movement of God in this old world. You are witnesses to the new work God is doing. You are witnesses, formed by a loving God, drawn into this story as sacred remember-ers. Your work is to whisper alongside God: do not be afraid, God is making a new thing. Do you not sense it? And then you work alongside the people God is forming together and help them to sense it and listen for what they sense when you come up empty.

In the 20 years I have served congregations, I have come to believe the the highest holy day, the one that is most central to the story of our faith, is Maundy Thursday. It is my very favorite night of the year as we gather at dusk, dip our hands into the water, remember Christ washing the disciples feet (even one he knew would betray him), we break bread and dip it in a common cup. We speak aloud the mandate given to us that night—This command I give you: love one another. Everyone will know you are my disciples because you have love for one another.

This Jesus Way was meant to be a revolution of love, and we turned it into budgets and bylaws to maintain. This Jesus Way was meant for us to organize around a love so big and so strong that the empire would feel the threat to its power, and we turned it into institutions that need the empire for the tax break. And the tricky thing is, I fully believe I'm right about this AND my livelihood is linked to protecting this institution and the budget and the bylaws instead of leading the love revolution into the streets. I want the love revolution more than I want the paycheck. So I have some figuring out to do, and I need your help. I need for you to do this paradigm shifting, rummage sale work with me. What do we do? How do we guarantee we're tossing the right stuff out to free us to give ourselves to Christ's radical movement of people committed to love?

Well, BTSR gave us some hints and clues and hunches and whispers. Last night, Dr. Tom Graves brought us back to the origins of the servant's towel—the symbol of BTSR. I keep my towel in my office along with a pitcher and basin and the scrap of fabric I received at my first opening convocation in 2003 when I was brought into this servant community. We are not called to be TED Talk pastors and innovation experts and entrepreneurial success stories. We might want to be because we want success and we want to win. But you and I both know that desire is the stuff of ego. And the measure of church "success" has been ego driven for a long time because we valued counting people in pews and dollars in plates. Instead, BTSR handed us a towel with our name on it. Dr. Graves shared last night that the idea and the phrase came from the incomparable Alliance of Baptists pastor Nancy Hastings Sehested who pointed back to the central gospel love story of John 13 and said, "Ministry is finding a towel with your name on it." THIS is our work. This is the people God is forming. This is our way forward together even if we don't quite know what shape love will take.

The dear writer and woman of valor Rachel Held Evans reflected on this impulse we have in our church culture to win at doing church, saying, "It's strange that Christians so rarely talk about failure when we claim to follow a guy whose three-year ministry was cut short by his crucifixion. Stranger still is our fascination with so-called celebrity pastors whose personhood we flatten out and consume like faces in the tabloid aisle. But as nearly every denomination in the United States faces declining membership and waning influence, Christians may need to get used to the idea of measuring significance by something other than money, fame, and power. No one ever said that the fruit of the Spirit is *relevance* or *impact* or even *revival*. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—the sort of stuff that, let's face it, doesn't always sell.

I wonder if the role of the clergy in this age is not to dispense information or guard the prestige of their authority, but rather to *go first*, to volunteer the truth about their sins, their dreams, their failures, and their fears in order to free others to do the same. Such an approach may repel the masses looking for easy answers from flawless leaders, but I think it might make more disciples of Jesus, and I think it might make healthier, happier pastors. There is a difference, after all, between preaching success and preaching resurrection. Our path is the muddier one."<sup>1</sup>

Friends, thank you for joining me in this work. I need to work alongside you. I need you to whisper to me, "Do not be afraid." When my ego takes the lead, I need you to call me back to love. When we start hoarding and can't bring ourselves to toss something else in the rummage sale pile, we need you to quiet us and say, "God is doing a new thing. Don't you sense it?" When we frantically cling to the old ways and old structures and fear their demise, we need you to remind us all that our God is one who makes rivers in the desert. Prepare us to be amazed and surprised. Call us into the muddy path. Grab the towel with your name on it and love us into the revolutionary way of Jesus the Christ. We are counting on you to lead us.

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, p. 112