

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
January 7, 2018

“Surprising Turns and Discoveries”

“When Paul had laid his hands on them,
The Holy Spirit came upon them, and they
spoken in tongues and prophesied ...”
Acts 19:6

Prelude:

A new year is upon us.
And don't you wonder
what will come of it?
Little do we know what any
year holds in store. We can
be certain only that we will come
upon surprising turns and discoveries.

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Our church tradition invites us
to consider baptism this morning.
It is not a universal practice in keeping
with Christians, but it is found among
those who adhere to the liturgical seasons.
Call it calendar instruction with tight packaging –
The sequencing of **Christmas**,
so fresh in our minds (I hope!), with its nativity,
and **Epiphany** - the Magi following the star,
the Bright Light roaming in a world
immured in night,
and **baptism**. Back to back to back.

John Westerhoff, once in the UCC,
who migrated into Episcopalian pastures,
once wrote a little book – *A Pilgrim People –
Learning through the Church Year*.

He says of this **“On the first Sunday after Epiphany, God’s story turns to Jesus’ baptism ... (baptism) ... reminds us of our necessary human response to God’s gracious act. God makes us a new people and our world a new world. We are called to respond by living in the world in ways that reveal to others that the possibilities of God are realities. We are to live so that when people look at us, they will see a manifestation of the life they long for and dream about...”** (*A Pilgrim People*, p. 62).

That’s quite a charge. Can you imagine?
When people look at us – they will see a
manifestation of life they long for and dream
about?

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Baptisms serve to recall that
God is merciful and kind and forgiving;
that God desires we be reconciled and at peace;
that we “know” we are accepted;
that we affirm birth and rebirth
as we grow in wisdom and
 knowledge of gospel.
We do not repeat baptisms,
as if the act is a compulsion.
But we do affirm – in the grace of God –
we can never be born enough.
As the poet, e.e. cummings has put it:
**“We are human beings; for whom birth
is a supremely welcome mystery, the
mystery of growing; the mystery which
happens only and whenever we are
faithful to ourselves ... Miracles are to come ...
They are by somebody who can love and who
Shall be continually reborn, a human being ...**
(Introduction, *Collected Poems*).

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Infant baptisms in church are often exciting events – may I say – entertaining liturgical acts. As a cleric, I don't have to worry about who may be watching me. All eyes are on the child, wondering what's the boy, that girl, going to do when startled by the water.

Baptism. To dip. To immerse. In water.
“**An outward sign of inward reality,**”
we sometimes say, an act
that is an affirmation of
the possibility of regeneration.
Rebirth.

Baptism. A sacrament part and parcel of what Johann Baptist Metz calls the “**dangerous memory**” preserved in the church.

Dangerous memory.

At the font we are reminded –
Divinity is dynamic – and when we meet –
when we encounter – when we converge –
we change. We regenerate.

The regeneration is discernible,
such that there is both an end,
and a beginning,
there is dying and
rising to new life
that conforms more fully
to what God desires.

Baptism – a sacrament of dangerous memory,
reminding us God, through the Holy Spirit,

is working in us, and through us, to grow us
as befits a child of God.

Permit a brief comment upon the scripture lesson.
Baptism is front and center. But note: it is
a ritual of faith not fully formulated.

We have disciples.
We have folks following the Way of the Lord.
Yet the full implications of what this means
is fluid; better said, it is evolving.

Two parallel episodes illustrate -
one involving a disciple by the name of Apollos,
who we know was a significant player in the
growth of the Christian movement.

Apollos was a leader in the movement.
He had been instructed in the Way (Acts 18:25);
he was an eloquent spokesperson;
he spoke with passion, “**burning enthusiasm,**”
and he was teacher,
teaching accurately, we are told,
the “**things concerning Jesus**” (Acts 25).
But we read in Acts, Apollos
“**knew only the Baptism of John.**”

It took the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila
to supplement, to boost, the ministry of Apollos,
that he might proclaim Gospel “**more accurately**”
(They “took him aside” we read,
to provide whatever it was he lacked).

This curious episode is followed by what we
heard this morning. Paul, in Ephesus,
encountering believers, disciples
(the terms appear to be interchangeable),
who profess no understanding

of the Holy Spirit.
 So Paul goes into download/update mode,
 engages in a laying on of hands with prayer
 that they might be brought up to speed
 with the Holy Spirit app.

What our author is telling us:
 different practices of baptism existed,
 as they continue to exist,
 some fixed to John the Baptist
 (a baptism of repentance and hope
 that help is on the way)
 and another fixed to Jesus
 (an affirmation the Help
 and the Helper has arrived
 and is available now);
 this second understanding
 apparently included a degree of ecstasy,
 the wonders of mystical speech,
 coupled with empowerment/zeal
 to practice prophetic ministry.

Both baptisms illustrate -
 God at work with us
 making us aware
 gospel always comes accompanied
 with **surprising turns and discoveries**
 that altar our lives for good.

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The new year before us.
 What might be in store for us?
 My guess: surprising turns and discoveries.

We are officially in a transition time,
 which should not be considered a “pause”
 or moratorium time. I hope and pray,
 at very basic level, that we individually

and collectively continue to grow in understanding of faith and its application. Like Apollos, we all have the capacity to be **“more accurately”** engaged in ministry.

I hope we resist the affliction of arrested development.

The challenge?

To get on with life, we need to give up some things that may hinder and work as deterrents to our faith.

“When I was a child I thought like a child, When I became of age - I “put an end to childish Ways” (I Corinthians 13:11); the NEB reads: “I ... finished with childish things.”

Gladstone:

“I do not believe that God’s mercies are restricted to a small portion of the human family ... I was myself brought up to believe that salvation depended absolutely upon the reception of a particular and very narrow creed. But long, long, have I cast those weeds behind me.”

What weeds do we need to cast behind us, that we may continue our advance?
This is a Sunday, this a season to ponder, not the changes that are imposed upon us, but that we foster and adopt in response to gospel.

I hope we remain generous in the new year, with our dollars - yes, and with our time; but also with our deeds, our acts of mercy, kindness, charity.

In being generous, I hope we are receptive

to surprising turns and discoveries,
not only about who we are, but what God intends
for us. This requires of us – not only intense examination,
but also imagination.

We want to resist an arrested development,
and the negative consequences
that mount when imagination fails.
I hope we are on the alert
and do not fall prey to patterns and
understandings that
fall short of what God desires.

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In the new year,
I hope that we maintain our
integrity as a faith community
entrusted with gospel.

I hope we all realize the prominent role
Christians have played in the “turn” that
has come upon our country. A new term
has come into play: “**court evangelicals**”
who are aligned with a political party,
who rather brazenly support nationalism
with hints of white supremacy, who
cheer the rich and misjudge the poor,
who would build walls and wash their
hands of addressing the immigrants
and aliens in our midst.

The court evangelical have been admitted
into the circles they have sought; they have
lusted for power and have been granted their desire,
but they have not the capacity to critique
the power they serve.

This is a corruption of gospel on a massive

scale. When people look at us, what do they see?

Do they see a manifestation of life they long for and dream about? Or do they see something terribly twisted and disfigured in the name of Christ?

While in the UK, I read that Franklin Graham was planning a possible crusade in England - and church leaders were alarmed - were voicing concerns - anxious over a bigoted religious expression that stirs ecumenical and interfaith discord.

We have our work cut out for us,
And our concern should focus on maintaining our integrity, our consistency, our reliability, our responsibility to be a people who pray to proclaim and practice faith in the love of God come to us in Jesus Christ.

The year before us will be challenging.
Do not despair if our advance is not universally shared, or given access to the high and mighty.
Take heart in the assessment of Amos Wilder:

**“Christian faith takes many forms
and hides under many disguises”**

(Amos Wilder,

New Testament Faith Today, 1954, p. 13-14).

Expect life to take surprising turns,
Expect to be thrilled with discoveries
of grace that spark regeneration.

Conclusion:

We are always in need of hope, are we not?

In the year before us – I pray that hope
abounds in our midst.

St. Augustine:

**“Hope has two beautiful daughters.
Their names are anger and courage;
anger at the way things are,
and courage to see that they
do not remain
the way they are.”**

May we all be so blessed.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*