

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
September 10, 2017

“From Generation to Generation”

“... This day shall be a day of remembrance for you.
You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord;
throughout your generations you shall observe it
as a perpetual ordinance.”

Exodus 12:14

PRELUDE

Our worship this morning is quite full.
Robust worship, you might call it.
Summer is fading and so also the
altered rhythms it provides.

Church school has formally resumed,
with festive air and celebration.
Bibles presented to eager children,
the church's book we hope they will
learn to love and appreciate and honor.

It is a joy to welcome a new member
(Jolynn Suko) and to be reminded of
upcoming mission activities (Climate
Change Boot Camp) - that keep us current
in practicing our faith. Amazing Grays
resumes following our time here.
Rev. Ruth will provide good humor.

The church and its face
is always in a state of flux;
the seasons come and go,
whether we be ready or not.

Last week I attended my 45th
high school class reunion - and some classmates
said to me: “You haven't changed much at all.”

I assume they meant I was recognizable,
which was some small consolation.
Change is the one constant
in life we count on;
early in my life, I took Isaac Watts to heart:
**“Time, like an everflowing stream,
bears all (of us) away ...”**

This week I reported to Executive Council
and in a letter sent to church members
my intention to step aside as senior
minister in August of 2018. It is a
concession I make to what time I have
been granted here. So a date is
on the calendar that enables the church
to prepare for transition.

We are not there yet. Until then,
I intend to keep preaching and praying to the
best of my ability. I intend to do what I can to
keep the church vital, healthy, and strong,
that new leadership can step aboard
and have a go of it,
and make difference,
and help Plymouth maintain and grow
the ministry that is here, for good.
Find the best – don’t settle for less.

Faces change – the seasons come and go.
But the mission – our mission of proclaiming
a broader expression of Christian gospel,
our mission of honoring the great loves,
(a) neighbor; (b) creation; (c) children
remains. And it is our charge, whoever
staffs the helm, to pass that gospel along
from generation to generation.

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From generation to generation.
That's what I want to address with my
remaining time this morning.

What gets passed from
generation to generation?
What has priority in the
curriculum of our faith?
What essentials always need to be at
the forefront of our
educational endeavors?

It was a decade ago that Stephen Prothero
published a book entitled:
*Religious Literacy - What Every American
Needs to Know - and Doesn't.*
Prothero's thesis - the U.S. is one of the most
religious nations in the world - yet it is filled
with a shocking degree of religious illiteracy.

There exists, Prothero contended, a troubling paradox -
there is an exceeding amount of religious vitality
in our nation, with so many knowing so little
about their own religious traditions.

This was so distressing for Professor Prothero that
he wondered aloud: is there a correlation
between fervent faith and religious ignorance.
The greater the ardor,
the more benighted the believer.

Mind you - this is well before
our current president,
then candidate and running for office,
confessed to a crowd he had no recollection
of ever having prayed for forgiveness;
and who later, before a student assembly
at Liberty University in Virginia, referred to
Second Corinthians as "Two Corinthians."

Prothero was not the first to express concern that religious fervor is often stoked by rhetoric at the expense of reason.

Richard Hofstadter assessed that
“ignorance is the mother of devotion”
in his study of Anti-Intellectualism in American Life.

And prior to Hofstadter, the 19th century church and Christian critic Robert Ingersoll noted
the reason everybody in the U.S believes in the Bible is that no one actually reads it
(see Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, p. 145).

Prothero issues warning –
“faith without works” (James 2:26) may be dead;
but believers beware:
“faith without knowledge is dangerous”
(see Prothero, p. 146).

It was Voltaire, outraged by ignorance,
outraged by institutional resistance to
enlightenment advance,
who took to signing all his correspondence,
“Ecrasez l’infame” (crush the infamous);
Voltaire’s ill-will was directed at the church
of his time, calcified, defiant of change,
staunch in defending and preserving the world
in which it was perched.

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From generation to generation.
This is the concern we find exposed
in our reading from Exodus.

Exodus, the **“centre of the Old Testament,”**
according to the Aussie scholar, Alan Cole.

My seminary president, B. Davie Napier,
in chapter one of his wonderful Old Testament survey
(*The Song of the Vineyard*),
did not begin in the beginning with Genesis,
but with Exodus, where God was first
working to bring order out of chaos,
life out of “living death” (the people
affixed in subhuman existence - without
freedom, leisure, choice, opportunity to be
creative; see *Song of the Vineyard*, p. 19).

Exodus - “the going out” of God’s people
(English equivalent of the Septuagint translation).

Exodus - wherein a beloved people are liberated
from the bondage that was an offense to God;
where God teams up with Moses, Aaron, Miriam,
sending them down to Egypt that a people
might exit, rise up, make way to promised land;
Exodus - where God acts both as creator and savior;
saving grace as a creative act.

Exodus - where there is a huge dilemma exposed;
it is easier to get the people out of Egypt than it is
to get Egypt out of the people.

Exodus - where we find the design for Tabernacle;
the dwelling place of God, in the midst of the
people God loves.

All this is to be passed from generation to generation.
But note - let us read carefully - in our lesson
Exodus gives liturgical instruction,
an outline and order of worship,
a basis of what to remember, but additionally
how to remember and why to remember.

If you delight in action thrillers,
Exodus is for you, the drama of how

to break a hard heart of a potentate
disinclined to let loose those whose
labor sustains the economy.

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What will break the chains?
What crisis will serve as a tipping point,
to bring about the change
God desires?

In Exodus we find a well-crafted script,
“**a series of piously decorated accounts**”
(*Interpreter's Bible*, p. 839) – the plagues.

An ecological crisis – pollution of the Nile;
infestation of frogs;
followed by gnats and flies,
and a plague that afflicted the
Egyptian livestock,
cattle, horses, camels,
the flocks and herds;
then comes an epidemic of boils,
skin lesions, making life miserable;
then hail, locust, and finally darkness,
a hot wind blowing desert sand,
eclipsing the sun, making day night,
causing people to bunker down,
to hide in holes as a means of escape.

Finally, the Passover.
An angel of death striking the first-born of the
household, every living thing, yet sparing
Hebrew people, for the blood having been
placed on the doorposts, God offering protection
and provision for the people that they might
get themselves out and into a better place.

Twenty years ago, Disney/Dreamworks, produced
the animated film: “The Prince of Egypt,”

an academy award winner with a great sound track,
which includes the Whitney Houston/Mariah Carey duet,
“When You Believe.”

*Now we are not afraid
Although we know there's much to fear
We were moving mountains long
Before we knew we could, oh yes*

*There can be miracles when you believe
Though hope is frail, it's hard to kill
Who knows what miracles you can achieve
When you believe, somehow you will
You will when you believe*

The plagues in “The Prince of Egypt” –
reduced to about 1½ minutes. And that
includes the Passover.

Here is what is curious: our lesson in Exodus
is placed in the text prior to the narrative that
tells the Passover story.

Our lesson tells the community
what to do in order to
remember the history worth passing on.

You want to be saved?
Do this.
Do this as a perpetual ordinance,
from generation to generation.
Don't let any one generation skip,
or delete, lest they fall, and miss
the blessing of promise, the freedom, the order,
the future, as desired by God.

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Lesson No. 1 –
This is our story, a Christian story,

no less than that of the Jews. We need know and honor the story every bit as well as any others who dare pay attention to it.

Lesson No. 2 -

Our memory and identity is tied to excellent offerings, and doorposts marked for safety and protection.

Lesson No. 3

When we enter this drama, it is with an understanding that it comes with a **“fierce urgency of now;”** that our going out is not to be postponed, not to be thrust into the future, but enacted in the present.

Recall the word of Frederick Douglas,

“I prayed (freedom) for twenty years and received no answer, until I prayed with my legs.”

So we gird our loins - which is an ancient expression meaning: **buckle up, baby, the ride is about to begin.**

Lesson No. 4

All that we do, all that we say, all that we pray, serves to bless and benefit our children.

The gift we provide is what one commentator has called an **“odd angle of vision.”**

An “odd angle of vision” that God has goodness and mercy and promised land in store for each and all who fall under God’s Passover protection.

From generation to generation.

Curious, there is no archival record in any Egyptian pyramid that tells this Exodus story. Google this story “back in the day” and it will come up blank. Egyptians, if they took notice, didn’t care to record it.

This also is a reminder: we are defined by the stories we tell and songs we sing and praise we sound. We are defined by Spirit, the One who is always making things new.

This is what we dare pass
from generation to generation:

We are an odd church where we
 revere the Jesus story.
We are determined to enact and impart Jesus love;
we want our children to know shelter,
 and to experience grace and mercy and acceptance;
we are an odd church, peculiar,
a church of saints and cranks,
abolitionists, feminists, novelists,
anti-racists, mixed up, a rainbow people,
of various abilities and intellects,
 who share great conviction,
who through the years, have butted heads with
whatever orthodoxy was ascendant at the time,
 trusting the Passover God who is willing
 to fight that we be free.

Amen.

*(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)*