



NOW WHAT?

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GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE,
NC

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PART 1:

Richard: Hey Marcia and Samantha, I have been meaning to ask you. What is this whole “*now what?*” theme all about. I mean, you made this decision before my time. What were you thinking?

Marcia: Well, Richard. We thought long and hard about this theme. Several months ago, we were dreaming about the fall and we had this beautiful vision--construction all done--new bathrooms and showers, a bright and shiny new kitchen all ready for GCPC to serve our community, and we’d have a full staff. So everything would be in place--it was a question of excitement--we’re all dressed up and ready to go.

Samantha and Marcia: Now what?

Richard: Hmm...so obviously things have a changed a bit. I mean people are still hammering away and we are not exactly a full staff. We have openings for a children’s director and a sexton. It feels more like: “Now What....?” Why even keep the theme?

Marcia: So the whole “Now What?” thing is more complicated than we thought it would be. This isn’t the first time I’ve had to learn that God’s timing is not often our timing. I am sure you know what I mean. With all that is going on in our world and in our lives, we’ve all turned to God at some point and asked, “Now What?” It can be a fed up kind of exasperation. It can be a bewildered kind of disbelief. It can be lament, it can be anticipation, it can even be celebration.

Richard: Yeah.... and come to think of it, we do come from a long line of ancestors in the faith who asked “Now What?” over and over again. Maybe, in order to really understand it, we should listen to those who asked it long ago. Samantha,

Richard & Marcia: now what?

Sam’s Portion 1

I wonder what the Israelites were thinking...

After five hundred years of brutal slavery at the hands of the Egyptians

After ten astounding plagues sent by God to free them

After one long journey across dry land –in the midst of a red sea divided

They must have felt astounded, flabbergasted, overjoyed, even afraid.

God was revealing God’s wonders in some unimaginable ways

And as the Egyptian captors were drowned in the sea with their chariots and horses
The Israelites watched from their safe perch. Some wondered,
Was this the only way for God to free us?
Why did so many have to suffer?
Why did it take so long for us to get to this point?
What's to become of us now?
Now what?

While others among them may have sighed with relief –
throwing themselves into the desert sand,
Shouting, “We are safe, we are free, Now what?!”
And still others lifted their eyes and arms to the heavens
Praising God for such faithfulness and preparing for the road ahead: “Now What?”
Miriam picked up her tambourine and danced with the women
Moses wrapped his arms around friends and they sang together in full voice:
“The LORD is my strength and my might,
and God has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise the Lord,”
With so many tears behind them, and so much uncertainty before them,
they stopped to breathe in the gift of life and celebrate the God who had set them free.
This was a complex, “Now What?” celebration song:
– a celebration in the midst of chaos – a celebration in the midst of the unknown.
Singing these songs would not erase the years of brutality that they had experienced.
Dancing for God did not mean that the desert journey would become less treacherous.
They celebrated having survived together as one people of God
They celebrated their need for one another moving forward.
They celebrated the Lord who had not and would not abandon them.
They celebrated who they were and *trusted* in wherever they were going.
And yet in the midst of their joyful songs, surely many struggled with all the pain that
God had just inflicted on their Egyptian captors. *Was justice nothing more than an eye
for an eye?*

The ancient Talmudic rabbis write that as the Israelites sang praises to God, the Lord
cried out to them, “*How can you sing as the works of my hand are drowning in the sea?*”
For God too, this was a complex celebration.
A celebration ripe with mourning and torment.
A woeful Now What? moment.
Just as the Israelites needed their God to set them free and promise to be with them
moving forward,
so too did God need God’s people:
to comfort Her in the midst of agonizing loss,
and to celebrate with Her in the midst of miraculous freedom,
and to promise to walk with Her into the unknown - welcoming in a new beginning.

Now what?
For our mothers and fathers of faith,
asking this question meant holding one another and God even closer.

Now what?

From these words emerged a new song - a song of trust in the Lord
- a song of hope in wherever the journey would lead.

Now what?

This was to be kept in their memories - passed down through generations.
This celebrated their God-given capacity to make new life and vibrant music together in
the desert.

SONG:

O sing to the Lord, oh, sing God a new song.

O sing to the Lord, oh, sing God a new song.

O sing to the Lord, oh, sing God a new song.

All: O sing to our God, o sing to our God.

RICHARD - Part 2

SITUATION SET UP:

Samantha: You know, we have been practicing that song all week, and I still can't get
that melody quite right. I keep waiting for it to feel right, and it just never does.

Richard: Really? I thought I sounded great!

Samantha: I wonder if our foremothers had perfect pitch?

Marcia: People have been singing in response to this question 'Now What?' for a long
time. The Israelites were celebrating God, even before they reached the promised land.
Why are we reluctant to ask it?

Samantha: Sometimes we just want to tie it altogether. It's hard to finally feel ready in
times of transition, when there's more to be done.

Marcia: I guess the question is, do we have what it takes to keep singing that song, even
before we have arrived? Even when there's still construction!

Samantha: What does it take to keep singing that song? Richard,

Marcia and Samantha: Now what?

Now what? Do you ever think about your skeleton, the bones that are inside you right
now, the bones that keep us upright, that hold each of us from the inside? The poet
Jane Hirshfield writes to her skeleton: "My skeleton....what did I know of your days, /
your nights, / I who held you all my life / inside my hands / and thought they were
empty. / You who held me all your life / in your hands / as a new mother holds / her
own unblanketed child, / not thinking at all." We are held, every moment, by these
bones within us, these calcified, hardened things, but they also change, right? They need
nourishment; they need care. They were here all along, they are here, but we notice
them only when they ache; when they break; as we grow and grow old. Otherwise, here
they are, just given to us. Our bones, they are us; they are grace.

Now what? How do we keep asking that question to ourselves today? Well, let's back up a bit: What brought you here today? What brought Grace Covenant together many years ago? What does it mean to keep going, to keep doing church? We all feel weary sometimes, even pastors. You can sit in the pew and feel incomplete, not yet arrived, not ready. It can feel like we never arrive. But we keep going. We keep asking "Now what?" And in the middle of the question: We Sing!

It's like, within us, within the decision to walk out the door, to open ourselves to the vulnerability of community, there's this song, a faith song sung by mothers and fathers of the faith, handed down generation to generation, or between friends, or in the mercy of strangers. It is a song of people searching for God, searching, crying out in the desert. And sometimes, all the time, it's also a song that God sings back to us, in moments of prayer, in quiet transcendence, in the movement of the Spirit that does not leave us no matter how long the road. This faith, this tradition, these songs sung over and over again by saints long forgotten -- they are here too, around us, in us, these songs, the faithful, in all their complexity, their laments and celebrations; their questions and uncertainty. This too is grace. Look at us all, given this thing we call church, that we call tradition, full of histories of love, and struggle, striving and trying. It's a history of people reaching out to a God who ever always draws near and reaches out to us. Feel this spirit that binds us, that holds us upright, that gathers us just as the skeleton gathers the flesh. It holds us upright even when we are weary, when we aren't ready, in the waiting.

This is grace of God. This is who we are. So Paul says, "we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord." The Israelites were not at the finish line. They were just starting. The church in Rome too. The tradition itself is one of people who were not ready, and they sang to the Lord anyway. May their songs carry us; may they draw us closer to our God. To the Lord, who binds us together, for all the messy, grace filled moments, the hallelujahs, the cries of lament, in the growing pains of the here and now, holding us on the shores of the Red Sea. - Now what? Every song we sing is an echo of those sung by generations past. They are in our bones. They are our bones.

SONG:

For God is the Lord, and God has done wonders.

For God is the Lord, and God has done wonders.

For God is the Lord, and God has done wonders.

All: Oh sing to our God, oh, sing to our God.

Marcia - Part 3

SITUATION SET UP:

Samantha: But how do we make an old song, our song?

Richard: Ok, I get it, I'm not a great singer! I'm not ready for my solo!

Samantha: Calm down Richard. Sometimes the song strikes a minor key--or we're not all in harmony, and sometimes God calls us to improvise.

Richard: That sounds beautiful and interesting. And really hard and maybe even a little scary. Marcia,

Samantha and Richard: Now what?

Jesus was the best improviser the world has ever seen! He could be fully present when people were suffering mightily. He could speak truth to power. He could speak words of comfort in the middle of his public execution. He could see what people needed with compassion. And he even listened closely enough to change his mind about things a few times.

Making Miriam's song our own isn't something we figure out alone. We learn how to make life and love where we are as Christians with Jesus' help. Far from an artifact of the past, or simply a memory, the Christian faith is a living, breathing, flesh, and blood way of being in the world today. And such an all encompassing faith calls into a community of believers--hungry to grow stronger in our trust in God, thirsty for the freedom that Jesus tells us is ours.

Look around—we are those people—those followers of Jesus who God has gathered in here at 789 Merrimon Avenue—we are the heirs of that song in the wilderness; we are the flesh on the bones of the Body of Christ.

Paul's letter to the church in Rome is the early church's "Now What."

The mutual forbearance that Paul teaches us is not an exemption from courage; it is a metric for the integrity of our faith. Our unity in Christ is what emboldens and humbles us to be together with a song in our hearts when it is uncomfortable, when we see things differently, when we are not sure what's next.

Mutual forbearance is alive and well in the ways this faith community is engaging the crucial question of our involvement in the Sanctuary movement. From learning Spanish to learning more about immigration issues, from engaging with other churches considering being Sanctuary to doing anti-racism work, from working with ministry partners who serve people on the margins to examining our consciences for what sanctuary does or does not mean for us as people of faith, this family of faith is discerning at every level of who we are about how God is calling us to be Sanctuary. It may feel sometimes like we are waiting, that we're not quite ready or not quite sure

how, but Sanctuary is happening in our midst even now--in the ways we are learning and relearning how to be together, in the impulse to make life and love from where we are now.

God abides in flesh and blood moments and redemption and resurrection emerge in the most unlikely ways, in places we thought impossible, in spaces where we had forgotten to notice.

So our bathrooms aren't done, and our kitchen is an empty shell and there is construction dust and unfinished business all around us. Even so, as Hurricane Irma moved inland last week your Session voted to partner with Beloved House and provide shelter here during the storm. This congregation stepped up with a remarkable abundance of volunteers, food, and supplies. Eleven guests rested, ate and created art and community, talked about what it's like to live on the streets, and here, in this still-a-work-in-progress space, our guests sang and invited us to sing with them.

God blew through here in a mighty wind--and whispered to us again about who we can be--a Sanctuary for those who are looking for a place to trust, a place to rest and get fed, a place where people can be themselves and not look over their shoulders and be afraid of cruelty, judgment, or harm. People like you and me, like our eleven guests, like Miriam and Paul, people who are hungry and thirsty to see God's wonders in our midst.

And that is the song we sing--a song of trust in the God who knows what we can do and what we need, who knows we can be trustworthy and we are vulnerable, who knows we are all both strong and weak, who knows we can be transformed.

"Now what?" is a profession of faith for people who know God abides in the question marks of life.

God shows up--the Spirit blows through, Christ's healing takes hold in the "Now What" that stirs us to sing like Miriam did--in an unfinished place surrounded by work-in-progress children of God. We can trust the "Now What," Grace Covenant, because Christ's Body is living, breathing, and singing right here, right now.

SONG:

So dance for our God and blow all the trumpets.

So dance for our God and blow all the trumpets.

So dance for our God and blow all the trumpets,

All: Oh sing to our God, oh, sing to our God.

Conclusion

Richard: So...."Now What" really IS the question we *should* be asking.

Sam: It's the song we *should* be singing - right now.

Marcia: The dream of who GCPC can be is what makes "Now What?" our question.

Sam: A long time ago it was a new song.

Richard: And it's been sung and sung again and again - it has been a lullaby, a battle cry, a song of celebration.

Marcia: And now it's our song to sing--may it ring out with the good news of how far we've come and the promise of all that lies ahead.

(Tamborine and then Jeff comes in right away)

SONG:

ALL: O sing to the Lord, oh, sing God a new song.

O sing to the Lord, oh, sing God a new song.

O sing to the Lord, oh, sing God a new song.

O sing to our God, o sing to our God.

For God is the Lord, and God has done wonders.

For God is the Lord, and God has done wonders.

For God is the Lord, and God has done wonders.

Oh sing to our God, oh, sing to our God.

So dance for our God and blow all the trumpets.

So dance for our God and blow all the trumpets.

So dance for our God and blow all the trumpets,

and sing to our God, and sing to our God.

O shout to our God, who gave us the Spirit,

O shout to our God, who gave us the Spirit,

O shout to our God, who gave us the Spirit,

O sing to our God, O sing to our God.

For Jesus is the Lord! Amen! Alleluia!

For Jesus is the Lord! Amen! Alleluia!

For Jesus is the Lord! Amen! Alleluia!

Oh, sing to our God, Oh sing to our God.