

Joel..: After all of this...
Acts: In the last days it will be..

The prophet Joel speaks of an invading army and plagues assaulting the people of God, sounding very much like the political and social unrest of our day and the plague of this evolving coronavirus. The prophet's answer to the prevailing darkness is for all the people to repent and turn toward God, which they do, and God's answer to them is timeless and changeless: mercy and compassion and inspiration:

your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men and women shall see visions, and your old men and women shall dream dreams.

The prophecy and visions and dreams of the people are God's response to hardship.

On the day of Pentecost, huddled in fear, thinking the powers that crucified their Lord would unleash violence upon them, the disciples gather to pray, and the Holy Spirit rushes in, burning away their fears, uniting them in all of their striking differences, enabling them to understand one another though they come from different places and speak different languages, and in response to the scoffers who say they are merely drunk, Peter rises up to preach, quoting the prophet Joel:

your children shall prophesy, your young men and women shall see visions, and your old men and women shall dream dreams.

Friends: it is time for prophetic visions and dreams.

Let us Pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be pleasing to you O God, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen

In the past few weeks, I have endeavored to talk with you about our common calling, encouraging us to hear God calling us through these challenging times, calling us to open our hearts to the light that comes to us in the darkness, in dark times.

This week, with our annual meeting scheduled to begin in a few minutes, I have been reflecting on the few months we have had together, though we have spent all of this time apart, plagued by the coronavirus.

I break with my discipline of following the readings assigned to us by the lectionary to share with you my sense of how God is calling us individually and as a church.

We have two questions to answer with our lives and together as a church:

Who are we?

Where are we going together?

As I have repeatedly said, I cannot answer these questions for you individually nor for us as a church together, and yet we answer these two questions every day of our lives, either intentionally and purposefully, or unintentionally, dragged through time by fears or busyness or politics or obligations we are afraid to break.

When we suffer hardships or invasions or plagues, says the Prophet, we are called to turn toward God, who is ready and waiting to lead and to guide us, to restore us with new visions of who we are in Christ, and to inspire dreams of our mission in the world.

As individuals, we experience the intentional answering of these questions as a sense of purpose and meaning, empowering us to move away from relationships and habits of despair that destroy the life within us, and toward the life God intends for us.

As a congregation, we experience the intentional answering of these questions as an ability to make decisions, to thrive in our diversity, to learn and grow through hard times such as the one we are living in, and also through times when the demanding need for change press us to the breaking point.

Again and again I say: faith does not solve our problems, nor make everything easily work for us; faith is neither simple nor straightforward but is a lifelong relationship with God and neighbor, filled with mountains and valleys, hard times when nothing makes

sense, and good times when we can see how everything works together for the greater good.

Somehow, despite all the opposition prophets face and conflict they heighten, and despite the manifold failings of the disciples, still we see difficulties and struggles as a problem to be managed or solved rather than the challenges through which we meet God, in which we learn about ourselves, and because of which we form new, life giving relationships with our neighbors and also with those we have come to see as enemies.

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This is rather a lot to take in, so let me tell you a story.

Wednesday was a glorious snow day.

I got up early and got to work, so I would have time to snowshoe in fresh snow across lake Monona.

By the time I broke free, it was snowing a little; the wind was from the North by Northwest at about 10 mph. It is always windier on the lake.

I set out to walk across the lake heading to South by Southeast, the wind at my back.

I try to walk a straight line across the lake, a mile and half to a park on Winnequah Road.

In the middle of the lake, the wind was howling. I began to notice open patches without snow, and I was afraid despite knowing better; it looked like open water to me.

I had seen someone riding a fat bike right down the middle of the lake a few days earlier. I had seen ice fishers out there. In fact, there was a guy parasailing on a snowboard out there while I walked, and yet those patches of ice right out in the middle looked like open water to me.

I imagined headlines: Local pastor falls through the ice, dies walking into open water....must have thought he could walk on water.

I kept walking in a straight line as possible forcing myself not to avoid the open patches of ice and soon learned the howling wind had spirited away the snow: the open patches were ice with the snow blown away.

When my brain got over my fears, I began to see contours in the snow, high, drifting moguls and slick ice valleys. I began walking the easiest path I could find, slaloming my way on an easy path with the wind at my back, enjoying every minute of it.

It was such a delight I started laughing right out loud.

It was an Epiphany: that moment of sudden vision, when we see clearly what has been hidden by fears and habits or traditions or relationships that blind us, that moment of joyful freedom when what we now see is so apparent and obvious and easy.

When I reached the park on Winnequah, my half-way point, I put down the ear flaps on my hat, put on my hood, zipped my coat up to my chin, and then turned North by Northwest into the teeth of the wind.

It had begun to snow in good earnest, and the wind whipped the snow on the lake into white cloud slurry. I could not see the other side, and had to walk into the cloud slurry, led by my inner sense of direction.

I knew what direction I needed to go, but I could see only a few steps in front of me.

My glasses fogged over; I couldn't see a thing.

If there was an easy path, I couldn't find it. I stumbled through high drifting snow and across treacherous patches of ice.

The farther I got away from the shore and thus the closer to where I was going, the more unsure I became of my sense of direction.

Fear got to me again.

I began to worry about how close I was getting to where the Yahara river comes into the lake; I regretted not bringing my binoculars, thinking I could look out and find a landmark, though I could see only a few feet in front of me with or without binoculars.

Finally, I remembered the wind was North by Northwest. I got my bearings by walking against the wind, making sure I kept it pushing against me in the same place so I knew I was heading in the right direction.

And then I had a second Epiphany.

It is easy to walk with the wind at my back and follow the path the wind makes across the snow, and it is easy to answer God's call when things fall together and the way forward is clear and the footing is secure and the path is obvious.

But we also follow the wind by walking against it, the Spirit leading us forward into challenge and difficulty, and though following a headwind is hard work indeed, we sometimes are led by the Spirit to faithfully walk against the prevailing winds, finding our bearings, our sense of direction, by keeping steady against the wind.

The easy way forward is not always the faithful way forward, nor is the absence of difficulty or challenge proof that we are heading in the right direction.

I believe in the coming months, we will emerge from this plague; our old and our young will return to this sanctuary of God. We will all do our very best to ensure all of our people are safe, knowing we will return by different paths and on different timelines, some of us with the wind at our backs, others with wind in our faces, but all of us following the Spirit.

It is time for us to do as Joel prophesies and Peter preaches, to begin dreaming together, young and old alike, to be united in a common vision of the Spirit, celebrating life and finding meaning in our diverse ways of living in the world, all of us finding our particular places in the world together.

It's time for prophesy, for us to see our need to repent and turn again toward God, for courageous people to open their hearts to the truth the prophets have always called us to. to care for widows and orphans, to lift up the downhearted, to put the last first and give a seat at the head of the table to the least, to release the captives, to proclaim God's favor.

It's time for vision, for us to peer out into the future inspired by our faith that God has something in store for us so we can make decisions and work together, thriving in our differences, united in our faith that God is making a way for us.

And it is time for us to dream, friends, it is time for us to dream, to dream Spirit-inspired dreams, not bound by the the narrow customs and traditions and comforts call such dreams drunken foolishness, for Spirit-filled dreams open us to the future God promises us, which always utterly transcends what we have known or can imagine to be possible,

and exposes us to the sneering ridicule of sober doubters, which is something like walking into the wind.

May God bless you, your family and your friends
May the Spirit inspire your dreams and grant you clear vision,
And may God bless Windsor UCC