

**“Where do we go from here?”**  
**by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.**  
Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church  
November 10, 2024

**Scripture: Ecclesiastes 1:9; Philippians 4:2-7**

*What has been is what will be,  
and what has been done is what will be done;  
there is nothing new under the sun.*  
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*Ecclesiastes 1:9*

## **I. The Elephant in the Room**

It's a unique privilege to preach on the Sunday after one of the most contentious presidential elections in American history. This sermon should be easy since we all voted for the same candidate, right?

Or maybe not. Let's take a poll: how many of you voted for the best candidate? You see? We're unanimous ... if I don't ask whether your candidate actually won.

When there's an elephant in the room, I say: ride it. Today, we're going to ride the colliding flows of energy present here right now: The energy of relief and celebration over the election results and the energy of devastation and despair over these same results. Perhaps the most pervasive energy is bafflement. Many of us are left wondering, "How could anyone in their right mind vote for so-and-so?"

This morning, I hope we can explore our collective bafflement. When reasonable, caring people on opposing sides struggle to understand how reasonable, caring individuals could possibly support "the other side," it often means that something important is being overlooked on both sides.

Did you know that C.S. Lewis advised that we should read one old book for every new one? It's not that he felt that ancient writers were any wiser than we are. Rather, when we read old books, we read them with the benefit of hindsight. What becomes abundantly clear is that when two sides of an issue square off, each being convinced that they have the corner on Truth and that they and their opposition could not be further apart, both sides are actually unaware of something quite obvious to those who look back on them. What later readers see is that both sides were united in being completely oblivious of a much larger issue, in relation to which their differences were quite small.<sup>1</sup>

Consider, for instance, a debate between two slave-holding groups in the early 1800s over whether or not enslaved people should be baptized and Christianized. Such

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, "On the Reading of Old Books," from his Introduction to Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*.

debates were easily as contentious as anything we debate today, yet in hindsight, what they were debating was minor in comparison to the problem neither side was seeing, or willing to admit to.

Is it possible that political and religious conservatives, as well as liberals, might share a profound blind spot – one that people in the future may see as obvious?

Let's try to ride this "Elephant of Bafflement" we're experiencing this morning by considering what both sides might be missing. I'll take a risk here, inviting you to play along. I'll describe three groups: A, B, and C. Based on the description, see if you can identify each group without naming a political party or religious group.

**Group A** generally:

- Embraces cultural diversity and scientific explanations.
- Prefers rationality over supernatural beliefs, often skeptical about the afterlife.
- Believes God is larger than any one religion.
- Speaks of social justice, though leadership tends to come from social elites, sometimes disconnected from the working poor.

Who group does this sound like?

**Group B** generally:

- Aligns closely with traditional religion.
- Believes in the supernatural and the afterlife, and tends to hold firm convictions about their beliefs.
- Views their faith as uniquely favored by God, often wary of outside norms.
- Speaks of a personal relationship with God, which appeals to working-class people.

Who might this describe?

**Group C** generally:

- Has given up on Groups A and B, feeling they are out of touch and even part of the problem.
- Sees the current order as needing to be destroyed in order to be fundamentally rebuilt.
- Believes a battle is brewing between Light and Darkness, with their group on the side of Light.

If you guessed that, when I speak of Group A, I'm referring to Democrats or religious liberals, and when I describe Group B, I'm talking about Republicans or religious conservatives, you're mistaken. And if you think that when I described Group C, I was referring to political or religious extremists in today's political or religious Right or Left, you're also incorrect.

I've been describing the three groups that existed 2,000 years ago! These descriptions refer to the three main religio-political groups of Jesus's time: Sadducees (Group A), Pharisees (Group B), and Essenes (Group C).

In Jesus's day, all three groups were pitted against each other. None could comprehend how a good or faithful person could be a member of the other groups. They accused one another of being backward and ignorant or even nefarious.

Incidentally, looking back it's easy to see that all three groups held a piece of the truth. The Sadducees were correct that the Divine is far greater than even their own religion could adequately describe or contain. Yet, they were spiritually vacuous, displaying little interest in the interior world of the human soul, or even belief in its existence. The Pharisees were correct that God is active in our world and can be experienced personally. But their version of God put God in a box that was far too small to fit in. The Essenes were correct that a major revolution was taking shape. Yet they believed in the power of the sword to accomplish it, not the power of truth and love.

Had these three groups actually listened to one another, respecting each other deeply enough to understand where the other was coming from, the First Century may have taken a very different path. Instead, all three groups missed the significance of Jesus's coming. At best, they considered Jesus irrelevant. At worst, they considered him a threat to their faith and values. Some participated in Christ's crucifixion.

Could something similar be happening today? Are we so busy fighting each other that we might be missing the most important work God is doing right now? Worse, could we be actively impeding the Spirit's progress toward our own liberation?

## **II. Riding the Elephant**

Ecclesiastes says, *"What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun."* This verse reminds me not to celebrate Donald Trump's election or mourn Kamala Harris's loss too deeply. In my view, Republicans, Democrats, conservatives, and liberals alike are missing something monumental—the biggest story of our era, perhaps the biggest story of the past two millennia.

That story is this: humanity is undergoing the most significant shift in consciousness since Jesus walked the earth.

If you feel that your political party or religious upbringing no longer adequately represents who you are and what you value, you may be part of this rising tide of awareness. If you feel that the various political parties and religious sects hold certain kernels of truth but are far from grasping the whole corn stock (not to mention the field), you are probably a child of the emerging new era.

What are the hallmarks of the new era? Here are seven of its pillars:

**1. Global Spiritual Awakening and Interfaith Dialogue:** Across the world, people are exploring spirituality outside traditional frameworks, blending practices, and emphasizing personal experiences of the divine. There's an increased openness to interfaith dialogue, as well as an interest in spiritual pluralism, where different religious and spiritual paths are respected and seen as complementary rather than competing. This mirrors the transformative approach of Jesus, who challenged established religious norms and emphasized a more direct, personal connection with God.

**2. Rise of Mindfulness, Meditation, and Inner Practices:** Practices such as meditation, mindfulness, and yoga have become mainstream, reflecting a growing interest in inner peace, self-awareness, and compassion. This widespread adoption suggests a shift from purely external forms of worship to inner spiritual work, promoting ideas of interconnectedness, presence, and alignment with a higher purpose. These practices help people focus, as Jesus did, on cultivating a "higher" consciousness and are ways to transcend ego-based thinking.

**3. Increasing Awareness of Global Unity and Interdependence:** Awareness of our interconnectedness—both ecologically and socially—has grown dramatically. Issues like climate change, social justice, and the COVID-19 pandemic have underscored how interconnected humanity is. There's a rising movement toward collective action, emphasizing that we are part of a larger, interconnected ecosystem and that our actions have global consequences. This aligns with teachings of compassion and mutual responsibility central to Jesus' message.

**4. Interest in Near-Death Experiences and Other Consciousness Studies:** Studies on near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, and psychedelic research are contributing to a growing fascination with consciousness beyond physical life. This shift toward exploring the mysteries of consciousness has sparked discussions on life, death, and the possibility of spiritual realms, challenging the materialist worldview that has dominated for centuries. These experiences often emphasize love, unity, and a "bigger picture," echoing themes central to Jesus' teachings on the Kingdom of Heaven.

**5. Growth of Compassion-Based Movements and Social Responsibility:** Across the globe, compassion-based movements are spreading, such as environmental protection, racial justice, LGBTQ+ rights, and ethical consumerism. These movements reflect a shift from self-centered to other-centered thinking, emphasizing empathy, equity, and compassion for all people and living beings. This mirrors the revolutionary compassion in Jesus' teachings, where love and care for others were central.

**6. Emergence of Scientific and Spiritual Convergence:** Quantum physics, neuroscience, and other sciences are opening doors to ideas once considered purely spiritual. Concepts like the observer effect, non-locality, and neuroplasticity point to a more profound, interconnected reality than previously understood. This convergence between science and spirituality supports a broader view of consciousness and reality

that aligns with ancient spiritual wisdom, suggesting that science and spirituality may be complementary paths to understanding existence.

**7. Focus on Personal Transformation and Inner Healing:** Many people are engaging in inner healing practices, such as therapy, shadow work, and emotional processing. This personal growth movement reflects a shift from external validation to inner wholeness. Inner transformation is seen as essential to addressing societal issues, echoing the spiritual transformation that Jesus and others have called for—a change from within to heal the world outside.

Did you notice that I've been preaching on these very themes all year long? Yes, there was a method to my madness!

History shows us that the religious and political factions of Jesus's time were blind to the most important event of their day. Will future generations say the same of us? Or will we wake up to what truly matters and help usher in this new era?

Let me close with an updated story of the elephant that should be in the room:

A group of blind people encountered an elephant, which no one had experienced before. Curious, each touched a different part of the elephant's body. One, whose hand landed on the trunk, exclaimed, "It is like a thick snake!" Another, whose hand reached its ear, countered, "No, it is like a fan." Still another, who felt its tusk, insisted the elephant was hard and smooth like a spear. And so it went, each person arguing or accusing one another of lying. Some even came to blows over whose account was correct.

Yet a young girl in their group, who had herself touched only a part of the elephant, remained silent. Listening carefully to each person's description, she gradually pieced together a fuller picture of the mighty beast. Filled with awe and wonder, she cried out, "Stop! Listen to one another. Each of you has felt a piece of the truth. We have encountered a much greater beast than we have imagined!"

The girl's evident joy of discovery convinced them to stop and listen to one another, then reach out and touch the parts others described. When they touched the whole elephant, they were overwhelmed with awe and wonder. While these blind observers had initially argued over whose truth constituted the whole truth, through listening to one another and experiencing what the others had experienced, they pieced together a view of the elephant that no sighted person could have by merely looking at it. They had touched every part of the beast, giving them intimate knowledge not only of what the elephant looked like but also of what it was like to connect with it directly.

If we're going to ride the elephant in this new era, we first have to reach out and touch it – with a little help from our friends ... and our enemies.

