

“Epic Reading”

The Rev. Drew Willard  
UCC at The Villages, FL  
January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sun. after Epiphany

Nehemiah 8:1-10

Luke 4:14-21

*‘On the first day of the seventh month,  
the people came together in the open area in front of the Water Gate.  
Then they asked Ezra, who was a teacher of the Law of Moses,  
to read to them from this Law that the Lord had given his people.’*

*Neh. 8:1-2*

Let us pray... O God,

May we claim for ourselves and as a congregation, a passion for your Word –  
a passion to hear and share your Good News for the sake of all the world  
through Jesus Christ.

Amen

Mystic, Connecticut is a beautiful area to visit with all kinds of attractions –  
especially Mystic Seaport.

Not only are there authentic buildings of a New England village from the 1800s,  
but there is a working shipyard with skilled artisans capable  
of constructing sailing ships of old, as well as museum displays –  
even a planetarium.

There are also several classic ships – the largest being the whaler,  
Charles W. Morgan built in 1841 and retired after 80 years of service.

It is a remarkable structure, 113 feet in length, that had a crew of 33,  
with its intricate system of rigging used for maneuvering  
its double-masted sails to catch the wind – truly a work of art.

It was literally an ‘oil tanker’ with its own ‘tryworks’ to refine oil from blubber,  
and a number of small boats to hunt the whales.

Returning from its first – or ‘maiden’ voyage of 3 years and 4 months,  
it brought in 800 barrels of whale oil and 10,000 pounds of whale bone –  
at the time, this was worth \$56,000.

When you step aboard, it’s not too hard to imagine what it must have been like  
to be a member of the crew, at sea for years at a time.

It is aboard the C.W. Morgan in mid-summer that a unique event takes place –  
the epic reading of Moby Dick, Herman Melville’s masterpiece about  
human arrogance and divine judgment  
against the backdrop of the whaling era.

The Moby Dick Marathon starts at 12:00 Noon on July 31<sup>st</sup>  
with volunteers reading one or more of the 135 chapters,  
for a continuous recitation ending 24 hours later.

Willard, p. 2

While I was serving Mystic Congregational Church as an Associate Pastor,  
I was partly inspired by the Moby Dick Marathon and my own experiences  
of 'epic telling' at the Network of Biblical Storyteller gatherings,  
to organize such a recitation of the Gospel of Mark.

Mark lends itself to 'epic telling' because of its brevity,  
so, many Biblical storytellers have taken on the challenge of  
memorizing and reciting the entire Gospel of Mark.

This was most famously done by Alec McCowen on Broadway  
for a 3 week run of 18 performances in late fall of 1978 and again in 1981.

Literary critic, Frank Kermode [in *The New York Review of Books*],  
described McCowen's original performance in this way:

*'On the stage there is nothing except some chairs, a table,  
a carafe of water, and a glass,*

*all put to use by a performer who represents something close  
to the utmost refinement of modern English acting technique.*

*His little bursts of mime,*

*his calculated expressiveness in face and gesture,  
are a source of sharp theatrical delight.*

*Though the resemblance is a matter of technique  
rather than of personality,*

*McCowen's controlled spontaneity  
made me think of Alec Guinness's remarkable Hamlet of 1951.'*

So, Biblical storytelling works – even on Broadway,  
though I want to caution volunteer liturgists that reading scripture  
on Sunday morning doesn't have to be 'Broadway'!

It doesn't have to be a performance – you just have to read it like you mean it,  
like it still has something to say to us.

Because in these texts, there is drama and humor, tragedy and triumph –  
and a character – or Spirit, transcending ages & multitudes of translations.

It is what captivated that congregation in the Nazareth synagogue  
with rapt attention as they listened to Jesus speak  
the Word of God through the words of the Prophet Isaiah.

The first time I read scripture in church, was as a teenager for Youth Sunday and  
I took it seriously and loved it – though I was always told to speak louder.

However when I was in seminary, I can remember the first time I read scripture  
for a church where I was serving as youth minister, I was caught up in it.

And it was that way every time.

I read with a passion that seemed to be more than my own –  
what I suppose Jewish people mean by 'the love of Torah'.

I still feel that way – especially, when I put these stories in my own words  
and they just come alive for me.

Willard, p.3

At Mystic, I passed that passion on to others in the congregation when I could like the grammar school-age drama group of little girls who participated in our “No Ready for Prime Time Play Readers Theatre” or when as a church, we did an epic reading of the Gospel of Mark.

There are 16 chapters in Mark and more than 60 readers signed up to read for our presentation, everyone from children to seniors.

We started with a pasta dinner, then moved on into the sanctuary for the reading which went for an hour and a half.

It was just for our church, but it was certainly something that could have been promoted as a public program.

So, one evening at the end of February, we all heard the whole story of Jesus like a Greek tragedy and comedy mixed together – like the stories told to those first Christians until Mark finally wrote them down.

That night, we all had a chance to see Christ in that ‘theater of the mind’ – our imaginations, which we so rarely exercise these days, apart from – or in spite of, TV and the movies.

Alec McCowen demonstrated that telling Bible stories can be entertaining for adult audiences.

Though it is arguable whether or not Mr. McCowen is a modern apostle, he has inspired religious artists to follow in his footsteps and reclaim these stories for their power to speak for themselves.

Over New Years, I got an idea – an idea that I shared with our Conference minister and staff.

What if churches of the Florida Conference of the UCC sent out liturgical artists, musicians, and actors as ‘missionaries’ to share what is best about their congregations?

What if other UCC churches throughout Florida hosted them and promoted these events in their communities as opportunities for mission, education, fundraising, and fellowship.

The logistics of such a project remain to be worked out, but it may just revitalize our churches with a challenge to creatively share what it means to be a Christian for such a time in which we live

The people of ancient Israel who returned from exile to reclaim their land and rebuild their temple, were hungry to sing the songs and tell the stories of their faith.

Stories do three things for us:

They remind us of where we came from, remind us of who are, and they help point the way to the future.

Willard, p. 4

Jesus' words stirred the people who heard him.

They were words that would have been very familiar  
to the people of his day.

But he told them in such a way,

that helped them hear their power as if for the first time –  
as if for their time.

We are poised for the next phase in our journey together as a church.

We worked to achieve a permanent location in the Villages area  
as a congregation of the United Church of Christ.

Let's ask ourselves, as we review our past year,

let us consider new opportunities of mission  
and perhaps some fun ways to share the word of God.

Amen

*Today's lesson comes from Nehemiah 8:1-10,  
which takes place after the return of the Judeans from exile,  
during their re-settlement of Jerusalem.*

*The people gathered for a public reading of the Law,  
which includes the first five books of the Bible –*

*Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.*

*Thirteen people stood with Ezra – probably to help with the reading,  
and thirteen others were among the people  
to help interpret what was read...*

*[And if you really want to know their names, they're listed in verses 4 and 7. 😊]*

8:1-2 On the first day of the seventh month,  
the people came together in the open area in front of the Water Gate.

Then they asked Ezra, who was a teacher of the Law of Moses,  
to read to them from this Law that the Lord had given his people.

Ezra the priest came with the Law and stood before the crowd  
of men, women, and the children

who were old enough to understand.

3 From early morning till noon, he read the Law of Moses to them,  
and they listened carefully.

4a Ezra stood on a high wooden platform  
that had been built for this occasion...

5 Ezra was up on the high platform, where he could be seen by everyone,  
and when he opened the book, they all stood up.

6 Ezra praised the great Lord God, and the people shouted,  
“Amen! Amen!”

Then they bowed with their faces to the ground  
and worshiped the Lord.

7a-8 After this, the Levites... went among the people,  
explaining the meaning of what Ezra had read.

9 The people started crying when God's Law was read to them.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher,  
and the Levites who had been teaching the people all said,

“This is a special day for the Lord your God.  
So don't be sad and don't cry!”

10 Nehemiah told the people,

“Enjoy your good food and wine and  
share some with those who didn't have anything to bring.

Don't be sad! This is a special day for the Lord,  
and he will make you happy and strong.”

Luke 4:14-21

[14] And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee, and a report concerning him went out through all the surrounding country.

[15] And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.

[16] And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day. And he stood up to read;

[17] and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

[18] "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovering of sight to the blind,

to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

[19] to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

[20] And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

[21] And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."