

**Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC**

March 13, 2016

**“Hospitable to the Unexpected”**

“I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”  
Isaiah 43:19

**Prelude**

I'm thrilled that we have been able to recognize the work of Dan Wire this morning as our 2016 recipient of the Amistad Peace and Justice Award. In giving this award, we are expressing our most sincere appreciation and respect for all the efforts Dan has poured forth on behalf of the rivers that course their way through our city. Our community health and vitality and quality of life is inextricably linked and tied to the rivers that flow to the sea. Dan is a happy ambassador for the river, and we are better off for it. I'm grateful for the work of the Peace & Justice Committee of Plymouth Church, who determined it fitting that we honor Dan with the Amistad Award.

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The other day I happened to be in the Allen County Public Library. It is such an attractive, enjoyable interior space, at least to my eye. I appreciate the open and airy atmosphere, particularly the ground floor concourse that runs east/west pretty much through the length of the building.

Sometimes I'm there for a purpose;  
picking up or returning material.  
Sometimes I'm there simply as a  
means to end, for a walk through,  
on my way from some here to there,  
or back again as may be the case.

If time permits, I'll pause to consider

the library's great mural that stretches along the south wall. It's full of pithy quotes from ancient and modern notables, in various script and sizes. That's what I was doing the other day, wondering really who helped select and sort what was suited for public display. That would have been an interesting committee to serve on.

A Maya Angelou (1928-2014) quote gained my attention.

**"We need to haunt the house of history and listen anew to the ancestors' wisdom"**

I saw in this statement a wonderful summary of church, capturing the expanse of worship, offering insight into both what we do when we worship, and why. What intrigued me was the gravitas (literally the "weight" of what we do when we meet together).

I realize, of course, we gather for any number of reasons.

The company isn't bad.

The doughnuts grade out pretty well.

The song and spirit can be  
transforming of our mood,  
altering of our outlook,  
uplifting of our spirits  
in positive ways;  
at least this is the hope of our prayer.

We are here, so we say,  
for good,  
which is OK for banners and  
brochures to proclaim  
as we work through a capital fund  
campaign.

But the "**here, for good**" sound bite doesn't strike into the full depth of this enterprise of our Christian worship.

I suggest we are here,  
to haunt the house of history;  
we are here,  
    to listen, to obtain  
        the wisdom of the ages;  
    to possess and acquire  
        ancestral insights  
for our good and the good of those  
    we hope will follow.

We are here,  
not for the acquisition of knowledge,  
but for wisdom - which is essential for  
    managing what knowledge we  
    have acquired.

**“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up,”**  
Paul wrote to the Corinthians (I Corinthians 8:1).  
Wisdom is required to understand this  
distinction. We pray for wisdom to use  
our knowledge, that we might be participants  
in the building of a better world,  
and that we might acknowledge with praise  
the God who makes such endeavor possible.

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Our morning lesson from Isaiah -  
this is worthy for us to haunt.  
Not to be haunted,  
which conveys the sense  
of being fearful and subject to fear's manipulation,  
but to lodge ourselves, to become subjects,  
the haunters, the disturbers, the purveyors  
of the teaching the prophet would pass unto us.

Isaiah begins, evoking a powerful episode,  
a defining time for God's people. The God  
speaking to Isaiah is the God who **“makes a way  
in the sea, a path in the mighty waters”** (Isaiah 43:16).

This is the God of the Exodus,  
who parted the sea that Moses and those  
under his care might take leave of Egypt's bondage  
and get themselves to freedom land.

This is the God who laid waste to Pharoah's army;  
those described in scripture as being  
**"dead upon the seashore"** (Exodus 14:30);  
those described in Isaiah as having been  
**"extinguished, quenched like a wick"** (Isaiah 43:17).

This is the God who reached deep into the  
heart of an empire, to save and redeem a  
people denied their dignity and the fullness  
of their lives, caught in a system in which they  
did not count and their well being did not matter.  
The people were nothing in Egypt;  
but God elevated them into a state of being  
beloved, precious;  
God brought them into a sweet land;  
a land where liberty and justice,  
law and order, defined life.

Isaiah knows that history.  
Yet he proceeds to speak a strange thing.  
Isaiah is a cheerleader for remembering  
(see Isaiah 44:21; 46:8-9; 47:7).  
Bearing memory - accurately, faithfully,  
is a moral and spiritual obligation.  
So isn't it strange for Isaiah to speak:  
**"Do not remember the things of old ...  
I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert"** (Isaiah 43:19).

The wisdom of the prophet is this:  
we can be so bound in a past that it blinds us,  
and we can't see, we are denied the  
wonder of all that is unfolding now. Indeed, Isaiah  
wants to know: **"Do you not see all  
that God is doing now?"**

Are you not awake and alert to all  
the transformations God is undertaking?  
Are you not awake and alert to all God  
is doing that your thirst might be satisfied?

Church –  
we need to haunt Isaiah’s house of history;  
listen anew to the ancestor’s wisdom.  
Isaiah may have uttered this word;  
but somebody recorded,  
    and somebody preserved it;  
and somebody made sure  
    it was passed along,  
and somebody put it into  
    the Sunday School rotation,  
and somebody else made sure  
it wasn’t lost and discarded  
    along the way.

It is a grand, wonderful vision –  
all creation plays a part;  
it is not other-worldly,  
but intensely focused upon being here, for good;  
and it’s not an anthropocentric; or humanocentric vision;  
we, as humans, are not seen as being “**exceptional**,”  
a superior species vested with rights and privileges,  
such that we are entitled to play havoc  
    with creation’s ecospheres.

In Isaiah’s house of history,  
God’s grand design makes  
provision for wild animals, and  
resources abound,  
the creation serves its purpose,  
to such a degree that  
God be honored and praised.

Along the way we have lost this  
sense of interconnectedness;  
we are not awake and alert to  
ties that bind us to earth and air  
and water; and to each other.

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We are people called upon to haunt  
the house of history, not to dwell in  
the past, but to find in the past what  
will instill hope today and trust for  
tomorrow.

We haunt the house of history,  
not to be stuck in the past, but  
to understand the novelties of God.  
Novelty is embedded in our history.  
God arising, surprising,  
    doing a “new thing.”  
Do you not perceive it?  
God is working with us,  
that we might make history,  
and shape the future.

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Have you ever heard or seen the quote,  
**“Well-behaved women seldom make history”**?  
You may have encountered this on a coffee mug,  
seen it on a bumper sticker, maybe on a T-shirt  
or a greeting card.

There is quite a history to this quote.  
In 1976 Laurel Thatcher Ulrich,  
a Harvard professor, wrote a scholarly  
article about Puritan funeral practices.  
And in this article, she wrote expressing  
her scholarly judgment on the women  
she was studying. **“Well-behaved women  
seldom make history.”**

The phrase was quickly picked up and  
went viral; it started popping up all over the place.  
It gained a currency that surprised Ulrich,  
who then later wrote a book using the title:  
*Well-Behaved Women*, in which she examined  
the ways in which women were agents of change,  
history makers - women like Rosa Parks,  
Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Virginia Woolf.

Much of this is on my mind because  
Plymouth Church wouldn't be the Plymouth  
Church of today, without well behaved  
members willing to make history,  
willing to haunt the house of history,  
to listen for wisdom speaking;  
without struggling, advocating,

defending, pushing, daring to believe,  
to see and celebrate God doing a new  
thing, now, for a more just, more kind  
and considerate church community.

It was H.G. Wells who once said,  
**“Adapt or perish, now as ever,  
is nature’s inexorable imperative.”**  
Jesus didn’t say this, but he lived it in  
his well-behaved life; he was awake and alert,  
committed still to showing us  
the way of love,  
the love in which we hope and pray to live,  
without which we perish.

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I’d like to close with a quote  
from Daniel J. Boorstin (1914-2004):

**“The most important lesson of American history  
is the *promise of the unexpected*. None of our  
ancestors would have imagined settling way over  
here on this unknown continent. So we must  
continue to have society that is *hospitable to the  
unexpected*, which allows possibilities to develop  
beyond our own imaginings.”**

Being “hospitable to the unexpected.”  
It is a teaching to be found whenever  
we haunt the house of history,  
as old as Isaiah, as fresh as today:

**“Do not remember the things of old...  
I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert” (Isaiah 43:19).**

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)*