

Sept. 14, 2008

Exodus 14:26-31, 15:20-21

“Who are We?”

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#### **Exodus 14**

**14:26 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen."**

**14:27 Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the Lord swept them into the sea.**

**14:28 The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen--the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.**

**14:29 But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.**

**14:30 That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore.**

**14:31 And when the Israelites saw the great power the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.**

#### **Exodus 15**

**15:20 Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing.**

**15:21 Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea."**

This church often takes up its tambourines to sing and dance!

I can't say that the women necessarily lead everyone out in glorious song and dancing, but sometimes they do!

Like the prophet Miriam, someone raises their voice in song, and we as a church, follow their lead in celebrating our faith, in singing our joy, in praising our God. Sometimes its Susan Windham and Marj, sometimes its Scot on the organ, his fingers dance on the keyboards even if he doesn't, and sometimes it is someone else all together! We are gifted with the beauty and joy of music here at Westminster, no doubt.

But what do we celebrate? Why do we lift our voices in holy joy?

Ours is not the story of freedom from our enemies. Ours is not the story of slaves running away from harsh masters. Ours is not the story of a lowly rabble who were nobody becoming somebody; a nation, a people beloved by God, special to God and in communion with their God.

OR MAYBE THAT IS OUR STORY TOO?

Perhaps at first glance we see ourselves together, as the community of Westminster, singing and smiling, hugging and laughing together and perhaps, we do not remember where we have come from!

Take another look around.

We are people who have come together as lonely, or far from home, or as outcast from other churches and other communions. Somehow, we didn't fit; we weren't welcome, we received no greeting of peace there. And somehow, we found our way here; to this United Church of Christ community. I know that I felt like an exile, an outcast, and that finding the UCC was more than just finding a church, it was finding my way home. So, yes, some of us do indeed feel that we have run from masters who sought to cripple or break us. We were slaves, yes we were. Enslaved to an addiction, a vice, a despair, or carrying an enormous burden of unhappiness and unhealthiness with us everywhere. We have been slaves to fear, slaves to loneliness, slaves to poverty, cynicism, despair. Some of us found our way here, and here the burden has been lightened, the addiction broken.

Coming here; our hearts were the hearts of a homeless rabble. Coming here, we were looking for a chance to stop running, stop fighting, stop hurting. It is no sense of social duty that has driven us through these doors: no, our hurts, our hungers, our need to be somebody instead of nobody, our desperate need for community and communion with God: all these and more are the stories of our hearts and lives and **that** is what has brought us here!

To this amazing old sanctuary, beautiful, but impossible to heat in the winter or keep cool in the summer!

To this much more amazing community and its story: started in 1879 by a pastor/schoolteacher and his wife and twelve other adults with their children, including members of the Spokane tribe. And one nursing infant, as is noted in our records!

- People have come here through the financial crises of two centuries, through the wars, the depression, influenza and HIV/Aids, through cancer and racism and heart attack, Alzheimer's and stroke, homophobia and sexism.
- Through the building of the freeway on our doorstep, and the change from streetcar to thoroughfare outside our window.
- From Congregational to United Church of Christ, with an angry split in the church over that change.

This place, called Westminster, has been here, and still is alive here. And its doors open wide, to invite people to come on in and find a community, a people, chosen and beloved by God, welcome just as they are, right here, right now.

This church, our home, once held 2,000 members and now holds just under 200.

This church, your home and mine, knows each baby and child and teen by name, sends care packages to our college students, invites each child to grow and learn and share their beautiful gifts of spirit with us, in joy and in safety. This church sends out friend and member alike to feed the hungry and support our neighborhood, to sing and play and organize our MANNA concert so that the hungry can eat.

This church walks in the CROP walk each spring, so that the hungry can eat. We agitate and organize in the city and state so that people can find housing, find work, restore their dignity, see a future of hope for their children.

This church organizes 7,000 Christmas gifts each year with the Tree of Sharing.

This church welcomes book groups, knitting groups, cooking groups, bible discussion groups, spiritual nurture groups, parent groups, groups of youth, groups for health, groups for grief and celebration of all that life brings.

Why do I persist in this litany of our actions, accomplishments, activity? Because I want to ask you: why are **you** here, Sunday after Sunday? What have **you** discovered **here**?

But even more pressingly, I want you to answer the question:

- **What would you do, if Westminster were not here?**
- **Where would you go, if Westminster were not here?**
- **What would you call “home” for your spirit, for your children’s spirits, for your partner’s?**

Where would you go, to find blessing?

To find songs of joy and praise, hope and courage in your life of faith?

To find comfort in grief?

Where would you go to find a 5 minute sharing of the peace of Christ???

Where would you go to find the people and theology of the United Church of Christ?

**What would Spokane be like without Westminster?**

I believe that you know how special this church community is.  
I know that I have been challenged, supported, excited and renewed by serving as your pastor these past 6 years.  
It is a joy to serve with Marj, with Scot, with the rest of the staff.

And the ways in which we serve, all of us, with our various gifts, makes Westminster wonderful and unique and a gift to all of Spokane.

But with our current deficit spending we do not foresee us continuing on beyond 3-4 more years. This church would have to move, or radically change its mission and ministry - without greater financial support, a stronger base of giving than we currently have. Our yearly deficit is rapidly eating up our savings. We must find strategies of building use and rental, giving, and receiving, hopeful praying and faithful action that give us the opportunity to continue into the future.

So, I want you to consider your answer to the questions I have posed. I believe in this church and its welcome, its generosity, its significance to the city of Spokane and in so very many lives. I am beginning my 7<sup>th</sup> year of ministry with and among you. I invite you to join with me, the staff, the Trustees, the men and women who have gone before who have believed in Westminster.

- Will you join me in praying for the future of this church and this people?
- Will you join me in finding ways to support this church's wonderful ministries, its open welcoming heart that the people of Spokane need?
- Can you join me, the Trustees and Council, in creatively strategizing ways to cut our deficit, and strengthen our financial future?

Join me in giving, and in working, for the hopeful future of this place that God blesses, and that we love: Westminster Congregational United Church of Christ, where, "no matter who you are or where you are on your faith journey, you are welcome here."