

Meditations on the 200th Anniversary of the Meeting House on the Plain in Norwich

I Kings 8: 27 – 29; 56-63

Psalm 100

Meditation The Vision of the Past

On November 20, 1817, the Rev. James Wheelock Woodward preached a dedicatory sermon in this sanctuary, which was later printed up into a pamphlet with three other sermons. I imagine that those sitting in the pews (not these pews, old box pews) could still smell the sap in the lumber as they sat down to worship here that first time. Probably they were bundled up a little against the cold – there was no furnace in those days. Perhaps they had sung a Psalm paraphrase from the Bay Psalm Book, as we did, led by a song leader. And then they settled down to listen to a sermon that would have lasted about an hour. Don't worry. I considered recreating that sermon in its entirety, but none of us would have enjoyed that. Instead, I do want to give you a flavor of it.

Rev. Woodward chose as the Bible text for his sermon the first verse we heard today, from the first Book of Kings: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, the heaven, the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house, that I have builded.” (Interestingly, he chose the last verse from our Kings reading, verse 63, for the text of his sermon dedicating the new meetinghouse in Norwich Center 6 weeks later.)

On that November day in 1817, James Woodward, in proper celebratory style, started out by reflecting on the beauty of the place: “How noble the design!” he said, “How sublime the use of materials, which are wrought into a place for the Most High!” And yet, they were told, remember, “it is unfit for a dwelling place for the Most High.” To impress this upon his hearers, he launched into several pages of theology, which I will spare you. In short, he preached 1. “The divine essence fills every place” – God is omnipresent. 2. “God knows all things” – God is omniscient. And 3. “The power of God is everywhere operative” – God is omnipotent. And, yes, he numbered those points 1,2, and 3 in the printed text.

Next, he preached on why this space was insufficient as God's dwelling place. 1. It is comparatively small – when compared to Solomon's temple, for instance. 2. Few people can fit in it – when compared to all worshippers on earth. And 3. The building's lifespan is limited – compared to the eternal life of God.

So, we get the gist of this. God is big, we are small. Not too controversial, not too original. But then, the preacher names the elephant in the room. “I forbear to recall to your recollection the unpleasant circumstances which have led to the erection of **two** buildings for religious uses, attended with obvious disadvantages to each other.” Don't you love it when someone says that they will refrain from mentioning something, while mentioning that very thing? But there, he said it. This worship to dedicate this building was also making visible and tangible and real the battle over church location that had torn the town in half. From contemplating the sublime and awesome power and mercy of God, we are suddenly dragged down to reality. We are confronted with the human power to argue and jockey for advantage. Rev. Woodward, who pastored the meetinghouse on the hill at Norwich Center, gave this sermon, but he feared, as he said, “the unhappy state of things, which has alienated friends and threatened a dissolution of our social compact.” Hmm... all of the sudden, Rev. Woodward is sounding very 2017.

It seems that this “unhappy state” came complete with name-calling. Rev. Woodward mentioned one prediction, clearly made by those opposing the building of this meetinghouse, that “this building will become a cage of unclean birds,” but he hoped that this was an unreasonable prediction. With all that negativity now named, now out in the open, he made a few suggestions. And yes, in the text, they are numbered. He urged them to remember 1. that holiness is attained by one “who speaketh the truth in their own heart” and surrenders their affections to God, and to remember 2. the duty of frequent public worship (now that they had a meetinghouse in the location of their choosing) 3. that if and when they called a pastor, that person should “feel the force of the truth he delivers, and afford an exemplification of them in his life” (there’s a word I’ve never used in a sermon!), and 4. the duty of living at peace amongst themselves. As he said, “No local interests – no feelings excited by circumstances which have occurred, can destroy the great command of the law, ‘thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’”

When we search for the vision of the people who built this place, the vision of the past, we see some of their hopes and fears. We see their virtues and their flaws. Knowing this, I’d like to update, in contemporary language, the hopes and vision of James Woodward. There he was, between a rock and a hard place, having to help dedicate a building he opposed, and preach to a group of people on the other side of a divide. But he does not turn this into a bully pulpit. He urges them (if I can put it in my own words) to 1. be authentic and open to God’s spirit speaking within them. 2. To gather frequently in a spirit of worship and devotion. 3. To call and support leadership that feels and acts out that same authenticity and devotion. 4. To engage with each other as peacemakers. To me, these things still feel important. They feel like a covenant which we could still affirm. James Wheelock Woodward was a brave man: he spoke the truth in love.

And now, just as was done so many years ago, we will hear more words from Scripture, this time from the New Revised Standard Version.

John 4: 19-24

Meditation: The Vision of the Future

Now we move from trying to understand the hopes and fears of our ancestors 200 years ago, to trying to articulate a vision for ourselves. And don’t worry: I am not going to paraphrase any of my sermons to set alongside those of James Woodward. Instead I turn to the story in the Gospel of John, of which we heard a small part, where Jesus engages a foreign Samaritan woman in theological discussion. They are talking about worship: where and how to worship. The Samaritan woman comments that they revere two different holy places. Her ancestors had worshipped in their own temple on Mount Gerizim. Jesus’ ancestors had worshipped in the temple in Jerusalem. The assumption is that they both worship God, but that there is one best place to do it. Of course, it has occurred to me that the residents of Norwich 200 years ago, all Congregationalists, seemed to have a similar idea: the Center or the Plain?

Jesus answers with two predictions. First, he makes the astonishing claim that neither place will be the site of worship, in some future time. Then he says, the future has arrived, and true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth, and that God is spirit. Rather than locating truth in one place, or with one tribe, he says that the Spirit is on the move, and God is seeking people to move with it.

What does this mean for us, as we sit in our beloved old sanctuary, celebrating its existence? What does it mean for us, in a place and time of record-low church attendance? What does it mean for us as we seek to be faithful and open?

Well, I am going to take the long view, the very long view, and make an observation. The work of the church is as free-flowing as the Spirit. Our calling has changed over time. The church has been an incubator of new ideas, new ways of service. But these things do not remain static as our possessions. We hatch them and let them go. Example: schools. Most schools got their start in church settings. Over time, local and state and national governments saw the good in them, and they were launched into the secular world. Another example: hospitals. Medieval hospitals were church run, originally based in monasteries and abbeys. Over time, others saw the importance of health care, and secular hospitals were launched. Non-profits: the Upper Valley Haven started as a mission project of the White River and Woodstock Episcopal churches, then immediately worked to include Congregational, Methodist, and Catholic churches. Now its leadership and volunteers do not necessarily have any church affiliation. And many other service organizations started in the church: Goodwill Industries was founded by a Methodist minister Edgar J. Helms, but is now a secular organization. In short, we do not, as Christians, maintain ownership of the good we have done and will do. But, at least in the United States, our churches have been the seedbeds, both for social change and the well-being of individuals.

The free-flowing Spirit gives us a powerful identity, and presents us with an enormous challenge. How do we discern the pathway forward? What is our role, once we are no longer the sole volunteers giving away food, once we are not the voice calling in the wilderness for an end to slavery? What do we stand for, once the dignity of all persons has been recognized as a civil right and a human right, not just a religious principle?

Well, we continue with all those daily or quotidian tasks, those never-ending acts of mercy and courage. On this side of heaven, we will have to plug away at feeding, teaching, caring for, encouraging those in need. But at the same time, we are a community of prayer and discernment. Though we no longer hold a place of highest honor and influence, our spiritual work can demonstrate our trust in a loving God, our desire for truth, our calling as peacemakers. We may be called, through prayer and discernment into resistance to the powers of oppression and hate. We may be called into a new mission on behalf of a neglected population that we do not yet know. We will certainly be called to love each other in spite of disagreements, and so to be a beacon of costly harmony in the world.

The truth is, I do not know what tomorrow will bring, let alone the more distant future. What I do know is that I will rely on the power of God, the example of Christ, and the leadings of the Spirit to give me joy, hope and strength. This reliance is our foundation, this is our common ground, this creates our holy space. Thanks be to God for this place, which has sheltered us and housed the prayers of the faithful. Amen.