

“Saving Church”

January 22, 2017

Faith in Film series – Sing

I knew that the film *Sing* would have a message for me when I saw the trailer as we were planning for this series. We’re in the season of Epiphany - this season of “a-ha!” moments when we remember that our faith in Jesus Christ isn’t static, but dynamic. Every day is a new opportunity to learn and grow in faith.

And the story of *Sing* is one we can relate to. Buster Moon is a koala facing the decline of the theater he loves and trying to figure out how to revitalize it. He’s an eternal optimist with a vision to host a singing competition that will reach new people and more people. He plans to award \$1,000 in prize money, but the flyers are misprinted to read \$100,000 instead.

Contestants come in droves from all walks of life with all different tastes in music. And the field is eventually narrowed down to five finalists: a pig, Rosita, a housewife and mother of 25 piglets – (and a resourceful engineer!); a street musician mouse named Mike; Johnny, a gorilla whose dad is a mobster; a punk-rock porcupine named Ash; and Meena, a very, very shy elephant with terrible stage fright.

To make a longer story short, Buster and the finalists form a community where they encourage one another and eventually work to save the theater. Now perhaps the story of an optimistic koala and a bunch of singers doesn’t seem to relate to the church, but it seems like we face the same situation. Saving the church is God’s business, but God uses us to serve in that effort. In the midst of statistics that tell us of decline, how do we work together to be more effective and more vital?

If the words from the prophet Isaiah sound familiar, it may be because they were the focus in worship seven months ago last June when we came together as one congregation. I didn’t preach that day, but I’m grateful that Carole Koch and Brad Hilleary did.

They looked back and celebrated. They lifted up the legacy of faithful people who had come before us and devoted their time and energy to building God’s Kingdom. They asked if we’re willing to work for a vital church where we reach out beyond these walls and follow God into the future with hope – and we continue to ask it.

They reflected on Isaiah’s words: “What matters is that we have been joined by God – right here in what seems to be a relatively prosperous, safe community, filled with promise. But right now in this very community, people are hungry, people are afraid, and there are people with no hope for any kind of future. Those are the people that God wants us to seek out. They are the ones who need a meal, who need reassurance, who need to know that there is a God who “has your back” at all times, in all situations, no matter what.”

It's a switch for us to understand that the church doesn't exist for us. Ultimately, the church exists for those who aren't here yet. Buster's problem was a theater that was failing; our struggle is to reach people in new ways. It means that we focus on hospitality - not just saying "hi," but being intentional about how we welcome, making space for people, and getting to know them. And, yes, it's important for us to learn how to do it better as a community, so I hope you'll be a part of our training next Sunday.

It means we sacrifice our own comforts for the sake of others. Friends, that means you may not like everything all the time. You may not like every song we sing. Not every sermon will grab you. You may not want to pray in a new way or with different words, or maybe media doesn't grab you. And it's okay - you don't have to like it - but I invite you to consider that someone else probably does. It may be what helps them to experience God's grace.

So it's not discomfort or change without reason or purpose. Think about it: *in this congregation, there are six generations represented*. From the G.I. Generation or Greatest Generation to Generation Z or the iGeneration (like iPhone or iPad) - from close to 100 years old to an infant. Not all of us will like the same music or respond to prayers in the same way, but it's not about us! It's about *making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world*.

We have to understand that God does not always work in the ways or in the time that we assume God will, though I have a lot of ideas for God on how God should work. God is not limited to the ways that we've experienced God in the past. I was struck by this powerful word from Geoffrey Grogan: "We are meant to reflect on the past with gratitude and stimulated faith, but not allow it to stereotype our expectations from God."

We hear that from Isaiah as he speaks to the Israelites who are in exile in Babylon. They've been away from home for two generations. Perhaps they're convinced that God doesn't care - that God has written them off! Maybe everything feels like it's falling apart. Their reality is chaos, and God is nowhere to be found.

God reminds them of the past - the first Exodus when Moses led the people by a way God made through the sea. Now, God says, there will be a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. What an image of transformation! They can have hope because God's promise is certain.

Sometimes the call to follow Jesus into the future with hope is overwhelming. It can feel like deep water and hot fire that we're in, and we struggle to feel God's presence. But God reminds us that God is our Creator. God promises redemption from the things we fear the most.

For the church, that's sometimes taking risks to do something new or serve in a new way, reaching out to people we don't know, or going into places where we've never been. God redeems us. God knows us by name. God made us for God's glory. God claims us as God's own. And God calls us to mission in God's name.

God is determined to end the exile and free them from captivity, and God wants them to expect that it will happen! God will lead them home and then they will rebuild. God is in the business of doing something new – and sometimes in very new ways!

Unfortunately, we're not always so impressed by that. We get fairly comfortable in how we do things. We long for the old days when life seemed better to us. And it's not just older folks who feel that way. I have that sense of longing, too.

But it's easy to get stuck where we are personally – living too much in the past and missing out on where God is calling us to go. And it's certainly easy to get stuck as the church. Sometimes we struggle to get past “but we've always done it this way” or “if people want to come, they'll come to us” instead of seeking God's will for us, trying to discern the deeper needs around us, and even inviting people to join us rather than waiting for them to come without an invitation!

An interesting part of the film was when the theater was totally destroyed. Buster didn't lose his optimism, but instead went back to washing cars - something his father had done for years in order to help raise money to buy the theater. Buster didn't give up, and his perseverance carried him to a new place. In the end, a benefactor named Nana sees a new thing that's happening and helps to rebuild the theater.

Saving the theater meant doing something new for Buster - thinking outside of what he had been doing. And I want to encourage us that God is the One who is always doing something new - and calling us to participate in it. God shows us new opportunities - maybe completely different things that we'd never thought to do or to risk or to try.

I thought of that this week as I cooked a meal for Family Promise and interacted with our four guest families. That ministry was a new thing years ago when it began, and it took great faith and hope for what God was doing. Shoes for Shores has \$600 more ready to be used for shoes and boots. We have people ready to read with kids at Ross Park. And those are just a few - God doesn't stop asking us to move into God's new thing!

God who speaks through Isaiah the prophet to remind the people who are discouraged that there will never be a time when God isn't present. There will never be a time when God will not be there even as they hear a promise to return home perhaps facing the reality of crossing deserts with little water, navigating raging rivers, and bypassing wildfires. And it's a truth we claim - that through the changes or adjustments, God is present. When it seems really hard, God is with us. When we're not sure how it'll turn out, God is faithful to guide and help us.

When we make a commitment to be a member of the local church, we're asked if we'll do all in our power to strengthen the church and its ministries. We're asked if we'll offer our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness - all to the glory of God and for the sake of God's mission in the world. Are we all in? Will we help God to renew the church?

One line from the film says, “Don’t let fear stop you from doing the thing you love.” If we love God and neighbor, then we can’t let fear stop us from putting that love into action. Maybe we’re afraid of change. We’d rather do our own thing than pay attention to God’s new thing. Change is good, but change is hard. We want to grow, but we don’t want to change.

I invite you to consider these questions from Tom Bandy: Do we want to be effective in carrying out the mission to make disciples? Are we prepared to stake everything, change anything, and do whatever it takes - even if it means altering long and familiar habits, redeveloping precious programs, and redeploying sacred assets?

Friends, we’re accountable to Jesus who gives us the great commandment - love God and love neighbor with all that we are. We’re called to mission - to make disciples. We can’t save the church, but God can renew us and make us more effective as we serve.

God is always doing a new thing. May we be open to join in.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.