

## **We've Been Here Before** The Rev. Clark Cowden

We've been here before. It feels like we're on the edge of a cliff. Our life together could go either way. It could fall apart and come unglued. Or it could come together with sinews and muscles that are so much stronger than we ever could have imagined. It is what we call the life of faith. It is scary because there are no guarantees, and we are afraid of losing something that has meant so much to us for so long. But we trust in the Lord Jesus Christ that as we teeter on the edge of the cliff, we won't fall over.

We've been here before. Joseph Ellis, in his book, *Founding Brothers*, makes this statement: "As (John) Adams remembered it, 'all the great critical questions about men and measures from 1774 to 1778' were desperately contested and highly problematic occasions, usually 'decided by the vote of a single state, and that vote was often decided by a single individual.' Nothing was clear, inevitable, or even comprehensible to the soldiers in the field at Saratoga or the statesmen in the corridors at Philadelphia... The real drama of the American Revolution... was its inherent messiness. This meant recovering the exciting but terrifying sense that all the major players had at the time—namely, that they were making it up as they went along, improvising on the edge of catastrophe."

We've been here before. We like to think that the founding leaders of our country were all united in their decisions, their vision, and their plans. In fact, just the opposite was true. They fought constantly. They were under a great amount of stress. Many of the states were reeling under the heavy financial debt of trying to pay off their Revolutionary War expenses. Their first attempt at a government failed miserably (the Articles of Confederation), and their second attempt (the Constitution) almost collapsed. They were sailing uncharted waters through which they had never been before, and they had to figure it out as they went, on the spot, just in time.

We've been here before. In 586 B.C., the Babylonians completely destroyed the nation of Judah. They murdered people in the sanctuary, they destroyed the temple, they stole the gold and the silver, they demolished the city walls and the government buildings, and they carried off people into exile. The Hebrews were devastated. Their whole lives had been completely uprooted, altered, and changed. The old world was gone. They didn't understand the new world. Babylon looked and felt so strange. They were not used to living in a culture with such different values, traditions, morals, beliefs, and worldview. Psalm 137 tells us that they sat down and cried. They didn't feel like worshiping God. They didn't know how to worship God in this strange land. They didn't know how to minister in a place so different from where they had lived their whole lives. They were teetering on the edge of a cliff.

We've been here before. And like our forefathers and foremothers before us, we wonder if we will ever make it out of the pit we have fallen into. God has promised to be our pillar of fire by night and our cloud by day, always with us, always leading us, but not yet revealing what our next destination will be. This in-between world, this transitional

world, is uncomfortable. It is difficult, it is unsettling, and it makes us nervous. But, in small, quiet, surprising places, God is beginning to grow some new missional plants in God's church. Seeds are being planted. Some have yet to push up above the surface, and some are only now beginning to spring forth. It's too early to tell what these new forms will look like. We only know they will look different from the plants to which we've become accustomed.

Our job as leaders and members in the North American church today is to cultivate an environment where these new forms are allowed to emerge from the bottom up. Our task is to create an environment of relationships, trust, openness, and learning that will allow the future of the church to emerge, even if it's not the future we would pick. For some it means praying, for some it means mentoring. For some it means learning new skills, and for some it just means getting out of the way. For all of us it means faith and trust that God is reshaping the church in North America. If we learn to get on board with the new missional work that God is doing, the results can be greater than we could ever imagine.

We've been here before. Feeling like we're on the edge of a cliff. It's not comfortable, and we can never completely relax. But, if we learn to balance on its energy, God will take us for the ride of our life!