

Romans 12:1-8  
Isaiah 43:16-21  
Frank Mansell's Installation at  
Western Boulevard Presbyterian, Raleigh, NC  
30 January 2022

I am honored to be here and appreciate Frank inviting me and you from Western Boulevard and New Hope Presbytery welcoming me. I bring greetings from Highland Presbyterian in Winston-Salem and from Salem Presbytery which have been home for my husband, Rev. Glenn Otterbacher, and myself since we moved to Winston in 2004.

I am delighted to be able to celebrate Frank in this way. Frank and my paths have followed similar trajectories. We both grew up as PPKs, Presbyterian Preacher's Kids; we went to Davidson two years apart; there we were both active in Westminster Fellowship and Davidson College Presbyterian Church, both studied at the University of Glasgow during our junior years; and then we both headed to Princeton for seminary. Frank and Debbie were married at First Presbyterian in Martinsville, IN where my grandfather had served when Debbie was growing up. I was serving in my first call in Urbana, IL when Frank and Debbie moved down the road to serve John Knox Presbyterian in Indianapolis.

Frank gave me permission to tell stories about him – but if I did that, then he might feel free to tell stories about me! 😊 What I will tell you about Frank – and you at Western Boulevard have already been learning – is what I know about who Frank is. Frank is a person of deep faith who has a strong sense of God's love and justice and God's hopes for our world. Frank is devoted to his family – his family by birth and through marriage, his wife and daughters, and his congregational family, and he is sinfully proud to be Presbyterian. Frank is great with older people; he is patient and listens well; he is humble and doesn't hesitate to apologize if he thinks he needs to. If he senses you are in trouble, he won't hesitate to check in. He loves to laugh and enjoys sitting around telling stories or playing games. Frank has an adventurous spirit, and sometimes tosses things out just to see how folks react – pushing on those boundaries gently but intentionally. And he is committed, in relationships for the long haul.

You can understand why I tried to recruit Frank to a congregation in Winston-Salem over the years, but God was working on something else for him – and God was working on something else for you. God had a new thing in mind.

Which is why this passage from Isaiah came to mind when Frank invited me to pick a scripture for this celebration.

Let us now listen to God's word to us from the prophet Isaiah 43:16-21.

This has been quite a season, hasn't it? I remember just a little over two years ago when this pandemic first began, congregational leaders all over the country began conversations about what image we could use to help our churches think theologically about this unfamiliar and unwelcomed time. Many leaders preached on and led discussions on the scriptural story of Israel wandering in the wilderness for 40 years as described in the book of Exodus. The uncertainty and anxiety which God's children endured during that season seems so appropriate and familiar to us.

As we have moved through the stages of the pandemic, many have also used the image of the Israelites journeying through the wilderness, returning to their homeland after 70 years in exile. They did not know how long the journey would take; they were uncertain as to what they would encounter in the wilderness, and they recognized life would not be the same when they returned as when they had left. Weary and anxious wouldn't begin to describe their souls. That is familiar to us as well.

The Israelites measured their time in the wilderness in years, 40 years wandering and then 70 years in exile. We now have begun to measure our pandemic wilderness time in years as well – 2 and counting.

We can also measure this season of wilderness in other ways. Sadly for many, we are measuring by how many weeks or months it's been since a loved one has died, or how long since we heard the diagnosis. Maybe it's by how long it has been since we've been inside a friend's home or gone on a family vacation. This congregation could measure by how many pastors you have said goodbye to in the pandemic. Some are measuring by how many Covid cases the schools have had or how many teenagers have died from gun violence in the community. Some around the world are measuring this wilderness time by how many climate crises they have experienced; last year one in three Americans felt the direct effects of climate disasters. Some are measuring it by how many loved ones died of an overdose in 2021, a year in which US overdose deaths topped 100,000 which is a record high – up almost 30 percent and more than the toll of car crashes and gun fatalities combined. And our lists go on during this pandemic wilderness.

A song called *Seasons of Love* from the Broadway show *Rent* has gone through my head a lot in these past few months in this wilderness. *Rent* is a Tony Award winning musical about a group of friends living in NYC, struggling with life, love, and AIDS and the impacts they have on America in the late 80's. *Seasons of Love* begins this way: "5 hundred 25 thousand 600 minutes, 5 hundred 25 thousand so dear, 5 hundred 25 thousand 600 minutes, how do you measure? Measure a year?" (Each year has 5 hundred 25 thousand 600 minutes.) How DO we measure a year?

We can measure only by the wilderness experiences I just mentioned, or we could measure in another way. The song from *Rent* continues and offers a suggestion: "In 5 hundred 25 thousand 600 minutes, how do you measure a year in a life? How about love? How about love?" the song asks. Measure in love... Seasons of love. What a helpful reminder.

How do we measure this wilderness time in our life? We can measure in love. Maybe it's by the Zoom calls with families or committees, times we can see loved ones' and friends' faces, even across the miles and despite the pandemic. We measure this wilderness by cards and emails and texts sent and received, reminders of love and prayers and togetherness. Maybe at Western Boulevard you measure by how many virtual communion services you've been able to celebrate or how many bible studies or Biblical Justice conversations you've shared on Zoom. You might measure this year by food donated to Urban Ministries or money or drivers provided for Meals on Wheels. You measure by in-person youth gatherings and handbell practices, and the opportunity to welcome a new pastor despite the pandemic.

We can measure this wilderness time by celebrating the love which can be found despite the wilderness, the love which God continues to pour into our lives, the love which invites us to come together despite challenges and weariness. You certainly share much love around here – by which we can measure this year, this season in our life.

The Israelites knew much anxiety and weariness after their season of suffering in a foreign land. But God spoke through the prophet reminding them that God was present and continuing to work in their lives because they were God's chosen people, God's beloved.

When the Israelites escaped the Pharaoh's grip, God turned the sea into dry land, making a way for the people to flee. Nearly 1,000 years later, God did the opposite. As the Israelites were released from exile in Babylon, they faced a seemingly impossible 900 mile trek back to their homeland through inhospitable wilderness. The prophet Isaiah encouraged the people with the promise that God would meet their needs once again, this time turning the dry land into rivers that would quench their thirst.

In this seemingly hopeless situation, Isaiah encouraged the people not to lose heart – as God has acted in the past, God will act again – and in a new way. “Look around,” the prophet said. “Don't you see? Look around with hope – God is at work – making a way where there appears to be no way, making rivers in the desert, guiding you through this wilderness, filling this season with guidance and care and love. God is still at work – doing a new thing.”

God yearned for the people to shift their focus – to recognize and focus on God's gifts and abundance and presence rather than the wilderness struggles and weariness. And God desires the same for us – to see that in all our struggles and weariness, in this season of wilderness, God continues to work. A favorite quote of mine is from Paul Claudel: “Jesus did not come to explain away suffering, or to remove it. He came to fill it with his presence.” People of Western Boulevard Presbyterian Church, look around with hope – even in this season of pandemic, God is present. God has indeed been at work, preparing you, preparing Frank, preparing the way so together you can be part of the new things that God is doing, even as this wilderness continues. This IS good news. Look around. What new thing is God doing in these next 5 hundred 25 thousand

600 minutes? God is making a way in the wilderness – let us indeed declare God's praise. Thanks be to God! Amen.