

Revelation 21:1-5

Then I saw new heavens and a new earth. The former heavens and the former earth had passed away, and the sea existed no longer. I also saw a new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God, beautiful as a bride and groom on their wedding day. And I heard a loud voice calling from the throne, "Look! God's Tabernacle is among humankind! God will live with them; they will be God's people, and God will be fully present among them. The Most High will wipe away every tear from their eyes. And death, mourning, crying and pain will be no more, for the old order has fallen." The One who sat on the throne said, "Look! I'm making everything new!"

### **"When The Story Almost Ended"**

Every story has a beginning. Pres House, who we have supported over the years, story begins in 1907.

That year, the Wisconsin Synod of the Presbyterian Church gave Pastor George E. Hunt of Christ Presbyterian Church in Madison permission to hire a staff person to serve college students attending UW-Madison. He hired, and for all you, Badger fans, please take note of this, the Rev. Matthew C. Allison, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Bloomington, Indiana, a Hoosier, to begin working with students at the University of Wisconsin.

A thriving campus ministry began. Over its years of ministry, it even became known as the University Presbyterian Church, though always affectionally known to the students as "Pres House." At one time in its storied past, it had students, alum, and area residents lining up out the doors in order find a spot inside for worship. However, that was in the past.

In 1994, when Staci and I moved to Monroe, and I became the pastor at Union Presbyterian Church, Pres House, existed but basically as a hospitality center on campus and nothing more.

The basement, where we serve the meals today, was old, and filled with offices for a number of different non-profits, along with a student run coffee shop, called the "Catacombs."

Keeping that building open was costly, and to what end?

There really was no student involvement at Pres House any longer. There was also another ecumenical ministry which the Pres House Board had joined with the United Church of Christ, the Baptist Student Center, the Wesley Foundation of Wisconsin, and the United Church of Christ, to begin a new venture in a new location known as the Madison Campus Ministry. Why

support two campus ministries that serve the same purpose, and a building that was so costly?

Since campus ministry fell under the funding of the Synod of Lakes and Prairies, it was decided by the Synod to close and sell the properties of several of the campus ministry centers, including Iowa, Minnesota and Madison.

The end of the Pres House story was about to be written at a 1999 meeting of the John Knox Presbytery.

Ralph Spaulding, Hugh Drennan, and myself would be present at that meeting.

The recommendation was to close Pres House and sell the property. Remember, John Knox Presbytery is made up of portions of Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin. The campus ministry centers on the University of Iowa and Minnesota had already been closed and sold. Why would presbytery representatives from those areas be concerned with whether Pres House is closed and sold, when theirs had already been closed and sold?

It was the most contentious and heated presbytery meeting I had ever attended.

With nothing but hope to cling to, the representatives of the Madison area churches convinced the presbytery to vote against selling the property. And so, Pres House was saved, at least for the moment, but its future was far from certain even after that vote.

There was little-to-no money, no students, extensive repairs were needed, and a whole new vision for ministry had to be developed if there was to be a future or the end of Pres House would come in a matter of a few short years.

Between the vote in 1999 and 2004, the future of Pres House hung in the balance. It was 2004, that the board hired a young married clergy couple, Mark Elsdon and Erica Liu, fresh out of seminary with no experience, but they did have a new vision for what campus ministry might look like in today's ever changing world of youth who do not necessarily grow up attending church, and are still not always trusting of the institutional religion.

While Mark Elsdon and Erica Liu have helped to write a new, creative Pres House story, it also took the buy in of the Pres House Board and local congregations that support Pres House ministry and the students themselves to make this ministry work.

Mark and Erica have written grants, visited local congregations, helped build the Pres House Apartments, remodel the basement, and found ways to make Pres House what it is today.

Just this week, in the midst of a campus housing crisis, Pres House made the local news as they found a creative way to address this situation that is helpful to new students and transfer ones.

And so, where there was an almost ending to the Pres House story to what once was a glorious past, with the help of Mark and Erica, and the courage of board who bought into their new vision for what this future might be they together took the risk, and it was a risk, and together moved into a new, creative future, that we have been witness when we have gone down to serve meals and worship alongside of the students.

Mark Elsdon has now written a book about the Pres House story, and is doing consulting work through a non-profit organization he has helped to found called "Rooted Good."

Let me tell you about how another story almost ended.

In 1953, a small group of Moravians began a new church on the Eastside of Madison. In 1954, they began construction on Lakeview Moravian Church.

At one time, Lakeview had over 350 families attending worship and Sunday school in their building. Today, their worship attendance is around 23 and membership around 50. Much like ours is today.

In April 2009, Staci was called to be their full-time pastor. By that time, their membership was down to around 70 with worship attendance averaging around 45, and aging.

Like our congregation, they have relied heavily on volunteers for care of property and cleaning. Unlike our congregation, they have no investments to draw interest from to supplement their budget.

So in 2017, two older members, sisters, one had never married and the other had but her only adult child lived in Texas, both developed health issues. They needed care and the decision was made to move to Texas to be nearer to the daughter.

To know them by appearance, you would not have guessed that combined they were the two biggest givers in the congregation. With their move, the church could no longer afford Staci as their full-time pastor.

As she was moving to part-time, the pastor at the Glenwood Moravian Church had accepted a new call. The board of that congregation, looking over their finances, realized they could no longer afford a full-time pastor, and so it worked out for Staci to accept their part-time position, allowing us to remain.

However, Lakeview's future was very uncertain. They were like many congregations, facing an aging membership, a decrease in worship attendance, financial struggles, and a possible end to their ministry.

During those years, Staci and a group of clergy who were pastoring part-time in small membership, aging congregations that were struggling with aging buildings began talking about sharing space in one location. They all knew that if they did nothing, and continued on in ministry as it was, that each church, like so many others, would be facing the end of their part of the sacred faith story.

How could they help their congregations see this time not as the end of their individual stories, but the start of a new, creative one, that God was calling them into together?

Dreaming together about what the future might look like of housing each of their small membership communities under one common roof, while maintaining their own denominational identity.

Each of their budgets were being drained by the constant maintenance and upkeep of aging buildings which took away from their real ministries and missions in the community.

Realizing that each of their congregations' stories that once seemed so alive and thriving were coming to an end, they began to have heart-to-heart conversations with their congregations.

A Lutheran colleague of Staci's, Pat Siegler, who was the pastor at Zion Lutheran was also facing a similar situation with his congregation.

They decided to invite their leadership teams together for conversation. This led to an ongoing conversations.

Two years ago, Zion voted to sell their building to a developer and move into the Lakeview building. There was lots of conversation with denominational leadership around property legal issues, but out of it a "federation" was formed, and they are now known as "Common Grace: An Inclusive Community of the Historic Zion Lutheran and Lakeview Moravian Congregations".

Without this move, both leadership teams knew their congregations faced closing in the near future. This gave them a chance to let one story end, and a new one, in God's name, begin.

Both churches are maintaining their own budgets and are paying their own pastors.

One of the things they did, was to combine items from each sanctuary. Zion has had cushioned chairs in their sanctuary; Lakeview, pews. The boards voted to remove the pews and replace them with Zion's chairs.

While it was a change for the Lakeview people, they actually found they liked it as it gave them more comfortable space.

This past Easter, OCPC provided the meal for Pres House students. Since Sam is worshipping there and a part of the worship music team, Staci and went down to serve the meal.

I was amazed to find out she had never been in the sanctuary at Pres House. For those of you who have worshipped there, you know they have spread their chairs out in small clusters, allowing for better sharing and discussions among the students.

She loved the spacing and interaction, and brought it back to her colleague, Pat. They rearranged the sanctuary and have been using it that way at Lakeview ever since.

Staci received a half-time call which is paid through the Moravian Denomination to be a community organizer, part of which is to write for grants and connect with the Eastside community groups and schools.

The two congregations are working with Mark Elsdon through his Oikos Accelerator project and have hired him as a consultant along with a developer. With a plan in place, at a recent meeting, the congregations voted to demolish the Lakeview building and build a new facility that will have a worship space, a community center and housing.

Staci and several church leaders have secured grants, that are allowing them to find new, creative ministry opportunities far reaching beyond just Sunday morning.

I shared the Revelation passage this morning, the writer of Revelation, reminds us that God's vision is to let go of the old, so God can create all things new.

Of this, Father Richard Rohr writes: **"Creativity and newness of life have a cost, and the cost is what appears to look like death. But really it is not. It is just letting go of one thing to make room for another thing. Loss is always perceived as an enemy or affliction, and looks like what we don't want. Somehow to embrace loss, spiritually speaking, is to achieve something more and something bigger. Some form of positive dying invariably allows us to be united with what is Larger Reality, but of course we never know that ahead of time. So if you spend your whole life avoiding dying, the spiritual teachers would say you will never get there. Meditate on the phrase Jesus gave us, 'Unless the grain of wheat dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.' (John 12:24). That quotation is about as counterintuitive as you can get. Rationally I cannot prove that to you. You have to walk through it. You have to experience it to know that it is in fact true and true for you. Frankly, none of us go there until we are shoved."**

I wanted to share these stories with you, because they both could easily have chosen to end much differently.

The campus ministry centers at the University of Iowa and Minnesota were closed and sold, end of their stories.

There are many churches like Lakeview and Zion, ours being one of them, that were facing the end of their stories, and were willing to acknowledge that, and in doing so, were willing to take risks to live into God's new future, not knowing what that might fully look like for them. But they had known that if they didn't take the risk, that they soon would be writing the end of their stories as faith communities.

Staci, Pat, Mark and Erica will tell you that these changes were not made to increase worship attendance on Sundays. They were made to help them live into this new vision of ministry of where God is calling us to serve the community around us.

As Staci said, we can no longer do church for church sake only. Our buildings are underutilized and our resources can no longer be used to serve ourselves.

With this understanding of ministry, both Common Grace and Pres House are writing new stories where an ending might have been written.

Nobody wants to think about the end of their story - be their life story or the closing of a church.

But we do need to talk about it, openly and honestly. I want to give you some hope.

We can, like the Pres House Board and the leadership at Lakeview and Zion (and other congregations) chose to let what has been die, so that a new story of ministry in God's name can begin utilizing our resources and building well beyond Sunday morning.

That probably would mean changes to the interior and upgrades, and possibly even partnership with others who might share in the responsibility for this building and its property.

Westminster Presbyterian Church hired a real estate agent to help them find a tenant for their downstairs space, which she did. In doing so, they did have to invest \$50,000 in upgrades, but the return they felt was worth the investment for their future.

These are decisions for the Session and you as the congregation to discuss and consider.

We can continue use our investments and building for the ministry as it is now for only Sunday morning worship followed by coffee fellowship, using our investments and your offerings to keep the building maintained for as long as we are able to do so until, well, until we are no longer able to because of age, attendance or finances.

Or we can explore options that are out there if we are willing to be open to the possibilities.

Last year, we had misplaced the "Hope" banner for the Advent wreath. A few Sunday's ago, it mysteriously appeared, in all places, laying over the trash can in the kitchen.

I don't know if someone was trying to send us a message, but personally, I don't want us to through "Hope" away, when we still have "Hope".

What about you?

Amen.