

Stumbling Toward the Light

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
December 3, 2017 ~~ First Sunday of Advent
Text: Isaiah 9:2-7

Yesterday was a phenomenal day here at the church. Our Bazaar, the result of efforts that have gone on for quite literally a year, was one of the most successful we've ever had. It was a wonderful day, an extraordinary day. Energy was high. Crowds were large and enthusiastic and came ready to spend. The Tea was phenomenal. The Gift Baskets, well, what can I say. The Greens were spectacular. The Bake Room – well, gained 5 pounds just walking in there! And every room was more wonderful than the next. Every room, room after room, was delightful and fun and was putting smiles on people's faces. I was sitting in the corner of Fellowship Hall with the little Christmas Trees -- a post I thoroughly enjoyed and am already thinking about for next year by the way – so I could see all the smiles, all the energy, all the enthusiasm in everyone.

I watched people come in tired and stressed and watched them be transformed by the whole experience of their Christmas encounter here. Spirits lifted. Smiles appeared. Generosity flowered. I had several people tell me the Christmas Trees were priced too low so they would give me big bills and tell me to keep the change for the church. I watched entire families as well as

groups of friends connect over the Tea, laughing and relaxing. I watched as our crew of workers in the kitchen held their breath while the inspector did his thing and then handed us the paperwork telling us we passed. Everyone was nervous about this new bar we had to pass in order to operate and rightfully so, but pass it we did, and with flying colors I might add. This was a real morale booster of sorts since that passing grade meant that our kitchen of which we have all been so proud for so long really is commercial quality, and we are capable of using that capability to its fullest potential. We faced a very scary proposition with that now mandatory inspection and we did it. We did it! God indeed works in mysterious ways, building up our collective self-confidence through a new requirement that scared the be-jeebies out of us. But we faced our fears – and thrived because of our ability to conquer them.

So it is with challenges and fears. They scare us. Sometimes they terrify us. We think we can never escape them, we can never defeat them. We want to run and hide. We want to pretend the challenges and fears, whatever they are in that moment, aren't even there. We want to step over them, walk past them, ignore them and just go on the way we had intended until whatever it is forced itself unbidden into the middle of our lives. Dear Ones, that is a very natural, very human response. And it is also the precise moment when our faith kicks into high gear and we find a

way somehow to engage with the challenge, the fear, the problem before us. Through the grace of God in those moments we come face to face with who we are and what we can do when we trust God and just do it, whatever “it” is.

The results of these kinds of encounters, these kinds of facing down our fears by working our way right through the middle of them, is confidence building. That’s true and for that reason alone, they are important. But they’re also much more than that. Their impact extends far beyond their personal impact on us as individuals. The ability to meet these challenges – these terrifying, potentially life-altering challenges that come into our lives unbidden and unwanted – provide us with a unique opportunity to be a special kind of messenger for God in the midst of our trials and challenges. We are given the chance to become prophets. God gifts us, through these challenges we must work through, the opportunity to become something extraordinary in the process. God makes us prophets in training.

Me, a prophet? Yes, you. Every time you do something you think you can’t, you face something you don’t want to face, you walk forward through a situation you’d give just about anything to avoid, you become a prophet – a messenger from God. How? In the simplest way possible – just by being an example, a living person who faced something you thought you couldn’t and triumphed over it, in however grand or small a way that might be.

It's not the size of the challenge or the grandness of the triumph that makes you a prophet. It's your example of faith and determination to others that does. Anyone can be a prophet. Any situation faced and survived with faith as your companion and shield makes you a prophet. Being a living, shining example to others that hope is still alive and well makes you a prophet.

And dear friends, our world today is desperately in need of prophets of all kinds – old and young, energized and exhausted, articulate and quiet, shy and outgoing. The world needs prophets now more than ever before as the national and international news becomes more dire by the day. Rationality has gone out the window. We have people trying to tell us all the time what the Bible says, according to them. We have people trying to label any information that disagrees with their perspectives and desired outcomes as “fake.” We have individuals in positions of power who seem to have forgotten that with power and privilege comes also great responsibility. And that responsibility is first and foremost to those at the bottom of the economic and social ladder. Jesus tells us that over and over again. The Old Testament, from the patriarchs to the judges to the kings to the prophets, tells us over and over again that each one of us is responsible for caring for the least of us. God has no means test. God has no interest in the profitability of corporations or how high the stock market soars. God cares about people, and only about people. And God

expects us to do the same. And to do that, to remember that, God sends us prophets. God makes us prophets. Each and everyone of us. As we experienced yesterday, first hand.

Every time a stranger entered this church yesterday, they were welcomed by you as beloved of God. With smiles and “Merry Christmas” greetings literally bouncing off the walls, you all became Christmas for the people who were visiting us yesterday. And I thank you for that. More importantly, God thanks you for that. Really? Yes. Because for some of our guests yesterday, coming here to attend the Bazaar is the only time they will ever set foot in a church. This can be for all sorts of reasons. They never had the opportunity as children. Or, they had a really bad experience with church at another point in their lives and now avoid churches like the plague. But, the extraordinary nature of our efforts in the Bazaar drew even those people in here – to a church. So for those people who were here yesterday, and I guarantee these church-avoiding folks were some of the people in our midst, you need to know they were amazed by what they experienced here yesterday as what it could mean to be church. A church!!! You opened their eyes to a new possibility, and that dear ones, is prophetic. You were prophets yesterday! Celebrate that! Own it!

And then here’s the real challenge. Continue to live prophetic lives as you move forward through this Advent season.

Continue to be those living, shining examples of hope and joy, love and peace that Advent is all about. Continue to be prophets in the midst of your own lives each day! And then you will be part of God's plan for the future. You will help all those other folks who are stumbling toward the light that Isaiah talked about in today's text: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who live in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined."

Dear ones, as we begin this journey through Advent together, dare to live as the prophets you already are. Dare to show the way forward to others in need of hope, of light, of new beginnings at this moment in their lives. Dare to be living proof that with God all things are indeed possible. Dare to hold the flashlight for everyone around you who is stumbling toward the light of God. Just remember, you only need to walk from one circle of light to the next one. You never know who might be walking through the darkness into that light right along with you but just out of your sight. You never know who you are leading forward just by being you. Dear ones, dare to be the prophets God created you to be, the prophets God needs you to be in the fragile, broken world we live in every day. Dare to trust that you can be that ray of light someone needs, just by being you. Amen.