

*“Olly! Olly! Oxen Free” – Isaiah 40: 1-11, Mark 1: 1-8*

Most of you know our grandsons, Alex and Gabe. While they are not here as often as they once were, they still float through from time to time. Alex is now six, and in first grade. Gabe is three. The boys really love each other, they spend a lot of time together, and they truly are best buddies.

One of Alex’s favorite games continues to be hide and seek. When Alex was three, we played a three-year-old version of hide and seek. Now that he is six, so now we have to play *the right way*, which means, *Alex’s way*. The problem is, sometimes Gabe wants to play, and he is, as I said, three. He doesn’t stay hidden. He wants to hide with Alex, and giggle, and he always in Alex’s words, *ruins the game*. Alex doesn’t remember when he was three, and played like Gabe, so sometimes he doesn’t want Gabe to play.

While I am very sympathetic to Alex’s frustration and feel his pain, I try to explain that Gabe doesn’t know better, and that he is trying his best. I tell him what matters is that we are playing together, and that our job, is to teach Gabe how to play, to prepare him, and help him learn. I remind Alex that Gabe is getting better at playing the game, and that the more he plays, the better he will become. Alex has a pretty good understanding of the future, so I try to tell him that letting Gabe play now will make future games better. Sometimes Alex understands, and sometimes he doesn’t.

Both scriptures referenced above focus on the importance of preparing, of getting ready for God coming into our lives and life together. This time of the year this message is heard, by most, as getting ready for Christmas, be it the religious, the secular or both. The truth is, the message’s focus goes beyond Christmas. It is about the future, our moving forward with God into what can and often times is the unknown. This message is also about change, and our learning how to live with change, and all that it brings.

Commented [E1]:

Isaiah highlights this by stating that everything changes, except *the word of our God which stands forever*. Change is never easy, but Isaiah’s words, *though the grass withers and the flower fades, the word of God stands forever* means God will still lead us through the changes, as God, comforts us in the midst of the unknown, strengthens us in a time of uncertainty, and is a presence and light in the midst of the darkness; because just like in the game of *Hide and Seek*, the desire is for the hiding, or the lost, to be found. God’s desire is to find us and lead us through. Our role, is to prepare to be lead, trusting that God is present in the changes.

Our desire, as a congregation, is to grow. This means we not only want more people among us, we also want to know God more fully and completely. The scriptures are clear, this won’t happen until or unless we repent, that is, change, and prepare differently. Until we become more open, and let go of our desire to stand on ceremony, tradition, and the same old, same old, growth won’t happen.

This is because those we seek to welcome in may not be comfortable with what we have always done. They see the world differently. Many did not grow up in the church. They don’t know and appreciate our traditions and rituals. That is the reality in which we are operating. We also need to remember that just like a six-year-old who doesn’t remember what it is like to be three, we can forget how difficult and challenging it is to enter a community where everyone already knows the rules and how to play the game, especially when you don’t.

God’s word is not revealed in only one way. It comes in the many ways people experience hope, grace, love, forgiveness, welcoming, inclusion and graciousness. As we answer the call to prepare, we need to be open to God’s grace, as it guides us through the changes and transition that are necessary for growth.

We have all experienced a time when in playing *Hide and Seek*, the seeker gave up, either because we were too good a hider, or they just stopped looking. When this happens, the seeker shouts *Olly! Olly! Oxen Free*, which means, those who have been in hiding are welcome to come out of hiding because, *the rules have changed. Everybody is welcome to come out into the open without penalty, play again.*

As we venture forth in faith into this new calendar year, how willing are we, as individuals and as a community, to proclaim, in word and deed, *Olly! Olly! Oxen Free! Come out, come in and join us!*

Peace,

Pastor Eric