

OUR FAITH TOGETHER

JANUARY 4, 2009

We gather today for worship on this first Sunday of 2009 and the first Sunday in January. The month of January was named after Janus the Roman god of gates and new beginnings. Janus was always depicted with faces on the front and the back of his head. In other words, Janus was facing both ways at once, looking back to what had occurred and looking forward to what was yet to be.

January is the month many wait for, hoping the New Year will herald better experiences than the year before.

For those of us who are followers of Christ, the early part of January until the 6th completes the traditional twelve days of Christmas. Our celebrations of the birth of Jesus end with the celebration of Epiphany, the feast we remember today. Epiphany emphasizes the manifestation of Jesus to the Hebrews in the persons of the shepherds and the manifestations of Jesus to the Gentiles in the persons of the Magi or wise men from another land. Jesus Christ, the gift of God to all men and women wherever in the world. He came for everyone 2000 years ago as he comes now to all of us today.

This Sunday is a bitter-sweet day for me as I come to the final day of my interim ministry with all the good folk of this pastoral charge. This interim ministry was for me unexpected as I had just completed a similar interim ministry at Wellington United and had planned not to accept another assignment for several months. However, when I received a phone call from Prince Edward North, I agreed to meet with your Ministry & Personnel Committee and the rest is history.

The invitation to ministry, either interim or permanent, is always a humbling challenge. To take on spiritual leadership in a parish is to be reminded very clearly of one's own frailties and the awesome task of walking with people in their life journey. It would be easy to just go through the rituals of parish life but that would not be satisfying to anyone, minister included. To walk with people is to expose oneself to pain and joy, hurts and laughter, sickness and health. To walk with someone in faith is to be fully present, open as well to the word of God coming through the faithful people we minister to each week.

My various experiences in ministry elsewhere as well as here at Wesley and Friendship have shown me the real privilege of this work. It is a position that anyone should tremble to fill. To prepare each week the service of worship, the bulletin, the readings and the hymns takes prayerful thought in order to ensure what we do at all times in our worship service relates one to the other and to the theme for the day. Then there is the presumption of writing a sermon each week which is relevant and related to the great passages of scripture.

Preaching a sermon or homily each week is both taxing and exhilarating. There are weeks when the words fairly fly on to the page and other weeks when it is a tough grind to complete. However, to be given the privilege of expounding on the Word of God is

indeed humbling. Who am I that I should lead and instruct the people of God, spiritual leaders and prophets have asked since the beginning of formal worship.

In our Ephesians reading this morning, St. Paul is speaking on this very issue of spiritual leadership, his role and the church. Let me quote again verses 7- 12: “Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for the ages in God who created all things; that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.”

There are many wonderful points here.

- Paul the preacher was chosen by God though he was but a man. In other words, one does not always choose to be the preacher; it is God who sets aside some for this task.
- Paul was compelled to preach “the unsearchable riches of Christ.” Our task as preachers is to bring Christ in a vivid way to the listeners, to dig into the stories and parables to discover what God is doing and saying to us through Jesus and through us.
- What Paul says is true: there are unsearchable riches of Christ yet to be mined and discovered. By study and prayer, these riches can be uncovered. It is the preacher’s task to share these with the world.
- Paul continues: “To make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for the ages in God who created all things.” This is a similar task to the former which is to uncover and share as much about God as we can discover and know. As we present a clear picture of God, his wondrous presence becomes clearer and more incredible. The question for us together is how do we respond individually and collectively to this wondrous God?

Our Old Testament reading from the prophet Isaiah, addresses the question of what we are to do in response to God’s acts of generosity and love. This also sets out the message of the preacher to the people of God.

- “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” Note here that this is hardly a theme for somber, no-nonsense, woe are we wretched men and women sermons. Rather it clearly strikes a positive note of joy and certainty in God’s abiding love and care. It is the recognition that there is always hope in God’s world and in our role within it. The call to arise and shine is an exciting and exhilarating one for us all.
- Verse four states: “Lift up your eyes round about, and see.” The preacher’s role is to help us all lift up our eyes and see what God has done and is doing in the world. We need to be reminded again and again that we serve a joyous, loving God, not a god who is vengeful, vindictive, evil and unpredictable.
- Verse five tells us what is out there for us if we but open our eyes and hearts to see: “Then you shall see and be radiant, your heart shall thrill and rejoice.” I love the words you shall see and be radiant. When we are open to the love of God and

familiar with all the blessings he has given to us, then we are radiant, for we can not contain our joy and thanksgiving. Try to be gloomy when you feel radiant – it is not possible.

What excites me most about active ministry in a parish is the interaction with fellow Christian seekers of all ages. It is very difficult to remain a committed and vibrant Christian if we are unable to discuss our faith or witness faith alive in others. We were not created by God to be isolates, nor were we meant to insulate ourselves from interaction with others. We are best in a community of faith where our faith can be nurtured and grow.

I have found the people of both Wesley and Friendship keenly interested in community building and mutual support. Remain open to new people coming through your doors, welcome the stranger into your midst and be prepared to learn new things about the faith because they are there to share their experiences of God with you.

The church community mirrors other communities which abound across the earth. The difference in the Christian community is the common bond we share in the need to worship with thanksgiving and praise our generous God.

We are humbled by God's bounty and his wondrous gift of Jesus Christ. It is important to provide time each week to think upon issues of life greater than ourselves. Public worship assists us in reaffirming our important role to one another and to strengthen us to face life's often tough challenges.

Our new church creed starts with these wonderful words:

"We are not alone, we live in God's world." This assurance of never being alone is powerful stuff is it not? We are not alone, but always walking beside our God who created us, loves us, sustains us and ultimately will welcome us home.

I wish you all so much joy as you remain together as worshipping communities. Continue to enjoy one another and to care about what happens to each other. Enjoy your new pastor who has come to minister with you and among you. Continue to grow in the faith and to be a light to the world.

Thank you so very much for your ministry to me. You have enriched my life and my faith far beyond your imaginings. You have given me the great gifts of your friendship and your love. I will always thank God for each of you and will remember you in my prayers.

Thanks be to God for the opportunities presented to us for community and love.

Rev. Gary Magarrell