

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany

February 4, 2018

Rev. Pat Raup

Promises to Keep

Isaiah 40: 26-31, Psalm 147: 1-11, Mark 1: 29-39

For the past week the final words of Robert Frost's poem "Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening" have been running through my head. They are: "for I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, miles to go before I sleep". These words are now written on my heart. They remind me of the commitment Konrad and I are making to you, Zion's UCC of Taborton.

Words are important. They have power. They carry meaning. Last week Konrad spoke about scapegoats and scapegoating, words that needed to be brought to our attention. He certainly showed us that the old saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me" isn't exactly true.

Today I will talk about something more positive: promises, contracts and covenants. Are you ready?

Today is a very important day for Konrad and me. Even though Dave Ernst the Younger already told us [on behalf of the Board] that we "could stay" today it will become official. At the Annual Meeting following worship Konrad and I will sign a contract with Zion's UCC of Taborton. A contract, as you know, is a legal document. It spells out obligations, expectations and responsibilities for the various parties involved. Today that involves all of us. As you may already know it will bind us to one another for the next two years. Konrad and I will be your Designated Term Co-Pastors [more about that at the meeting] and you will be our Congregation, our Church, our Beloved Community. I hope you know that we have already come to love you and this place.

The more important promise that all of us are making today is a covenant. A covenant is not a contract. There are no requirements and no penalties. It is a promise that is freely entered into, difficult to break. It is a willingness to be together in whatever comes our way, to pull together as a community, to rejoice when rejoicing is called for, to mourn when mourning is called for, and to knuckle down, figure out what went wrong and find a way forward when that is called for.

A covenant does not promise that everything will be hunky-dory, smooth sailing with no bumps in the road, no hurt feelings, no grumbling, no thinking about packing up and just plain leaving. Difficult times will come, whether of our own making or because of the times we live in. Our promise to one another, our covenant is to hang in together and see it through.

God created the idea of covenant. At the very beginning, when the universe exploded into being and life on Earth developed, God looked upon it all and saw that it was good. God loved the universe. God loved us. God still does. This is God's original blessing for which we can be eternally grateful.

Even when humanity messed up royally and floods covered the earth, God did not give up on us. God raised up Noah, had him build an Ark and gather all the plants and creatures that would be needed to begin again. When the storm was finally over a rainbow appeared in the sky and became the symbol of the continuing covenant with God. God had kept faith. God had been with them throughout the storm. God would be with them into the future.

God continues to act out of this covenant. We were given Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus put flesh and bone on our understanding of a faithful God, faithful in all circumstances. That is why we often refer to Jesus as Emmanuel, which means God With Us.

All of which brings me to today's Gospel. Several weeks ago we spoke about the fact that the first thing Jesus did when he came out of his 40 days in the wilderness following his baptism, was to tell us that NOW is the time, the Kingdom of God is HERE, right now, right this minute. All we have to do is open our hearts, welcome it in and act accordingly. More easily said than done....

Today we learned that Jesus began his ministry by HEALING people. He healed everyone he came across, everyone who asked him for healing. He didn't stop to ask if they were Jews or Gentiles or Pagans. If they were ailing, he cured them. He healed them of diseases, including leprosy; he healed them of the falling sickness [epilepsy]; he cast out demons. He restored them all to life, whole in body, mind and spirit. And when they were healthy and whole they were able to return to the community once again, to start over. No one was permanently excluded.

However, there was a cost in all of this for Jesus. At the end of today's Gospel we witness him going away on his own, to a place of solitude, where he could be alone with God and be refreshed for the journey ahead of him. The next day, he continued to heal people and give them hope for a new way of life.

Doesn't all this sound similar to what we have just been through here at Zion's? Let's remember that the storm is over and the time for healing and including others has begun. Let's remember that God has promised to be with us no matter what comes our way. Let's remember that we need to take time to be alone with God in order to be refreshed and re-energized for the re-building of community that needs to take place.

Let's pull together rather than pull apart, for that is the essence of COVENANT.

AMEN