

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH – Scripture & Sermon
22nd January 2023 – 3rd Sunday After The Epiphany

WORSHIP FOCUS: Strength

It is good to love many things, for therein lies the true strength, and whosoever loves much performs much, and can accomplish much, and what is done in love is well done. — *Vincent Van Gogh*

CALL TO WORSHIP: Psalm 27

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.

One thing I asked of the LORD;
this I seek:

to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;

I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud;
be gracious to me and answer me!

“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
Your face, LORD, do I seek.

Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.

Do not cast me off; do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!

If my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will take me up.

Teach me your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.

Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.

Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!

1st LESSON: Isaiah 9:1-4 (NRSV)

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.

You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

2nd LESSON: Matthew 4:12-23 (NRSV)

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them.

Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

REFLECTION: “Immediately?”

How quickly does it take for you to make a decision?

Are you the kind of person who makes a decision quickly? Are you the kind of person who takes their time, and weighs out the options? Or, are you the kind of person who puts off making decisions, and then ends up having to quickly decide at the last minute?

Most of us take a while to decide to do something. A recent article in the UK Newspaper, the Daily Mail, published some interesting findings on our decision making speed.

We take 3 minutes and 13 seconds on average to decide what we are having for lunch. But, when we are trying to decide what to have for dinner it takes a little longer – 4 minutes and 55 seconds. And, if we want to go out and buy a bottle of wine to go with that dinner, it takes us 6 minutes and 25 seconds.

Apparently it takes most people 5 minutes and 37 seconds to decide what they are going to wear each day. And, 10 minutes and 8 seconds to decide if are going to buy a new article of clothing.

More important decisions take longer. It takes us 5 days and 18 hours to decide who we are going to vote for in an election. We deliberate 7 days and 13 hours before deciding where we might go for our holidays. And, we take 9 days and 10 hours to decide in the first place whether or not we should take that holiday. If we are considering marriage, that takes 8 days and 12 hours. And, if we are thinking about children, that takes the same amount of time – 8 days and 12 hours. And, every year when we need to buy that special birthday present for our loved one, that takes 10 days and 6 hours.

Most of us, even when we are deciding simple things such as what to eat or drink, avoid making hasty decisions. And, certainly when the decision is an important one, making that decision can take much longer. Think, for example, how long it takes for us to decide to downsize, go back to school, or to redecorate or renovate our homes.

Making decisions is hard work. Deciding is hard work, especially if we are tired. How many of us, for instance, have decided to spend a nice relaxing evening watching television, and instead, have ended up spending most of the night trying to decide what we might like to sit back, relax, and actually watch? Deciding to act is hard work, especially if it involves confrontation with another. How many of us are long overdue for a heart-to-heart conversation with someone that we love, because we know it is going to be difficult. Deciding is hard work, if it involves something new – a new idea, a new action, a new relationship, a new adventure, a new plan. All of us know what we know, and have made our peace, more or less with it. Deciding to change and move away from what we know, even if to others the way we are living is not very appealing, is extremely hard. Indeed, we may dither over the hard decisions for years, and in our dithering, do nothing until time or events force us to take that first step.

Many of you may remember the scene in the 1970s musical *Oliver*, in which Ron Moody, playing Fagin, opens the floorboards in his decrepit loft while his boys are asleep, and pulls out all the treasures he has stored up for his old age. He looks at them in the glow of the fire wistfully. Wonderingly. And, he wonders about his situation, singing a song that starts with the words, “I’m reviewing the situation. . . .” He wonders if it is time to turn away from being a crook, and become a respectable man. And he wonders about being loved by a wife, and having a family, and respectability. And in the way he sings about and imagines this dream, we realize if Fagin decided to change – if he had the courage to do so – he has all the gifts and the smarts to make a real change for the better. But, we know he won’t. We know he has sung this song many times. Because, each chorus ends with him dithering – I think I better think it out again!

Sometimes we so deliberate and agonize and avoid making important decisions that social scientists worry about our ability to make decisions that require immediate action. For example, climate change is a very real threat today, and yet, over and over again our society has put off making real decisions that might thwart the crisis.

It is curious, that although we don’t make decisions quickly, that in so much of our sacred scripture important decisions are made so very quickly. An angel comes in the night and warns Joseph to get out of Israel, and presto – the family moves to Egypt. John the Baptist sees Jesus at the banks of the River Jordan, and he knows, immediately, that the one he has been waiting for has arrived. When Jesus finds out that John has been arrested, he immediately leaves Nazareth where he is known and has spent most of his life, and retreats to Capernaum. Like John the Baptist, he asks people to repent, for the Kingdom of God is near – and many do, on the spot.

There is no apparent dithering as these courageous decisions are made. Indeed, in the story of the call of the first disciples, their decision is immediate. As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

As Jesus went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them.

Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Immediately is certainly not today's way. Today's way is the way of rational deliberation, careful consideration, and attempts to hedge our bets. The way that important decisions are made in the Bible, seems so very different – a time when the Holy Spirit seems to take hold of people, and they become convinced, enthusiastic and persuaded very quickly. Indeed, although it is not our way, scripture clearly sees the ability for us to make such immediate, life-changing, and extravagant decisions as sometimes being necessary.

Years ago, one of the founders of our denomination, John Wesley, was at a bible discussion meeting one evening in London. The people he met with were early Methodists – one of the most rational of religious groups. Indeed, they came to be called Methodists, because of their methods – the way that they balanced scripture, tradition, experience and reason to discern the will of God. Methodists were deliberate, careful, they weighed things out.

And yet, what happened that evening as John Wesley was walking home from this meeting with his friends, was precisely one of these Holy Spirit moments of enthusiasm – an instantaneous reversal of his being. John, as he wrote in his diary, suddenly felt his heart (not his mind) to be “strangely warmed.” And, it was this experience that persuaded him to stop meeting carefully behind closed doors at the university with fellow theologians, and to get out there, pitch a tent, and start preaching to coal miners and their families and factory workers in the midlands. And that changed everything. We would not be here today, if it were not for that moment when God gave John Wesley the courage to take another road. Just as we would not be here today if Paul had not had a similar experience on his own road, and been changed in an instant by his experience of the risen Christ – becoming not a prosecutor of Christians, but one of the greatest evangelists of the faith.

God is my light and saving health, the psalm tells us. God is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?

These words are true. And yet to follow God, and believe that the yoke is going to be easy to bear is sometimes hard to believe. Indeed, the yoke of our burden, and the bar across our shoulders, the rod of oppression, often seems sometimes impossible to break.

And yet, the psalm tells us to be strong and wait. It assures us that the rod will be broken. The Psalm repeats, and echoes the astonishing words of Job: “I believe that I shall see God's goodness in the land of the living. Wait for God; be strong and take courage; Yes, wait for God!”

Beloved, know that we may seem like we are taking a long time to dither. It may seem like sometimes we might not know what to do, or how to do it. But, scripture assures us that when God comes, when God is with us, when the Spirit blows, we will be ready. We will choose, we will be persuaded, and we will be enthusiastic.

This season after epiphany is a season in which Christians commit to the belief that anything can happen – that God is breaking in. That at any time, the people who sit in darkness will see a great light, and for those who sit in the region and shadow of death, light is dawning.

When God calls, you will be ready. I know you will. John spent his life urging people to repent and wait for the one who was coming. And, John spent most of his life waiting. But when Jesus appeared, he had the strength to know and to proclaim the truth.

As we wait. As we sit in the light of the season of epiphany know that although we usually take time to make important decisions, we are ready for God to come. We wait for the Lord, confident that we are ready to respond.

Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!