**First United Methodist Church**

**618 Eighth Street**

**Columbus, Indiana 47201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles**

**December 29, 2024**

“Wisdom for Beginning: Confident and Courageous Steps”

Texts: Ecclesiastes 3:1-12 and Revelation 21:1-6a

There is an old story about the first shoe salesman to come to the frontier of Indiana. He packed his bags full of shoes and set out from the big city of Philadelphia prepared to make a lot of money. He had shoes of every size and style in his bag. When he arrived, he began introducing himself to the Hoosiers. And he noticed something. Children, adults, they were all barefoot. No one had any shoes. Saddened, he packed his bags and sent a note to his company that he would be returning. Indiana was a big disappointment because no one wore shoes.

A second salesman set out at about the same time. He too carried shoes of every size and style, along with the tools to make more. When he arrived, he also introduced himself to the Hoosiers living here and he also noticed that no one was wearing shoes. He too sent a note back to his company but his read, “Nobody here wears shoes. You’d better send me more supplies, this place is a goldmine!”

Same circumstances, different perspectives. Like those mythical salesman, we can look at our circumstances and come to very different understandings. Is it a calamity? Is it opportunity? Is it the end of the world or the beginning of something new?

This is where we find ourselves with the two readings this morning. We have one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. The reading from Ecclesiastes invites us to look back and that seems like a good starting point as we stand at the completion of another year. Let us begin by looking back at what has been.

In the coming weeks, the United Methodist Church will ask us to fill out an end of year report. Little has changed in the 33 years I have been filling out that report. They want the statistics, the things that can be measured. I will report that we received eleven new members, baptized four individuals, and conducted three weddings. I will be able to share that our worship attendance is increasing. Our finances are strong. We have a growing youth program and seven confirmands. I can give the numbers they are looking for and those numbers are important. But there is something much more important than the numbers that are simply beyond measure.

We began 2024 talking about the struggle of loneliness facing our society. It isn’t about Columbus or First UMC, it is something we face as a nation. Some might blame the pandemic, but I think it was prevalent long before that. The pandemic just made it more apparent. We are lonely. A Pew research poll in 2023 indicated that 53% of Americans said that have between one and four friends. The Surgeon General released a study showing that loneliness can be linked to an increase in heart disease, stroke, and other health factors. We entered 2024 facing this challenge and with a desire to do something to address it.

This year a new group was formed, and they have worked hard to create opportunities to bring people together for social events. They took a day to visit Greensburg, had a picnic at a state park, visited the Christmas light show at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. It brought people together. It was about building and strengthening relationships and community. We are a stronger church and healthier individuals because of this ministry.

Related to that, in this year we held more opportunities for social events after church. Cookies at Christmas, pancake breakfasts, Chocolate Sunday, and special receptions. Every Sunday we have a fellowship time in the library, and it is nice to see people gathering to chat and meet new people. I deeply appreciate the hard work of Bill Poor and Cindy Witwer who put this together week after week. But those special gatherings expanded the fellowship. And people stayed. They chatted. Friendships were made. There is no place to register such events on the denominational reports, but they were an important component of the health and vitality of our congregation.

At the beginning of 2024 we were looking at a budget shortfall of over $100,000. I don’t recall a year that I have been here that we didn’t have some level of shortfall. Our anticipated expenses have always exceeded our anticipated income. It is an anxious moment for our Finance committee and the church leadership. We have come to call this expected shortfall our faith gap. We enter the year with the faith that somehow it will work out. And year after year, it has. And year after year, we find ourselves asking, will the bubble burst? Will this be the year that we don’t quite make it? But over and over, in spite of my anxiety, we have.

This year our church experienced what, for many churches, is the one thing they pray will never happen. The boiler went out. Thankfully, the timing was about as good as it could be. The boiler quit working just before Easter. Our hardworking Trustees committee and our maintenance man, Steve Heyerdahl, were able to patch it together through the remainder of the cold season. It bought us time to move forward.

For many churches, the cost of replacing a boiler is so expensive that it means either an immediate capital campaign or closing the doors of the church. We had to do neither of those. Thanks to the good stewardship of this congregation, we had funds in our Foundation that paid for the replacement boiler in full. And no sooner had we designated those funds for the repairs than an unexpected gift was received from the estate of a member that exceeded the cost of the boiler. How do you measure the faithful stewardship of a congregation? It is about much more than numbers. It is about connection. It is about faithfulness. It is about believing in the ministry of this church and wanting to see it continue into the future.

In the past few years, I have become aware of the significance of our online services, and I am deeply grateful for the group of people we call our tech team. They do important work. Not only are we able to watch our Sunday morning worship services online, but they are here for special services like Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, the Longest Night, and events like Fridays @ First. And while there is a formula for counting the number of people watching online in our worship attendance, there is no place to tabulate the significance of this ministry. On several occasions this year, I have had people say to me, “I watch your services every Sunday.” I had no idea. But I am grateful. I have described the livestream services as the new back pew of the church. It is the safe place where someone can experience the worship service. There are so many people in our world who have been hurt, who are worried that they will be judged, who long for the experience of worship but are concerned that they will not be welcomed. Those concerns are real because there are plenty of stories about churches that fit that description. The online services have become an opportunity for all to be included…those who are not able to attend in person, those who are out of town, those who are hurting, worried, curious. You are welcome here.

Having said this, however, I want to say that I don’t always know how to be a good pastor to those who are watching online. With those who are here in person, I can sometimes detect when someone is hurting or struggling. I can see it in their body language or expressions or a tear in their eye. But I don’t always know how to minister to those who are watching online. And that is important to me. I want to be a good pastor to you. And so I will need your help. If there are ways we can pray for you, help you through a difficult time, celebrate a special occasion…whatever it might be, please let us know. You are an important part of this congregation, and we want to show that.

There are so many powerful moments I have seen within this congregation as you have ministered to one another. You are good people, and I am humbled to walk alongside you.

I am hopeful about the future of the church because of the ways in which this congregation nurtures young leadership. As I sat in a pew on Christmas Eve watching the Family Service two things leapt out at me. First, there were a lot of people present who had no children or grandchildren in the program. But there you were supporting and encouraging their leadership. And the second thing that I noticed was the great work of our youth. They really are remarkable. They are involved in leadership helping as ushers and greeters on many Sundays. They are active in service, working at Hot Meals. They are caring and thoughtful. Your support helps nurture that. There is no place on the end of year report to indicate such things, but this is a place where young faith is growing and where young faith is teaching us all.

Looking back, the wise author put it very poetically. “For everything there is a season. A time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to throw away; a time to tear and a time to sew; a time to keep silence and a time to speak; a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace.” We have seen a bit of everything this year. We have had times of weeping and times when we have danced together in delight. We have had moments for the hopeful planting of seeds and opportunities to harvest what we ourselves did not sow. We have grown together. We have loved together. Our faith and our life have expanded in this year. And for that we say thanks.

But the other reading for this morning is about looking forward. In just a few days, we will cross the threshold of a new year. Who knows what 2025 will hold. But let me share a couple of hopes for this new year together. I want to see us continue to expand our fellowship ministries. We are doing well to bring people together to build relationships and new friendships. But what would it look like to expand that to those who are lonely, but not here.

Think about someone you know who is lonely. Someone who is hurting. I remember when I was very young attending church, they had an upcoming Sunday when everyone who brought a friend would get an ice cream cone. Like any child, I would do most anything for a free ice cream cone. I asked all my friends and finally my neighbor Mike agreed to attend church that Sunday morning. I was so excited, we were going to get ice cream. And that day, Mike changed his mind. I don’t recall if he was sick or worried or just didn’t want to get up. What I remember was the lack of an ice cream cone in my hand that Sunday morning.

I would love to invite folks to come to church. But maybe it doesn’t have to be Sunday morning. What if our invitation were to come to a Fridays @ First. Or volunteer at Hot Meals? Or join us on a social event? We plan to continue to offer social events to bring people together, think of these as opportunities to care for people who might be looking for meaningful connections. And look, since I never got that ice cream, maybe we will host an ice cream social of some sort this summer where everyone gets a dish of ice cream, whether you come alone or bring a bunch of people.

I also want to expand our service outreach. I found it humorous a few years ago when Kelly Daugherty was here to speak about Love Chapel and their good work. He asked all those who had volunteered over the last year to raise a hand. I think he expected a handful of people. In fact, what he got were a lot of hands in the air. This congregation was a powerful supporter of the food pantry, the homeless shelter and all the ministries of Love Chapel.

And I know that there are many here who volunteer at other organizations here in town. You give your time to care for the people around you. So in the coming year, I would like to have a monthly mission moment. We will be inviting leaders from the various community service programs in town to share a bit about what they do. This will be an opportunity to support them financially if you choose. But it will also be a chance to learn about the work that is being done here and how you can get involved. I hope you will not feel obligated to give to everyone that speaks unless you are so inclined. But I hope that this will be a chance to find a place to use your talents and passions in meaningful ways.

Related to that but on a congregational level. One of my goals for the coming year is to strengthen our committees and volunteer opportunities. Our committees are doing good work, but I have not done a good job of bringing new leaders into the committees. I am sharing this with you this morning for you to hold me accountable, but also to ask for your help. If there is a place you would like to serve, please let us know. Consider your unique talents and how they might be used in service here. We all have gifts to share, and it is important to find our places to use those gifts and talents.

And finally, related to our talents, I don’t know what this looks like, but let me share the rough outline of what I am imagining. I know there are some very talented people here. You are painters, photographers, writers, knitters, sculptors and so much more. Ther are people in this room that have great hobbies and interests. What would it look like if we had ongoing displays of artwork, crafts, hobbies in the Fellowship Hall for others to see? How can we exhibit these things to share with others? I think there are a lot of possibilities, and I would be curious where this might lead.

You may be saying to yourself, “he didn’t mention any Bible studies or Sunday School classes or prayer groups or anything we often associate with church.” Don’t worry, those things will be happening as well. But when I read the gospels, I find that Jesus was frequently more intent upon bringing people together, building friendships and strengthening community. When those things happen what often follows is the kind of things we come to expect from a church. We pray for one another. We care for each other. We serve together. We do all these things as a way of loving our neighbor and in so doing, loving God. It will happen. God will lead us there.

We close with the words from the book of Revelation that promises that God is making all things new. Sometimes we wish that weren’t the case. We get very comfortable with how things have been done. We don’t always want or like change. But the promise behind all of it is that God is with us in that change. As we look back at where we have been we see traces of God’s presence throughout our individual and collective lives. And we hold that gift as a promise for 2025 that no matter what may come, God will be with us waiting for us there.