

8th Sunday after Epiphany
February 27, 2011 (Annual Congregational Meeting)

Isaiah 49:8-16a *“Come Out...Show Yourselfes”*: A Sermon-Dialogue
with the Strategic Ministry Planning Team

the Rev. Michelle Slater, Anne Clark, Kathy Findlay, Mark Paetkau

Thus says the LORD:

*In a time of favour I have answered you,
on a day of salvation I have helped you;
I have kept you and given you
as a covenant to the people,
to establish the land,
to apportion the desolate heritages;
saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out’,
to those who are in darkness, ‘Show yourselves.’
They shall feed along the ways,
on all the bare heights shall be their pasture;
they shall not hunger or thirst,
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down,
for he who has pity on them will lead them,
and by springs of water will guide them.
And I will turn all my mountains into a road,
and my highways shall be raised up.
Lo, these shall come from far away,
and lo, these from the north and from the west,
and these from the land of Syene.*

*Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
break forth, O mountains, into singing!
For the LORD has comforted his people,
and will have compassion on his suffering ones.*

*But Zion said, ‘The LORD has forsaken me,
my Lord has forgotten me.’
Can a woman forget her nursing-child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are continually before me.*

“Come Out...”

In our reading from Isaiah this morning, the prophet speaks on God’s behalf, speaks words that God has given him to speak.

And God is speaking here to a captive people, a people who have been taken away to exile in Babylon. No longer a sovereign people, living in the land God had led them to, to prosper and to thrive. Now they have been conquered by the invading Babylonian army, their homes destroyed, and they themselves have been carried off to another land, to serve another people’s dreams.

Naturally, the people of Israel feel abandoned and betrayed by their God: *“The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.”* Yet God reminds them that she is always near, always present: *“Can a woman forget her nursing-child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”* God uses the most personal and intimate image to describe her connection to us: as a mother breast-feeding her baby. As intensely as Israel feels forgotten, God feels intensely and intimately connected and protective.

And, God reminds them that he has been present in the past, in both the good times and the hard times: *“In a time of favour I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you.”*

But it is not for themselves alone, that God has blessed and answered and saved her people. God says, *“I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out’, to those who are in darkness, ‘Show yourselves.’”* God’s people are blessed, so as to be a blessing to others, especially those who are in trouble, who are most in need of God’s light and freedom and blessing.

So what does this have to do with the people I have invited up here? Well, these are the members of your Strategic Ministry Planning Team. Anne, Mark, Kathy, Cathy Cryder and I are meeting every two weeks, talking, wondering, thinking and praying about the long-term future of our congregation. Right now, we are working on writing something that will be shared with the whole congregation, with our sense of what our cultural context is, what ministries



we have now that give us life and excitement, and most importantly, where we believe God is pulling us. **Or in other words, what future does God have in mind for us as Dunbar Heights United Church, and what will we need to do to make that future a reality?**

One of the things that has come up again and again for us, so far, has been how hard it has been, and is, for United Church members to talk about our faith to other people, to share who God is for us and what God has done in our life.

So my question for you this morning is, if someone asked you seriously about who God is, and what God is like, what would you say?

Kathy:

God is someone who gives me strength when I am feeling weak and allows me to be at peace when otherwise I might feel distraught. He gives me the courage to keep going even when I am at my lowest point. I talk to him regularly. I believe it is my belief in God and the ways of Jesus that enable me to forgive and show compassion when my first instinct may be to not.

Mark:

This is a very difficult question for me. I am not very good at articulating my theology but there are attributes of God that I aim to live by: justice, compassion, equity and concern for others. I need God to hear my prayers, for forgiveness, intercession and thanksgiving. My understanding of God governs my approach to stewardship: responsible use of all God's resources in a way that advances spiritual life.

Anne:

Who is God? The answer I remember most from childhood is that God is Love. Love that is manifest in each of us and is called out of us to be our best. As to What is God Like? God is unknowable but God is deep within each of us, where with our deepest sense we know God. This community of love and knowing sustains me.

God says, "In a time of favour I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you..." Is there a time in the life of this congregation, in your experience, that God has been present and helped us?

Kathy:

During times of tragedy and sadness with friends and family of the congregation. When we are not sure which way to go with respect to programs, the building, our ministries. Together we seem to be able through our faith to enable things to happen when they may not seem to be working.

Mark:

We have been members of Dunbar since 1984 apart from a 13-year interregnum when we worshipped at the International Church of Bangkok. God has been with us on several occasions when we faced tough issues at Dunbar. From inclusive language, to the ordination of gays and lesbians, to embracing the ideas developed in the Emerging Spirit Campaign, to marrying same sex couples, to changes in the music program, the process has been thoughtful and respectful. All were heard, all views were encouraged – God's spirit filled the discussions.

Anne:

God was present for us in this congregation when we began the process of amalgamation with Knox. It was a rich and good process but when we got to the ultimate moment of committing to the relationship, it did not feel right. God was leading us to try again, to call Michelle, to look again at who we are. I look out and see the faces that have been here for years and those that have come recently. Even on a very snowy Sunday the pews are relatively full.

“Show Yourselfes...”

Another thing we’ve talked about is how hard it seems to invite people to come to church with us, to encounter this same living God that we’ve known.

Through Isaiah, God gives us a mission, that of “saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out’, to those who are in darkness, ‘Show yourselves.’” So our mission is to invite others to hear God’s call to “come out” from whatever is holding them captive, to “show themselves” in the light of God’s love and healing.

So my question to you is, what is God currently doing in our congregation that you think others might be interested in or find compelling?

Kathy:

The work we are doing with our Outreach group, the refugee program and our Music program. In particular for me is the work that is being done in the Children’s Ministry. We seem to be able to empower the children and the leaders of the children to learning the way of Jesus through stories, actions and music. Fostering awareness for them of some of the injustices that exist in our world. Allowing this space to be a safe place for them. One where they can feel at home.

Mark:

I think others would find our worship services compelling. Being welcoming is important and our worship is especially so: the care and skill in preaching, exceptional music, active lay participation and lively involvement of children.

God has clearly called many in our congregation to engage in Outreach programs. Outreach is surely our best response to the gospel call. It is interesting to me as a finance person that Outreach occupies the least amount of time of any budget line. In fact much of the fine work we do is done with no affect on our finances.

Our work begins with worship. The Disciple course deepens understanding of scriptures and is transforming. I think others interested in our church would find the learning opportunity compelling.

Anne:

What do you think others might find compelling. Our children’s ministry. We offer children a chance for silence, for stillness, to reflect on the challenges in their lives and to be held in love by an entire congregation. Young families’ lives are so action-packed with opportunities for their children – hockey and music and skating, skiing – that it is almost impossible to find stillness. If parents only knew what we are offering their children, they would be knocking down the doors and packing the place.

So far in our work together, what do you think God is calling us to, or pulling us toward, in the future, that others might find compelling?

Kathy:

Building a strong and faithful community of individuals who find depth and meaning in the time we spend together with not only our existing group but with our wider community.

Mark:

I believe God is calling us to exhilarating changes – in how and where we worship and how we use our very, very significant resources. We have an opportunity to revitalize our own worship, possibly lead other congregations to a healthier state and then to contribute to our community on a scale that emphatically demonstrates the values of the United Church.

Anne:

Dunbar Heights United Church is uniquely positioned because of our vision, energy and generous donors. We might become a program church, where we act as a resource to other west side churches.

Amen