

**“Letting Go” based on Acts 2:1-21**  
**A sermon preached by the Rev. Elizabeth Smith-Bartlett**  
**at Larchmont Avenue Church**  
**May 31, 2020**

I.

I started writing this sermon in my head months ago in anticipation of this day. The plan was to start by sharing a story that would connect to the Scripture for the day, and also would connect with our parting ways. It would be a little pastoral and a little prophetic. I would charge you to boldly step into the future that God has in store for you and promise that I would always be with you from a distance. We would laugh, and cry, and have cake at coffeeshour, and together bring this chapter to a close well.

But obviously in this time since our lives have changed.

Our worship has changed.

Our world has changed.

And the sermon needed to change some, too.

I can't quite wrap my brain around the fact that I'm leaving LAC in the midst of a global pandemic, in a time where we have been forced to let go of so much in such a short amount of time. It has been incredibly jarring to move so swiftly from announcing my departure to suddenly not being able to gather together as a church in person. These past several weeks have been bizarrely surreal, and that doesn't seem to be changing any time soon.

And yet...if I stay focused just on what hasn't been, I'd be missing entirely what has been. Which is that you are stepping up to feed our neighbors in Mamaroneck and New Rochelle, and are seeking out how else LAC might actively and tangibly love its neighbors in this time. Which is that we are all learning new technologies and finding new and creative ways to stay connected with one another. Which is that I had one of the most beautiful and powerful experiences that I've ever had with our high schoolers in our last SHiFT gathering over Zoom. Which is that your Session is at work preparing for LAC's future with vision and courage, and your Deacons are providing compassionate care for the congregation and building community in the process. Which is that in private and public ways, in bringing over moving boxes and sending well wishes and holding celebrations, together we are bringing this chapter to a close well.

You are still being church, and you will continue to still be church, and that has not changed. That can only be taken away from you if you let it. So I think the sermon plan still works, just perhaps with a slightly different tone.

Pray with me: *Holy God, open us...move in us...breathe in us. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. You are our rock; you are our redeemer. Amen.*

## II.

So the story goes something like this: In the month or two before my first birthday, I began pulling myself up from the floor to my feet using different items of furniture--the sofa, the coffee table--and eventually started taking steps. The only catch is that I wouldn't let go of the sofa or the coffee table, even when it became clear that I had my balance. I would walk around the living room as far as I could holding on to something...I would even switch between objects in order to go further...but I wouldn't risk taking those first unassisted steps. Why mess with a good thing?

My first birthday rolled around. We were living in a little house with a long, shaded yard that was not very level. Family and friends gathered to celebrate my big day, and brought with them gifts, including one that I fell in love with right away. It was a stuffed rabbit with wheels and a rope attached; it was large enough for a child my size to sit on and be pulled along by another person using that rope.

My parents say that at some point in the party, I was in a sandbox on one side of the yard, while that rabbit was on the other side of the yard, where apparently one of the other children was also falling in love with it. And apparently one year old Elizabeth was not ok with that. They say that I stood up, that I started walking over the bumps and the grooves, over tree roots and rocks, all the way across that yard, to reclaim my rabbit. And then, when I got there, I pushed the other child down, and in case I had not made my point clear, I grabbed that rabbit, and I pushed it back across the length of that yard.

They also tell me that after that day, I went back to holding on to the sofa or the coffee table when I wanted to walk, unwilling to let go again for another several weeks.

## III.

"In my beginning is my end," wrote the poet T.S. Eliot. Our earliest stories point to who we are deep down and what direction our lives might take.

For me, I have remained cautious, but with a fire in my bones that does rise to the surface on occasion. And I find that when it does--and when I am able to let go of whatever it is I'm clinging to in order to step out in vulnerability and in courage--those are the moments that I feel most fully alive. You've been witness to it--there's a sermon that many

of you remember from a few years ago--the youth affectionately refer to it as the sermon when I talked about being too short for the pulpit. Preaching Mary's Magnificat in the height of the #metoo movement is a moment that I will never forget--and it is a moment that we will always share; it is a story that is mine, but it is yours, too.

*In my beginning is my end.* The writer of Acts knows this as well. The Book of Acts tells the story of the church from its earliest days--and this morning's story of Pentecost is considered to be the birthday of the church. It is a story that is the disciples', but it's the church's, too.

Remember that in the earliest days of the church, believers believed that Jesus' return would be imminent--within their lifetimes. They considered themselves to be living in in-between times--God's kingdom had already arrived with Jesus and would return in its fullness when he did, not yet, but any day now. But as time went on, and some of the believers started to die, there was a crisis within the community of faith--do we stay the course and keep watching and waiting, or was all of this for nothing?

And so the Book of Acts was written to remind them of who they were deep down and what direction their life together might take, even in these new circumstances.

*Remember how the Holy Spirit came as rushing wind and tongues of fire? That same Spirit is with us still.*

*Remember how Peter boldly proclaimed what God was doing in our midst, even when it meant putting his own safety and reputation at risk? This is still our call.*

*Remember how our community was devoted to caring for one another and sharing what we had so that everyone had enough? This is still our ethic of life.*

*Remember how our church was born in the midst of chaos and confusion? It can be reborn in the midst of it, too.*

#### IV.

We come back to this narrative year after year as the church. And every year it invites us to ponder this question once again: are we a church most fully alive in the Spirit? Or are there some things we need to let go of to allow us that freedom?

To be fair, choosing to let go is difficult. There's risk involved in letting go. What if we fall or fail? What if we make fools out of ourselves? We can't always control outcomes when we choose to loosen our grip and take those first steps, and oh how we like to be in control. But also, deeper, there's grief involved in letting go, in parting ways with what was and what was familiar.

And there's something about us Presbyterians being referred to as the frozen chosen, or how we always do things decently and in good order that doesn't scream that we are risk-takers. We want to make thoughtful and careful decisions. We want to preserve our traditions. These are noble things, and there's nothing inherently wrong with them. But when they impede the movement of the Spirit in our lives and in our life together, then what we are practicing is not faithfulness but idolatry.

This year, this call of Pentecost is louder than ever. Because once more we are disciples standing in the midst of very real chaos and confusion. The world as we have known it in our lifetimes is no longer, and we are living in in-between times, watching and waiting for what might come next.

In an article she wrote for the Financial Times last month, novelist Arundhati Roy invites us to see this pandemic as a portal. She writes:

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.<sup>1</sup>

The Book of Acts was written because the earliest church was ready to imagine and fight for another world, a world not ruled by the powers of empire but the power of God's love to overcome death. The Book of Acts was written to be the story that guided the church in every age, in those moments when it was easier to cling to the familiar and play it safe, when they needed that push once more to have the courage to let go and be a church most fully alive in the Spirit.

And it can be the church's story for these pandemic days. It can be your story, too.

V.

But you'll have to let some things go. You'll have to make some bold and hard choices, and take a stand as you witness to what God is doing in the world. You'll have to

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<sup>1</sup> Arundhati Roy, "The Pandemic is a Portal." Financial Times, April 3, 2020. Accessed May 22, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

risk making mistakes--you won't always get things right, and you won't be a perfect church. But if that means that you are following Jesus on the way, and that you are taking those courageous, vulnerable steps towards being fully alive in the Spirit, then you might not be a perfect church, but you will be a deeply faithful one. You will be living into who you are deep down.

It has been a gift and an honor to be part of LAC's story for these five years. And please know that you will always be a part of mine. I will carry you all in my heart, and I am eager to see what is in store for you--how you will follow the movement of the Spirit in your midst, and how you will see visions and dream dreams for the future of LAC in this next chapter.

So beloved, as our journeys lead us in different directions, may you know that God loves you just the way you are, and loves you too much to let you stay that way forever, and may this knowledge give you the courage to live into who God created you to be.

May you be open to the movement of the Spirit in your life together as the church, and may this movement inspire in you bold visions and prophetic dreams for what life together might look like.

And together, as you navigate these pandemic days, may you walk through this portal lightly, ready to imagine and fight for another world.

Amen.