

*“Faithfulness and Risk Walk Side By Side”*

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Epiphany, Sunday, January 26, 2014

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**Holy Scriptures: Isaiah 9: 1-4**

*But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

**Faithfulness and risk walk side by side.**

Faithfulness is living out the trust you have within you,

leaping forward into the unknown

yet all the while

remaining true to your God, your people,  
your creed, your call.

Risk is stepping out on faith into the unknown,  
trusting, daring, praying, hoping to expand your reach,  
your influence, relationships, territory, resources,  
love.

Both faithfulness and risk beckon us beyond the familiar  
and into the new, into unexplored territories  
where we discover that God has already gone,  
and is there now,  
beckoning for us to follow in  
Christ's footsteps.

Faithfulness and risk walk side by side.

When Jesus Christ calls to us,

He beckons us beyond the point of familiarity.

Christ asks us to risk doing something we don't know how to do;

to become someone

we are not yet sure we know how to be.

There is more going on here than our taking a risk following Jesus'  
call;

each and every time He calls us to follow,

He is taking a risk on us.

Our God is a God of new beginnings,

continually inviting us to follow in Jesus' path

on the way to new attachments and new adventures.

The prophet Isaiah spoke to the people of Israel,

gently reminding them of their journey

from where they had once been

to where they were

and to whence they might go.

Isaiah said, *"There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish.*

*In the former time he brought into contempt*

*the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,*

*but in the latter time*

*he will make glorious the way of the sea,*

*the land beyond the Jordan,  
Galilee of the nations.*

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;*

*those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.*

*You have multiplied the nation,*

*you have increased its joy;*

*they rejoice before you as with joy at the  
harvest...*

*For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their  
shoulders,*

*the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on  
the day of Midian.”*

You see, once upon a time you were mad,

for you were oppressed and cast off.

Then you grew sad,

for you walked in a deep darkness, with despair and no  
hope.

Praise God, you became glad,

for your joy increased when God saved you, redeeming all.

And then, my people, you got seriously rad,

radical in the eyes of the world,

building a faith community that shines like a great  
light.

### **Mad, Sad, Glad, Rad**

These are feelings and thoughts that we tend to share,

each of us on a fairly regular basis.

We are going to make the time and effort right now in this sacred  
space

to apply the wisdom of God's servant Isaiah  
to where we are as a Christian congregation,  
one planted here on a hill at Ponce and  
Nelson Ferry,  
here at the intersection of faith and  
reason,

### **Mad, Sad, Glad, Rad**

Couple funny cartoons in the New Yorker recently.

A teenager at lunch in the school cafeteria is looking at his cell phone and saying,

*"I want to make my mark on the world – and have it disappear in ten seconds."*

Another shows an office worker at a laptop slowly fading into digital blurriness.

A colleague turns to a collie dog and says, *"Quick, Lassie, go get I.T.!"*

The one that really demands attention shows two boxes side by side.

In the first box are three small people standing in a field apart from one another.

The heading reads: *"How much everyone got upset in real life."*

In the second box, the image is completely covered with faces that are visibly angry.

The heading reads: *“How much everyone gets upset on the internet.”*

Paul Appleby and I were talking a while back

about why folks seem so mad on the internet.

I told him how church members send me links of good articles to read,

and after I do so, I scroll down and read the comments posted below.

Are you like me, finding it unbelievable

how much vitriolic anger is dumped on neighbors by neighbors.

Paul Appleby said it’s akin to what happens

when someone picks their nose while driving.

Nose pickers think that since they are alone in the car no one can see,

but the fact is they are in a small room with six big windows in public space.

Same with internet anger.

Folks think that since they are alone in their home or office or coffee shop

they can release their anger out on the world,

and all the while not be seen, not be held accountable,

not be held to the standards of life in

community,

the gold standards of common courtesy and  
Judeo-Christian love.

The little cartoon in the New Yorker

is a gentle yet prophetic reminder

that when we talk with each other face-to-face,

walk side by side, live and serve in  
community,

then being really, truly mad

will be more the exception  
than the rule

because we will work  
it out, talk it through,

and then, with  
the help of God,

forgive  
and forget.

If I was a gambling man than I would lay good odds

that if you took a spiritual inventory of your life

of all the times and experiences that made you  
really mad,

more often than not you would come to the  
conclusion

they were caused by  
misunderstandings.

Being mad has caused more loss than gain.

Would you rather have back the relationship or your pride?

Do you want to be right or do you want to be reconciled?

### **Mad, Sad, Glad, Rad**

What you are about to hear is not a happy story.

However, it's one that needs to be shared so we may glean whatever lesson we can.

Bethany Christian Church in Jackson, Tennessee called me to serve as Pastor in 1992.

Our family stepped out on faith and took a risk, for the church was dying.

Regional Minister Richard Hamm had pulled me aside  
and said I would either help grow it or close it.

Our first Sunday there

the worshipping congregation included a grand total

of 11 members, 4 visitors, and 3 Brewer-Calverts

(Katie would make her first appearance in  
two years!).

Long story short, within 5 years we had quadrupled in size to 65  
souls,

become interracial, open and accepting, built a playground,

made a splash in the local news (did you expect



anything less?!),

and had a vital children's and young adult  
ministry.

One Sunday morning my son Henry, 4, and I were driving to  
church

when he said, "Daddy, Sunday is my favorite day of the  
week."

"Oh, son, that is great. Is it because Sunday is when we go  
to church to worship God?"

"No, Daddy, it's the day we get to watch the Dallas  
Cowboys!"

Our young women admired the Christian Women's Fellowship,

and asked their blessing to start a new CWF Circle.

Under Betty's spiritual guidance they met regularly for prayer and  
study.

After several months they asked if they might host a church  
fellowship meal,

which until then had always been coordinated by the  
established CWF Circle.

Permission was granted.

Sunday came and the church broke bread in worship and then  
afterward at the meal.

Everything seemed quite lovely and delicious.

Until the criticism hit home.

The new Circle was informed by their seniors

that they had not used the proper serving utensils.

The decorations were too bright.

The menu was not what was normally served. Maybe you're not quite ready.

The older CWF Circle felt justified, thinking it was their place to educate and rear.

The younger CWF Circle felt hurt, thinking that they had done their best.

Here is the really sad part.

The younger women never met again as a Circle.

They were done; the air had gone out of their sails.

Joy for evangelism and church growth ebbed.

Why invite friends into the fold if permission to serve is granted with strings attached?

In 1998, sixteen years ago next month,

Betty and I moved our family of four to Decatur to serve here,

alongside you, in this amazing journey of faithfulness and risk taking.

Within three years Bethany Christian Church closed her doors for the last time.

Even though Bethany officially closed around 2001,

she really died the spring weekend

when the hearts of younger, newer, up-and-coming

servant leaders

were crushed by well-meaning Christians

who could not resist the temptation  
to correct.

### **Mad, Sad, Glad, Rad**

Let the church learn some lessons on how to turn sadness to  
gladness.

Let the new butterfly stretch and stumble and stall as it  
prepares to soar.

Toddlers fall again and again as they learn to walk,  
and learn they do.

Anyone studying a new language will make  
ridiculous mistakes,

and that is part of the fun and the joy.

So be glad!

Be glad that God has put upon the heart of an almost-80 year old  
Elizabeth Hamm

to be a catalyst for church growth and transitions and new  
beginnings.

She is filled with a new passion and purpose.

For once she isn't our bookkeeper; she is our new door opener,

and by golly she is going have a new door to make this  
building

more handicap accessible if it's the last thing she  
does!

Be glad that the Holy Spirit has given a young architect named  
Doug Schuette

a sense of vision and the courage to be a servant leader of a  
church he loves.

Be glad that we have such a solid foundation of members and  
friends

who know their Bible, know where the skeletons are  
buried,

and know how to prepare and serve the Lord's  
Supper.

Be glad that God has sent – and is sending -- beautiful souls into  
this congregation

to serve and sing, to love and laugh. No one joins a church  
to go to meetings.

Our newest members and friends know that this is a  
missioning church,

and want to participate.

Be glad we acknowledge as a Body of Christ

that while not every change is an improvement, every  
improvement is a change.

Be glad that we already have the three tools necessary  
to do what is essential for positive spiritual and communal  
growth:

*Faithfulness. Courage to risk. Communication.*

Trust in God and in one another and in yourself.

Dare to try something new, and support those who do.

Keep lines of communication open at all times.

There is one thing I insist we hold fast to: we are a transparent  
church!

Let's keep it that way.

I am so excited;

I cannot wait to see whom the Lord is sending next.

I can't wait to see how God is going to use us and mold  
us.

I am eager to see what we will discover around the  
corner. *How about you?*

Be glad and rejoice, even if things are not done the way you would  
have preferred.

The next thing I say has one finger pointed out and four pointed  
back at me:

Choose to criticize and critique and correct if you must,

but don't you dare complain about being tired or  
overburdened

because you chased off the ones the Holy Spirit sent to help and heal.

Please remind us of the seven last words of a dying church.

All together now: *“We’ve never done it that way before.”*

Fred Craddock says sometimes all that is left in a dying church is akin to the brown stain that remains in a cooking pan.

When we got to Bethany Christian Church in ‘92, the 11 members were the ones who had run everyone else off.

They were there nine years later to close the doors, as well.

Be glad! We have come so far, with the help of God.

I could share how many victories we have already accomplished, great and mighty.

When I shared this message with my mother, Buffy Calvert, and said I was going to celebrate our major wins, she advised we rejoice in the smaller, more intimate moments of grace.

Be glad, and show your gladness with words of affirmation, with compliments and offers to assist and aid.

Be glad, and continue to offer your valuable resources and

treasure,

your fantastic talents and precious time...

...even if you don't like everything that is  
happening or the way it's done.

This is a tough one for many of us.

Do it, anyway.

Take a risk.

We'll find our way together, stepping out to walk side by side,

with confidence that we are following Christ's path of  
faithfulness and risk.

### **Mad, Sad, Glad, Rad**

When Jesus Christ calls to us,

He beckons us beyond the point of familiarity.

Christ asks us to risk doing something we don't know how to do;

to become someone we are not yet sure we know how to  
be.

Jesus Christ is provocative, daring, radical even.

The root of radical means roots.

The closer we get to our roots,

who and whose we are,

the more radical we appear in the eyes of our  
culture.

And yet what we have going and growing here in this congregation  
is exactly what our neighbors crave,  
deep down where it counts the most.

Life affirming relationships.

Fun and fellowship, faith and fantastic food.

Service above self.

Breaking bread together, agreeing to differ, uniting to serve,  
resolving to love.

And at the heart of the matter,

following Jesus on the way to the Cross and the Crown.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*

Extra Worship Resources:

Call to Offering

They say that a research firm that specialized in testing wind tunnels was undergoing budget cuts after losing a major contract. An unofficial memo was posted on the refrigerator in the firm's staff kitchen, saying, "Because of budget cuts, the light at the end of the tunnel will be turned off."

We may smile at the attempt of humor in desperate



situations; the Church must often choose to sing with joy and hope in times of fiscal stress. Our stewardship reflects our faith that God's light shall never be turned off. Christians who shine are reflecting divine light. Such living with joy and hope is contagious. The best part of living in the light of Christ is that we can't keep it in. We are light to more people than we give ourselves credit for. And that is a true story, one worthy of our tithes.

### Prayer for Offering

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” (Psalm 27:1) Lord, we give to you all that we have and are. We offer our tithes as an outward sign of our inner gratitude for your presence. You are our light and salvation, and our fear is overcome. Amen!

### Call to Communion

Faithfulness and risk walk hand in hand. When Jesus Christ calls to us, He beckons us beyond the point of familiarity. Christ asks us to risk doing something we don't know how to do; to become someone we are not yet sure we know how to be. There is more going on here than our taking a risk following Jesus' call; each and every time He calls us to follow, He is taking a risk on us. Our God is a God of new beginnings, continually inviting us to follow in Jesus' path on the way to new attachments and new adventures.

### Benediction

You are the reflected light of Christ more often than you think. You are brighter than you know. Your shining glow is seen

from a greater distance than you imagine. Go forth  
encouraged. Shine!

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*"The place God calls you to is where your deepest gladness and the world's  
deep hunger meet." -- Frederick Buechner*