

From Everlasting to Everlasting (145th Anniv)

2 Peter 3:2-4, 8-13

July 31, 2022

First Presbyterian, Luling

Well, happy birthday to us! I'm delighted that we are here today, by various means, to witness to God's faithfulness for 145 years here at First Presbyterian Church in Luling. We're honored by the presence of our guests, and what a joy it is to gather in a spirit of celebration.

One hundred and forty five years seems like a long time. In 1877, this congregation was organized by the Presbytery of West Texas with fourteen members—twelve women and two men. In 1877, the Civil War was a dozen years in the past, and the era of Reconstruction was coming to a close. On the frontiers of Texas and throughout the Plains, the U.S. military fought with Native Americans in battle after battle. The railroad had reached Luling a few years before, but oil had not yet been discovered. I'm sure there was someone growing watermelons and smoking briskets, but they weren't recorded in the history books. In 1882, the oldest parts of this church sanctuary were constructed, and faithful church members tended it and added to it over the years. That all seems like a long time ago.

What those first 14 members might think of us today! I imagine they would be quite surprised to find me, standing here in this pulpit. And they would have no way to begin to comprehend that you are joining us on zoom and on your phones from the comfort of your own homes.

145 years *is* a long time. We celebrate a significant milestone today. But 145 years isn't very long at all. Second Peter reminds us that a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day, in God's time. That echoes the Psalmist, which we read in the call to worship: a thousand ages in God's sight are like yesterday, or like a few hours in the night. God's perspective of time is one of eternity. Our perspective of time tends to over emphasize the significance of our own place in history. We humans tend to be a tiny bit self-centered, after all. God's faithfulness began before us, before our generation, before anyone our generation can remember, before this congregation, before anything at all. And God's faithfulness will last beyond us, beyond anyone who will be able to remember us, beyond all of everything.

This is the focus of our Second Peter reading: when the day of the Lord arrives, when Jesus returns, there will be a new heavens and a new earth, where

righteousness is at home. In the meantime, God is patiently waiting for us to get with the program, and live with holiness and godliness. When those new heavens and new earth arrive, everything else will be dissolved away. Yet God will remain. God's faithfulness endures. From everlasting to everlasting, God is God. Everlasting began before the beginning and will last after the end. A thousand years, a day, it doesn't really matter how we mark time, because our human measures cannot capture God's steadfast love. God's faithfulness remains.

As you know, I've lived and preached and traveled in lots of towns around here. I can't say this is true of every single town I've been in, but it's true of a whole bunch, around Luling's size, give or take. In several places in town, there will be a tree in the smack dab middle of the street. Not a major street, mostly residential ones. In towns like Luling, where the oldest parts of town are laid out in a grid pattern, there will be a large tree in the middle of the road. Almost always a live oak, which isn't surprising here. Most, but not all, have warning signs in front of them—those up and down rectangular signs with diagonal black and yellow stripes. Warning! There's a tree in the middle of the road! Don't hit it!

I've been thinking about these trees. Some of you are chuckling on the inside, I know. She can make a sermon out of literally anything. But I really have been considering these middle of the road trees. Before the roads were paved, it's easy to see how a tree might become established in the middle of a dirt road. People just steered their horses, buggies, and wagons around it. The church history says Pecan Avenue out there was paved in 1925, by the way. And before there was air conditioning, it's easy to see why a tree's shade would be valuable. Even now, anyone who's ever parked in a shady spot rather than a spot closer to the store can tell you that a tree's shade is worth preserving. Trees are important. I like trees. But these trees in the middle of the road.

At some point, someone made a conscious decision to leave the tree in the middle of the street. I would imagine when the road was first paved would be time when that decision was consciously made. From then on, that decision got renewed. Maybe the street was widened. Or curbs and sidewalks were added. The trees remained. The trees grew. Their roots start buckling the pavement at the same time their shade begins to cover the whole width of the street. Someone keeps paving around the trees. Of course, we only see the trees that people kept. Any number of trees were cut down, especially for major thoroughfares. But these trees we do see are still here because people have decided, over and over, that they're worth keeping. The trees are undeniably in the way. But they are valuable, too. Those who have come before us have passed

along that value judgment, that the trees' value outweighs the inconvenience of swerving around them.

There are pieces of our own history that are trees in the middle of the road. Things that appear inconvenient or out of place, yet earlier generations have preserved them. It's worth noticing those things, as we take stock and seek to serve God faithfully here now and into the future. It's worth noticing them, evaluating them, giving weight to our ancestors' decisions to preserve them. It's good to measure if they're still worthy of being right in the middle of the road, too. Or if they have become obstacles that we can no longer maneuver around, or even have become dangerous.

Whatever those metaphorical trees in the middle of the street may be for us, they aren't insurmountable obstacles, because God is with us. Nor are they worth our unexamined devotion, because they are trees, not God. From everlasting to everlasting, the Lord is God. Trees in the road, we ourselves, generations before and after us, individual churches will all pass away, but God and God's faithfulness, and God's church, endures and abides.

One of the most intriguing parts of our church's history to me is not well documented in the written pieces that we have. From 1917 to 1923, the church was closed. Why was it closed? Was it World War 1 related? Flu epidemic? No preachers? No congregation? What happened that the Session, or maybe the Presbytery, decided that the church would close? I don't know. Nobody wrote that down, at least that we still have available. We do know why it was re-opened in 1923. That year, the Synod of Texas made a push to open all Presbyterian churches in Texas. The pastor from Lockhart came a couple Sundays a month that year.

For those six years, I know that some faithful people must have missed this church horribly. We know how we felt in 2020 and into 2021, and their absence from church would have felt more permanent. When the Sunday school re-opened in 1923, there were only four people present. I imagine those four must have been folks who grieved when the church closed. I'm inventing stuff now, but I imagine they must have prayed that the church could open again someday.

From everlasting to everlasting, God is God. God was here before we got here. God was at work before this church came into being, before minutes were written, before records were kept. God was doing God's mission here. God has worked through this congregation, when we were faithful and when we were not, when we were bursting at the seams, and when only two or three were gathered in Christ's name. God will continue to be at work here, because God is from

everlasting to everlasting. Thanks be to God. Amen.