



Thriving in an Era of Uncertainty

In his book *The Sky is Falling*, Alan Roxburgh writes these words . . .

“Uncertainty is the tenor of the times – it permeates our work, our families, and the very nature of our relationships with one another. Furthermore, over the past decade or so, there has been a massive erosion of confidence in the major institutions that gave twentieth century North America its sense of stability and permanence. People’s confidence in government, medicine, education, law, business, and religion as sources of trust, truth, and honesty is very low. The pillars upon which we built our social systems are now deeply suspect. In place of confidence, there has emerged a broad, chronic sense of uncertainty.

“At all levels, across a spectrum of roles, leaders find themselves in a strange, new, precarious location. Some people feel this uncertainty as loss – increasing numbers of them are turning to home schooling, gated communities, or “traditional values” in efforts to fend off the uncertainty and deal with a world that feels increasingly scary. They seem to want to retreat, build walls, and defend at all costs. At the same time, other people deal with the uncertainty and alienation by deconstructing our foundational institutions, including the church, hoping they can construct something more relevant to life around them from the rubble. They distance themselves from the immediate past, viewing it as unworthy of their trust. For them, it is not about where we have been, but where we might go. Their battle cry is to advance, deconstruct whatever might get in their way in the process, and hopefully discover a land of promise just over the horizon.

“How does one name this place of uneasiness we find ourselves in today? It is the world of transition . . . The imagination for living as God’s people in our time comes from two places: first, the Biblical narratives that form the fundamental story of Christian life; and second, the concrete realities of living in the midst of today’s church. The one cannot be separated from the other. Each is critical for the development of an imaginative engagement with our context.

“This is not about trying to recapture some past moment, but neither is it about trying to define some radical future. Neither option takes the church seriously as it is. Both want,

in their different ways, to deny the present fact of the church as it finds itself lying in confusion amidst North American culture. The cisterns are empty and there is no water, despite any contemporary Hananiah promising that in just a short time everything will be right again. Hope for the church is not found in methods of retaking the culture and remaking Christian life, nor in adapting the church to match some form of postmodern life; it is found in a readiness to live in the midst of a church that languishes where there are few answers but the possibility of again hearing God's word as it directly addresses us today. The book of Jeremiah addresses just such a time of transition as the one we live in and offers rich resources for discerning the ways we can engage our time of discontinuity and change.

“Despite our apprehensions and confusion, the church can learn to live and thrive in the midst of this transition period. Biblical narratives such as Jeremiah provide a way of hope that will seem counterintuitive . . .

“In the Biblical accounts, exile was a hopeful moment in Israel's life. Hosea used the metaphor of the desert and exile as a symbol of God acting like a lover, intent upon wooing and winning back a love that had turned to others for solace and satisfaction. Exile is a symbol of God's gracious preparation, not God's abandonment! Babylon was the place in which Israelites had to fundamentally rethink their understanding of God and the tradition they had taken for granted. Only out of this long process would a new imagination – a new identity as God's people – begin to emerge. The Babylonian Exile was Israel's period of transition.”

I think these are important words for us to consider. I believe they describe where many congregations are today, and how many people are feeling about our denomination and our General Assembly. We live in a time of great uncertainty. We live in a time of massive, discontinuous change. We live in a time where trust is low. We know that anyone who promises us a quick fix and some easy answers can't possibly be telling the truth.

We live in an era of uncertainty. The old has passed away. The new is coming. And we are living in between. It's not a comfortable place to live, but it is where we are. We can't go back to the past, and we can't create a radical new tomorrow. But, we can learn to live and thrive in the midst of the confusion of today. We must re-enter the stories of the scriptures in light of our present realities. Out of this wrestling will emerge a new identity as God's people and a new path for us to

travel. In the same way that the Israelites had to fundamentally rethink their understanding of God, so do we. Our dry wilderness is not a place where God abandons us – it is the place where God is preparing us for something new! This is not a message of discouragement, but a message of hope.

The presbytery is the best level in the church to bring congregations and their leaders together to form learning communities to understand what God is doing in this time of transition. This is the place where we share our experiences, our successes, and our failures. It is the place where we grow together. It is the place where we learn to listen and discover together how to live, minister, and move through this time. Regardless of what happened at General Assembly, and regardless of what may or may not happen in other places in our denomination, I hope you will join us in this presbytery, as we seek to discover together, how God wants us to live and thrive in this era of uncertainty.



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