

## ***“In the Midst of New Directions”***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on November 8, 2020  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
Text: Exodus 13:17-22

I chose this hymn, one I am aware is not as familiar to you as others we have included in our reflections this fall, quite intentionally. When I was planning this sermon series, it was very clear that this election would be both extremely contentious and truly monumental in determining what our beloved country will be in the years and decades to come. As I sat down to write this on Saturday morning, four full days after the election, the outcome was still not finalized. That changed late Saturday morning and now we know we do have a new President and Vice President. Those four days of indecision left a mark on all of us, though, and will be a part of the healing now so desperately needed in this country we love, whether we consider ourselves to be “red,” “blue” or “purple.” Indeed, everyone’s worries about this election proved to be true. But so did the statements of election experts, partisan and non-partisan. They were telling us back in the middle of the summer that the election results would most likely not be clear until days if not a week or two after the election. I guess we should count ourselves blessed it only took four days, although let’s be sure to acknowledge that the election is not over yet. There are more votes to be counted in several states, some recounts pending and then comes the arduous process required to get the vote confirmed in the Electoral College.

But, here we are right now, in this moment when history shifts yet again. I think it’s worth reminding ourselves of the many reasons counting the vote took so long. Mostly it comes down to the simple fact that the Pandemic caused way more folks to vote by mail and/or absentee ballot and those kinds of ballots take much longer to count because of the strenuous verification measures in place to preclude voter fraud. Legislation in some states prohibiting the counting of mail/absentee ballots until Election Day was also part of the problem. We owe tremendous gratitude to the election officials, poll workers and ballot counters across this country who have done everything humanly possible to insure that the vote count is accurate, despite what some fear mongers are saying. These folks know all too well how important their work is when it comes to the future of our country.

Kudos to them for doing it so conscientiously and so meticulously in spite of the tremendous pressure they have been under to go fast. Honestly, I have never been more proud to be an American. The pace of this election is proof positive that this country and our election system works. Good people take their work very, very seriously and are doing it to the absolute best of their ability. Courageously is also a fair description of their actions as well, given that in several cities there are armed militia members camped outside counting facilities. I don't know about you but I would find that very, very disconcerting if not alarming. Yet these humble civil servants – that's who they are, remember – just keep plugging along, doing the work they were hired by our government to do. God bless them, one and all!

So, back to the hymn I chose for our reflections today – “In the Midst of New Dimensions.” This is a new hymn having been published less than 30 years ago. That makes it a toddler in the lifespan of a hymn! I was introduced to it at some UCC function I was attending back in the late 90's shortly after it was chosen for inclusion in the *New Century Hymnal*. I instantly fell in love with it. The tune is lofty and inspiring yet surprisingly easy to sing. And the lyrics are simply miraculous capturing as they do the ethos of this time, this moment, in American history when our very identity as a nation feels like its on the line. Will we continue to be the place where the world's huddled masses can look to for a new beginning, where our own people of different races and ethnicities can ultimately find justice? Dear ones, I do not believe I am alone in believing our great country has lost her way as too many of those in power on both sides of the aisle have worried more about retaining power than what is in the best interest of the common people. We are truly “in the midst of new dimensions, in the midst of changing ways.” We must find our way forward through this new reality of technology driven, pandemic constrained, and economically fraught confusion to get where it is our country needs to be both on the world stage and, more importantly, right here at home. Truly there is so much work to be done that extends way beyond one election, important as it is.

The story of this hymn is, in a way, the story how we came to be in this moment as a nation. The hymn was written by Julian B. Rush who was an ordained Methodist minister working in youth ministry in Texas and Colorado. In that role, he used his talents as a musician, composer and

playwright to great advantage. That's why he was approached by church officials in 1985 to write a hymn for the upcoming Rocky Mountain Annual Conference of the United Methodist Churches in the area. The new bishop, the Rev. Roy Sano, a Japanese-American, was being commissioned to his new role and the theme of the entire conference was diversity. Rush gladly obliged and this hymn is the result of his efforts. Unfortunately, the message of the hymn did not receive the enthusiastic response both the conference leadership and Rush were hoping for. Diversity was an emerging topic of consideration at that time and the embrace of the idea was moving at a snail's pace. Sound familiar? Anyhow, the fate of the hymn, and of Rush, hung in the balance when Rush left his wife and came out as a gay man. He was hoping for support from the church where he was serving at the time since he believed them to be a progressive congregation. Turns out they were not and he was removed from his position there and no other appointments were forthcoming for him within the United Methodist system for pastoral placements. So, he took a job at Montgomery Ward for a time. He was eventually offered a voluntary, unpaid position at St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Denver, CO, the first United Methodist Church to declare itself to be a "Reconciling Congregation," the United Methodist version of Open and Affirming.

Since the time it was first composed, the hymn has become the bedrock of inclusive worship in many Protestant traditions, including us in the United Church of Christ. Filled with vivid biblical imagery, the hymn is both prayer and challenge to all who sing it. So many of the questions it raises are just as relevant this morning as they were when Rush first wrote them more than 35 years ago: "Who will lead the pilgrim peoples, wandering in their separate ways" from the first verse; "Who will lift the olive branches? Who will light the flame of care?" from the second verse being just some of the questions Rush poses. Important for us to remember is that he is asking those questions of us and, dear ones, in the wake of these last four years capped by such a fraught election, those questions feel even more relevant this morning than they ever have. So, dear ones, it is truly time – past time really – when everyone in this country needs to work on finding answers to these very questions raised by Rush. And how do we go about doing that?

Let's turn our attention to the Exodus text we read this morning to see what insights it might have to offer us. It is the dramatic story of the first moments of the exodus – the escape of the Israelites from Egypt under the leadership of the great prophet, Moses. Except we need to remember, as the text makes clear, that the real leader of this ragtag group of fugitive slaves was not really Moses. It was God's own self. "The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light that they might travel by day and by night." God's own self took tangible form, visible to all, and led the people forward into a new beginning. This is the same God who had finally broken the iron will of the Pharaoh who endured 10 plagues before finally relenting and releasing the Israelites. This was done in the heartbreaking aftermath of the Passover when the Angel of Death claimed Pharaoh's own son while passing over the houses of the Israelites which had been marked with the blood of sacrificial lamb's blood. God knew that soon Pharaoh's anger would be rekindled when the shock and grief subsided and so it did with the Egyptian army soon in hot pursuit of the fleeing Israelites. So, traveling by day and night made possible by God's own self was yet another example of the miracle of God acting in history, of God's abiding presence with God's beloved people.

This is the God Rush proclaims in the refrain which follows every verse of this hymn: "God of rainbow, fiery pillar, leading where the eagles soar. We your people, ours the journey now and ever, now and ever, now and ever more." In this powerful imagery that we can almost see as we sing, we find the reminders of God's abiding love of God's people, of God's active presence in the day to day life of history as it unfolds. Also, please note Rush's emphasis on the infiniteness of God's love guiding us on this unending journey to live God's vision for the world into reality. He has us repeat the phrase "now and ever" three times – the recommended mnemonic for helping anyone to remember anything. Now and ever, now and ever, now and ever more" God is with us on this journey to the new dimensions ever being revealed.

Never has our lived experience here "in the midst of new directions" ever felt more real, more urgent, than it does in the midst of this election that will literally determine the future of our country in ways we can

scarcely truly comprehend in the moment. Never has Rush's question "Who will lead the pilgrim peoples wandering in their separate ways?" felt more relevant as the aftermath of the election is yet unclear. One thing I do know for sure, though, is what our role as the followers of Jesus must be. We must be the ones to lift the olive branches to the people with whom we disagree. We must use the strength of our faith in Jesus and his unequivocal commitment to love for all of God's people to reach out with care and concern to the people who have been so battered and bruised by this election season, and indeed the past four years. And, dear ones, let's be clear, that those hurt and injured, angry and fearful people are on both sides of this cataclysmic red/blue divide in our beloved country. Never forget the reason we are in this mess is because this entire country lost track of who we are. For decades, the US has been the world's conscience and the world's hope. For decades, we have espoused the need to take care of everyone and then failed miserably in doing so. No wonder the electorate exploded into fury and anger, as power and wealth kept concentrating in fewer and fewer hands. No wonder faith in the institutions of this country, including the mainline churches, waned. We were too complacent in living up to the responsibility of carrying God's vision of shalom into the midst of all the emerging new dimensions as the contours of a technology driven paradigm shift upended everything we thought we knew about life and each other.

Dear ones, the good news is that it's not too late. It's not too late – it's never too late – to take up the mantle of God's challenge to us framed so beautifully in Julian's Rush's hymn. Who will lead the pilgrim peoples wandering in their separate ways? We will, even though how we will be able to remains unclear. Who will lift the olive branches, light the flame of care? Dear ones, we will for this is the challenge God has placed before us in this moment, in the living of these days. May God grant us the wisdom and courage we will need for the journey ahead. May God raise us up on those eagle's wings. Amen.