

“Prophetic Imagination”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
December 9th, 2012
2nd Sunday in Advent

Mal. 3:1-4

Luke 3:1-6

[God through the words of Isaiah, said,]

Fill up every valley and level every mountain and hill.

Straighten the crooked paths and smooth out the rough roads.

Then everyone will see the saving power of God.’ *Luke 3:5-6*

Let us pray... O God,

Thank you for the help you have given us and for the help we shall surely receive.

Inspire us with a vision ahead of what you would have us yet do.

Amen

Today, we recall the commitment of those who first met to form a congregation of the United Church of Christ for The Villages-area.

Next year, it will be 10 years since our first service of worship as a faith community which took place on December 11th, 2003.

August 15th, 2010 is another milestone – literally, because on that day, we walked a mile from Temple Shalom to finally enter our own house of worship.

The people who were drawn together for that first gathering, attracted more people over time.

Two retired pastors, Bill Wealand and Ben New, provided the spark, voicing a vision of ‘prophetic imagination’ – a vision of what could be, that helped organize worship and form committees.

In time, a charter was signed, recognizing us as a viable church of the UCC in the Florida Conference.

And more people came along to build on this idea of establishing a permanent congregation here – and that meant literally to build a house of worship.

The construction was accomplished within 7 years, though the financial obligation is still before us.

Like the Israelites’ wandering in the desert, our church met in various places – including a storefront, a Villages community center, as well as other churches.

We are grateful to each of these places in that time of our sojourning, and especially to Temple Shalom – a Jewish community of faith, where we worshiped and conducted our meetings for 3 years.

Willard, p.2

Some of you were involved from the very beginning
of this journey to become a United Church of Christ at The Villages.
So, we remember with gratitude, you and others who came before many of us,
for what you did in response to that initial spark of ‘prophetic imagination’
that has led to our reality.

I thank you and we thank you.

To bring a church building from a dream to reality,
you negotiated to get the land and financial resources through a loan.
You got the vision of a church down on paper as an architectural design,
negotiated construction contracts, and supported this work with
personal pledges, and fundraising.

We need to remember those of you who responded to that initial
prophetic imagination that has led to our reality.

I thank you & we thank you.

Even before we had a building,
you were inspiring one another in your services of worship,
preaching and singing, concluding every Sun with the call,
“Let There Be Peace on Earth”.

You cultivated a sense of mission beyond just meeting your own needs,
contributing with abundant generosity to the local food pantry,
CROP Walks and mission kits for disaster response,
prayer shawls as practical reminders of God’s love,
as well as being ‘5 for 5’ in giving to our denomination’s special donations
that support of our “Neighbors in Need”,
as part of “Our Wider Church Mission”, to “Strengthen the Church”,
even to help provide for retired clergy as “Veterans of the Cross”
and that this is not just “One Hour of Sharing”, but “Mission One”.

We need to remember those of you who responded to that initial
prophetic imagination that has led to our reality.

I thank you & we thank you.

Since moving into our own house of worship,
you have expanded on what is possible to do here
through your creative “prophetic imagination” with activities like
Children of God sermons, musical performances and art displays
by talented church members, dramatic presentations, concerts,
spiritually themed and socially activist films for discussion,
outreach to African-Americans, Muslims, as well as our Jewish friends,
volunteer work locally with Wildwood public schools, the Food Pantry,
and the One Family Christmas gift project.

Willard, p.3

You have engaged in focus groups as an effort
to inspire our “prophetic imagination” to meet the challenges of the future.
And you have helped as individuals to keep “the train on the track”
by the contributions of your time & talent
helping in the office, getting up to read scripture, singing in choir,
preparing the communion elements,
bussing tables for special dinners, cooking *and* cleaning up,
marking things for yard sale, driving someone to the hospital,
weaving a prayer shawl, sewing a banner,
making a phone call to keep in touch,
serving on church committees,
bringing a meal when there has been illness or a death in a member’s family,
baking treats for coffee hour.
And we have revitalized our Called to Care Program with volunteer “shepherds”
and initiated a parish nurse program, as well as a bereavement committee,
and disaster response co-ordination.
These are all important roles and activities as we mature and grow
as a congregation to care for one another.
We need to remember those of you who continue to responded to that initial
prophetic imagination that has led to our reality.
I thank you & we thank you.

Hopefully you see that church isn’t like going to the movies
and yet it can be entertaining.
It’s a place where you’re called to participate – called to serve.
We are so blessed to have many ways to do that.

The initial vision of ‘prophetic imagination’ for this church
was the establishment of a permanent worshiping community
with its own house of worship in the Villages-area.
That’s been achieved.

Where do we go from here?
What is our new vision and how shall we engage our prophetic imagination
for what is next? What is our message?

First and foremost we must claim the good news of God through Jesus Christ
just as every gathering of Christians has done
from the twelve disciples in the upper room to the basilicas of Rome,
from the Crystal Cathedral to UCC at the Villages.
God’s Son, suffered and died unjustly, but rose from the dead
to demonstrate God’s healing power to save us from anything we face –
and that we are to forgive as we have been forgiven.

Willard, p.4

In the process, we seek to become God's kingdom as a beloved community on earth as it is in heaven.

We do this by cultivating our relationships with God and with one another passing along the beliefs and practices of our faith – just as we have received from those who came before us.

Along with this responsibility to pass along our Christian heritage to the next generation, is the responsibility to interpret it and determine what God is still speaking to us and apply in our own time and in this place.

What makes us – the United Church of Christ at The Villages, unique as a Christian community of faith?

What is our message? What spark of prophetic imagination do we have to offer our local community and the world beyond it?

Certainly, our living reality as an “open and affirming church” – is an important part of that message of who we are as Christians.

This puts us in the stream of change that is moving the Church, our society, and the world itself – kicking and screaming as it may be at times, progressive, emergent, and in concert with the prophetic hope for human liberation voiced as “Peace on Earth, Good will to all”.

We need to make room for those who will be drawn to us because of what we are doing here – those whom God will send, those who will continue to respond to that initial prophetic imagination that has led to our reality.

I thank God & let us thank God, in advance.

With the lighting of the Second Advent Candle, we are reminded that peace is part of the promise at Jesus Christ's birth.

Let us consider the creative possibilities of ‘prophetic imagination’ – and how our message of being ‘open & affirming’ can lead to peace...

Let there be peace on earth; And let it begin with me.

Let there be peace on earth; The peace that was meant to be.

With God as our parent; Children all are we.

Let us walk with each other; In perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me; Let this be the moment now.

With every step I take; Let this be my solemn vow.

To take each moment; And live each moment With peace eternally.

Let there be peace on earth, And let it begin with you & me.

Amen

*Our lesson from Malachi 3:1-4 is a word of assurance that –
as bad as things may seem, God is on the way
with a forerunner to get things ready...*

[God said to Malachi,]

3:1 I, the Lord All-Powerful, will send my messenger
to prepare the way for me.

Then suddenly the Lord you are looking for
will appear in his temple.

The messenger you desire is coming with my promise,
and he is on his way.

2 On the day the Lord comes,
he will be like a furnace that purifies silver
or like strong soap in a washbasin.

No one will be able to stand up to him.

3 The Lord will purify the descendants of Levi,
as though they were gold or silver.

Then they will bring the proper offerings to the Lord,
4 and the offerings of the people of Judah and Jerusalem
will please him, just as they did in the past.

Luke 3:1-6

For fifteen years Emperor Tiberius had ruled that part of the world.

Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was the ruler of Galilee. Herod's brother, Philip, was the ruler in the countries of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was the ruler of Abilene.

Annas and Caiaphas were the Jewish high priests.

At that time God spoke to Zechariah's son John,
who was living in the desert.

So John went along the Jordan Valley, telling the people,

“Turn back to God and be baptized! Then your sins will be forgiven.”

Isaiah the prophet wrote about John when he said,

“In the desert someone is shouting,

‘Get the road ready for the Lord!

Make a straight path for him.

Fill up every valley and level every mountain and hill.

Straighten the crooked paths and smooth out the rough roads.

Then everyone will see the saving power of God.”