

## ***I'm New Here***

Lake Street Church of Evanston

Rev. Michael Woolf

April 28, 2019

I want to thank everyone for your warm hospitality to my family and I on my first week, you have been very kind. I also am very appreciative of your efforts to give me a good introduction to Chicago-land weather, with a late April snowstorm, a bold strategy, but it certainly lets me know what I'm in for.

And I guess that's what this sermon is about. I'm new here. I recently went back home briefly over the past month, and I'm from Alabama, but after living almost a decade in the Boston area, I had a pretty stunning realization that sometimes hits me when I visit down south, which is that, while I'm from here, it feels very new and very different. I'm new here all over again, even though I should know everything so well. This was particularly true in my parent's neighborhood. So, in Alabama, we have perfected waving at everyone. We do it a lot. And you do it when you're driving, you do it when you're walking, you do it everywhere. And I had a stunning realization – waving is exhausting. You have to pause, you have to stop and wave. And if you don't, whoa. There's this guy my dad was telling me about who doesn't wave. It was said with such disapproval. But compare it to my time in Boston. I learned this lesson the hard way. No one on the bus wants to talk to you. Everyone wants to be left alone. And so, I was new there all over again. Marveling at how much you have to wave to people you don't know. I found out that I don't like waving that much. It's funny how going home can put things in perspective about the person that you have become, about how new it can feel to be in an old place.

In preparation for my arrival in Evanston, I listened to a lot of Gil Scott Heron. Now you may know him as a fierce black revolutionary poet who penned stuff like "The Revolution will not be televised," with an immense vocal range and an astounding ability to be critical of society. But I was listening on repeat to his final album, released after a 15 year break in 2010, the well-titled "I'm new here." Now, of course, Gil Scott Heron was not new at all. He had been around the block a thousand times. But after a decade of battling addiction, he put out this soulful look inward, and this track, "I'm new here" just speaks to me on an elemental level, because it has this line about meeting a girl in a bar, who tells him he has an ego the size of Texas, and he says, I forget is that big or is it small? I'm new here. And that's a bit like my arrival here. I'm new – now I've been in church my whole life, and I've been doing ministry work for awhile, but I'm new HERE. I will have to spend awhile getting to know you, what's important to you. Some things –

immigration justice, environmental justice, world-class music (can I get an amen) – these things are obvious. But there will be more subtle things.

And of course, I'm new here, so you'll have to get to know me. I can have a dry sense of humor, so bear with me. The Woolfs are infamous for folks not knowing if we're joking or not.

But there's another component that comes up in our texts about new beginnings this Sunday. Now, one of our texts is about the resurrection – now, I know plenty of you have got opinions about the resurrection, but let's just bracket that if we can for right now. But the core thing I take from this text is that Jesus, someone who was best friends with the disciples, at some point they experience him ANEW. He is new here in the text, and if we are supposed to be reading ourselves into the disciples, if they are the natural stand in for the audience, then the story at its most basic level is an invitation to experience the person at the middle of the story anew, just when you thought you had him figured out.

And the Divine likes new things as we see in Isaiah. And if we look at other religions, the cycle of birth and rebirth, Samsāra in Buddhism, means that unless your path has been that of the Bodhisattva, you will also be new here again, won't you?

And so, the texts of the ancient traditions talk of something that is at once trendy and deeply unsexy – they talk about renewal. About being made new again. And if I could just be so bold this morning as to say that Gil Scott Heron, the Bible, and the Buddha are talking about the same thing here. That there are these brief shining moments in our lives where we can be made new, where we can be remade, where we can be both new and not so new in the same time.

Folks, you're walking into one of those moments with me here today. And so I want to ask you, can you be new here at Lake Street again. Now, I don't mean getting lost in the building, which I've done plenty of. I don't mean that you forget everyone you've met. No, I mean that spiritual sense of rebirth or renewal. To be new here again, to follow your deepest passions about this place and to plug in like you mean it, to bring your gifts and your talents and your doubts and your everything to this place, to make it even more central to this little corner of the beloved community. I mean recommitting to justice efforts, to Hilda's place, to being new HERE. In Evanston.

Because that's where the magic happens. When we can be new. When we can be made new. When we don't know whether Texas is big or small, because we're new here. I'm new here, can you show me around?