

SERMON SERIES

Making Our Garden Grow

SERMON TITLE

“Gladness Will Be Found” (Isaiah 51:3)

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Today, we continue our summer Sermon series inspired by the findings and recommendations of our Long-range Planning Ministry Team at Meadowbrook. Each week we’ve been exploring how the Bible speaks into the areas identified by our Long-range team, including the 4 top categories the team believes to impact the future health of our local church. Over the last few weeks, we’ve considered Openness to Change, the importance of Increasing Attendance and Participation, and what our Forecasted Financial Status speaks to us, how we may grow in our understanding of it, and what it calls for us to do in response. This morning, we explore the 4th category identified by our Long-range team, Reaching Young Adults.

In this series, we’ve seen how God calls on us to tend to our community as if tending our gardens. For gardens to grow and thrive they must be tended with love and care. This includes stewardship of the beautiful, sturdy trees which have long blessed the garden, just as it calls on us to provide special attention to the needs of the littlest seeds that have only recently been planted or begun to grow.

We all get older and kids grow up and move on. So we ask ourselves, what do we do next to welcome new young people into the life of our church? What does that next chapter look like? It’s a very different world out there than the one in which most of us were children.

One of the things we see more and more is young adults moving other places in pursuit of opportunities, be it love, career, or any number of others goals. I know this is also true for many of us here today. But it is especially the case for young adults in today’s culture. Speaking for myself, as an example, there are none of my childhood friends who still live in the town I grew up in. Everyone has moved somewhere else. Perhaps that is true for you as well, or for your own adult children or grandchildren. And this all tells us something very important as a local church: there are many other young adults in our community that we did not know when they were children. This is even more so given our location near large universities such as U of M and MSU, as folks may

live in between East Lansing and Ann Arbor and here. Add to this the auto industry and all its related tech and supply companies in the broader metro area, including many people moving from other countries right to Novi. Some of you may already be aware that Novi has a growing Indian and Asian population and has for years. In fact, the data shows that in the last ten years more people moved to Novi from another country than from another part of the state. While not everyone moving to the community is a young adult, many are and have young families. This is a unique opportunity for our church to reach out and to welcome families and young adults that may have moved to the area in recent years. We also have many young adult family members, friends, and neighbors that have remained in the area, but who may not be connected to a local church or to our church. We might ask ourselves why they do not feel connected to the church. Is it only about an invitation or might it be more? When invited what are young adults invited to and what is expected of them, how have we been communicating that and hearing their thoughts on it?

Even though the world changes, the promises of God remain.

In our passage from Isaiah, we learn about God's presence to us. Despite times of challenge, which do exist, God continually cares for us, comforts us, and promises that joy and gladness will come even if they are not there now. Remember that the people of Israel had at this point lived in exile in Babylon. Far away from home, they likely had many among them that may have doubted they'd ever return. They probably had folks who forgot about the promises God had made or that they were even part of them.

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God announces the restoration of Zion and offers comforting and encouraging words. Isaiah shows how God will renew the barren wilderness of their exiled lives and will restore the Israelites, transforming their desert to a paradise such as was like the garden of Eden. Quite a promise to a people not sure about what happens next. But God's promises are good for all time, and so this is big news.

If you read slightly before and after our passage this morning in Isaiah, you see God calling on people to really pay close attention to what Isaiah is sharing with them, and in turn, with us. We're reminded of

how God worked through Abraham and Sarah to bring forth nations; this despite their circumstances of being fairly advanced in age. God brings new life through people of faith in surprising ways.

Part of being able to welcome someone is in knowing about who they are. Young adults today live in a very different world than 10 years ago, let alone 30 or 50 years ago. The Springtide Research Institute is an interfaith organization which studies youth and young adults and their faith life. In a recent report on Gen Z, or young adults aged about 13-25, there are some surprising trends. 54% of Gen Z report “religious communities try to fix my problem, instead of just being there for me.” Even though a majority of Gen Z identify as religious (71%) or spiritual (78%), most aren’t turning to religion (communities or leaders) to help guide them through times of uncertainty. Only 27% of those self-identifying in a spiritual community report reaching out to members of that community in times of need. Why don’t they turn to religious communities in crisis or when challenged? 60% say they don’t believe things they hear said at such places; 58% of Gen Z polled feel they are being told the *only* way to understand faith and would respond better to being invited into discovery of faith themselves; 56% say that since other things give meaning to their life they don’t need faith communities; 47% feel that faith communities won’t be interested in things they are; 39% report being harmed by a faith community in the past. When overwhelmed Gen Z turn to: friends (55%), then family (49%), school (20%), and, *get this*, no one and faith community at the exact same rate (16%). But folks, remember that many of these youth have never been exposed to religion, let alone raised in the Church. And data shows that this is truer of their parents, Boomers and older Gen X, than you might expect. Consider this, 42% of Gen Z in Springtide research report that they did nothing in connection to religion as a child. Scholars’ studies of ten years ago already show patterns of low-to-no church participation or attendance in Gen X and Baby Boomers. This shows that the pattern did not originate with Gen Z and has been with us for decades. And to highlight that this is not only focused on a generation or two, a 2021 Pew Research study shows Americans polled in 2007 reported 78% as Christian and 16% as having no religion, in 2021 63% Christian and 29% no religion. We recently discussed the

importance of attendance and participation at our church, including the fact that decline in both are not specific to any one church. A Gallup poll asked this question of American adults in 2021: how often do you attend church or synagogue? Weekly 22% (almost every week 9%, once a month 11%), seldom 25%, and never 31%. As you can see, these patterns have been there for years whether we knew it or not. But now we do know, and so we can do something about it. We can welcome young adults as Jesus would call us to.

Jesus came to be with us, loving and serving all kinds of people according to their unique needs. We see this all throughout the Gospels. Jesus is always with us in all our diversity including whether or not we've ever been included in the faith or how we have been treated. How do we follow Jesus' example in welcoming the young adults in our community today? I'd say it starts by listening to them and learning what their needs and dreams are. Maybe we start with an invitation to ask some good questions together. One of our long-range ideas is to host some meals with young adults in the community. Perhaps that is a good place for such questions, but likely more can still be done.

Friends, as we see from Isaiah, God will bless us and bring about our joy and gladness together. God's promises are good. So may we lean into them, and especially into the call Jesus places on us to reach out to all people including young adults. The church will grow and flourish by our connecting to young adults and their needs in the community as it is now. They are the future and will be part of the glad song heard in the renewed garden.

May it be so. AMEN.