

June 15, 2014 -- Stained Window Series #1 -- Father's Day

"*Let It Be With Me: Leaving, then Beginning Again*" -- Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: *Psalm 121, Matthew 2:13-15, Luke 1:26-38*

Through the next few months, we will use the space around us to help us in our spiritual journey of faith. We will use our beautiful stained glass windows as our guides. Speaking broadly, this Pentecost season will be a spiritual exercise in examining what we surround ourselves with spiritually. The danger with any endeavor, with any long-term commitment, is to get used to what surrounds us. Much quicker than we imagine, we get comfortable with the event, the people, the things which initially sparked our passion. Comfort leads to habits; which leads to lack of awareness; which leads to complacency. Complacency allows our physical, emotional, mental and spiritual muscles to atrophy. So by constantly re-introducing ourselves to what is all around us, we discover what is new, what has changed inside of us and what might be ahead of us.

Our first window is the one on the west side of the meetinghouse. All of the windows in Rockland Congregational Church were sponsored in the name of someone, and I think it is important to acknowledge the '*cloud of witnesses*' who watch over us. This first window is '*In memory of Charlotte Buffum - 1884-1970*'. Charlotte was a poet who lived in Dover-Foxcroft. In 1938, she came in a close 2nd place for a state-wide poetry contest with a poem entitled "Rondeau for Loveliness". The judge said of the poem that it was "*music and perfection of form*", which is high praise because rondeaus are actually song structures from medieval ballads and a very difficult, highly structured poetic form.

This window, as all of them are in our meetinghouse, is a tryptic, a story in three frames, depicting the Annunciation to Mary, the Birth of Jesus Christ in the manger, and the First Family's Flight to Egypt. The window represents the beginning of our journey of faith. I have thought for a long time that our spiritual lives are defined primarily by the road we walk rather than the destination at which we arrive. It may be that the end point is of less importance than the road we walk to get there. Each of us begins in a different place, but like Mary, we are all called upon to begin the journey to God at some point in our lives. The journey of faith has an arc to it, a story within it, a beginning, a middle and an end.

Journeys do not begin with the actual start of the journey itself. Rather they begin with an idea, with an invitation, with a calling and intention. A visitation, perhaps. Jesus' story, and therefore ours, begins not with Jesus, but with Mother Mary. It is helpful, I think, to look at Jesus' story from the perspective of someone other than ourselves or of Jesus himself. Instead, what is Jesus' life like from the perspective of John the Baptist, from Peter the Rock, from Barrabas the freed prisoner, from Judas? This window invites us into Jesus' story, and thus our own, from the perspective of Mother Mary.

Her journey of faith begins with the Annunciation by the Angel Gabriel. Gabriel is, in the Jewish tradition, the angel of judgment, and his name means *Power of God*. This is

who comes to Mother Mary. Notice that Gabriel tells Mary to “Fear not”. The appearance of angels is an occasion for fear, since they always say, “Do not fear” in Scripture. Next week, we will take a look at the nature of angels. In this moment, Mary’s life takes a radically different direction than anything she had planned. She is supposed to be married, live out a traditional Jewish woman’s life and die in poverty and obscurity like her neighbors and friends. Instead, Gabriel declares to Mary, “*blessed are you among women*”. She is to be the mother of the great Son of the Highest God, who ascends to the throne of King David.

When our journeys of faith begin, we must leave much behind. It often seems like everything, because all that we held dear to us is abandoned for this new way. So it is with Mary, who must leave behind her cultural ways, who must leave behind an old understanding of who she is, who must step out into an unknown future. One of the little details in the window is underneath Mary. She sits on a pillow. There is comfort here. Sometimes, Gabriel is portrayed in the Christian tradition as the Angel of Mercy. How we receive the pronouncements of God, whether as judgment or mercy, is often all about how we hear the words of God. Mother Mary, in her infinite blessedness, hears God’s message as comfort and promise, not as threat and judgment. She responds with, “*Let it be with me according to your Word*”.

I don’t think we can accept God’s message to us in Jesus Christ as mercy unless we follow Mary’s example. Mary’s acceptance of her new future does not come out of nowhere. It comes from a tradition which acknowledges God’s presence in new journeys and the unknown throughout history; an acknowledgment of God’s presence in history itself.

Think of it this way. Perhaps we are drawn into situations by God so we might experience, over and over again, the saving power of God. Such a perspective reframes many things and also gives us a capacity to accept the presence of God in the face of the unknown. So, what if Adam and Eve’s ejection from the garden is God freeing them so they might experience the presence of God *in the world* - in a world that demands protection, guidance and divine presence? What if Abraham is drawn out of Ur in order that he might be exposed to the promise of God in the face of worldly power and threats? What if the Hebrew people are taken into slavery so they might experience the freedom God gives to all people by drawing them out of Egypt? What if the Hebrew people must wander for 40 years so that when they are drawn out of the wilderness, they have an unshakeable trust that the Lord will be with them in the Promised Land?

Letting go of our past and all the pressures that past puts upon us by laws, traditions and familial heritage does not mean rejecting it. It means recognizing the value of that past and then moving forward into it. This is the meaning of the wise men and the shepherds. They are both drawn from familiar places and familiar work to bear witness to the presence of Jesus Christ in the world. Both the wise men and the shepherds are called out of their familiar places by a message from God, just like Mary. And notice, in this central panel, that while Jesus is the focus, it is Mother Mary who

offers comfort to the baby Jesus. Perhaps, also, she is offering comfort to all who come to Christ as well. The comfort we speak of when we are speaking spiritually is not the comfort of complacency or wealth; rather it is the comfort of the messages and history of God with us throughout time. Here, with Jesus, the entire world has changed. The journey we are all on has forever changed. It is not even predictable.

Tomorrow, the wise men will still be wise men and the shepherds will still be shepherds, but everything about their lives is now woven into a great journey and a greater story, one that relies on the mercy and comfort of God's promise and presence. As I said, a lot gets left behind in this new life, in this new promise, guided by God with us in the person of Jesus Christ. But that past is not forsaken. The protection of God promised to Adam and Eve after the garden is also our protection. The blessings to Abraham given by God are also our blessings. The freedom of the Hebrew people from slavery and oppression is also our freedom. The Promised Land of the Jewish people becomes the Kingdom of God in Christ which is ours to live within now. In God's mercy and comfort, promise and presence - this is where our lives blossom and grow. The journey of faith requires that we go into an unknown future, a new beginning, with only the trust in the past works of God. This is why we tell the story over and over again, so that we might live into the next chapter of our continuing story with God and Christ.

How did God call you into your new life with Christ? Who were the messengers of the Lord who offered you a new life? In what ways are you also "*blessed among all people*" to be like Mary, a bearer of the light of God to the world? How have we been called out of oppression, confusion and wilderness to bring forth the presence of Christ? In these questions is where the bud of our journey begins. In the last panel, we see Mother Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus carried by a donkey out of Jerusalem and back into Egypt. They do this because, yet again, an angel of the Lord, probably Gabriel, has told Joseph to leave Bethlehem with his family so that Jesus might be saved (!). Because Mary trusted in the Lord and because Joseph has learned from his tradition the unusual ways God calls people out of darkness, he *lets it be according to God's word* and accepts God's pronouncement.

Thus begins the actual journey of faith. All that has gone before is background and inspiration for those first steps into the unknown. It does not matter if those first steps are taken in conflict and difficulty or in excitement and celebration. There is one last theme in this first window I want to point out to you. Notice that when Gabriel comes to Mary, he is holding the bud of a lily. The flower has not yet bloomed. The true journey has not yet begun. Then at the manger, Joseph holds the flower. It has just begun to bloom. We stand on the edge of an entirely new way of life. And then, as Mother Mary and Joseph and Jesus flee Bethlehem, the lily is in full bloom. We also bloom when we enter into the journey of faith with the first family.

We go forward like Mary and Joseph with the promise of the Lord and we go into the unknown *with witnesses* - the shepherds; with the presence of wisdom - the wise men; and with the knowledge of God's presence universally and historically - the star of

Bethlehem and the pyramids. And we enter the journey of faith *as witnesses* - as guides for others in the ways of God and Christ; as mentors and elders offering wisdom and hope to all whom we meet; and as stars shining for the love of God for all creation. In our journey of faith, we have the opportunity to over and over again begin anew, so that each step we take draws us deeper into the story we are telling about Jesus Christ. Like a lily blooming at the time of Easter, the time of Resurrection, we renew ourselves along this road of faith. And in doing so, we say with Mary every day, "*May it be unto me according to thy word, O Lord.*" Amen.