

Turning Around, Following Stars, Planting Flowers

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
On January 7th, 2018

Ephesians 3:1-12, Mark 1:4-11

This morning we are celebrating two different liturgical days on the same Sunday. Yesterday was January 6th, which is Epiphany, the day we mark the revealing of God's glory to the Gentile world in the form of the wise men from the East coming to bring the young Christ child their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And today on the liturgical calendar, the first Sunday after Epiphany, is the day we mark the Baptism of Jesus at the Jordan River. Both liturgical days are fitting for the first Sunday in 2018, which is a great time to set a course for the New Year, because baptism marks only the beginning of the faith journey and that journey is directional, guided by signs and intentions.

Our first reading comes from the pen of the Apostle Paul writing words of comfort and challenge from prison to the church in Ephesus. Listen for what he says about the mystery of God's grace being made known to him and to all humankind and his role in that.

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given to me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Paul understands himself to be a servant of the gospel, the good news of the mystery of God's love for all humanity. He sees himself as a servant of that mystery, a participant in the unfolding of God's eternal purpose being carried out in Christ Jesus. And in our Gospel text for today, we see a forerunner who also participates in the unfolding of God's eternal purpose.

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

On the morning of New Year's Eve, I came across a little one-panel cartoon that depicts two little humanlike creatures atop raised yellow numerals making up 2018.

One is standing, arms folded, with the trace of a scowl on his face. He's looking down on the other one, who has gardening tools and is leaning from the 2 over to the 0 of the twenty in 2018.

This other little guy has a box of seeds on his left and a watering can on his right and he's smiling and digging away.

The grumpy guy asks the cheerful one, "Why so optimistic about 2018? What do you think it will bring? Everything seems so messed up."

Mr. Smiley, deeply engrossed in his work, replies, "I think it will bring flowers."

"Yeah?" Grumpypants says, "How come?"

Without missing a beat, our cheerful gardener comes back, "Because I am planting flowers."

That little cartoon spoke to me of hope as much as any beautiful passage of scripture we might read. As we sit here on the cusp of a New Year, with the first week already under our belts, a temptation at least some of us might face is to cross our arms and bewail how messed up everything seems to be—whether it be on a personal, national, or global stage.

Now don't get me wrong. There's a place for lamenting the troubles of life, at least for a time. Those challenges and difficulties are real, and they range from the aches and pains and losses of being human and growing older, to the concerns that come with being a parent of a child of any age, whatever age that child happens to be, from infancy to young adulthood and beyond. You never outgrow being a parent. Then there is the responsibility of caring for aging or ill parents, or spouses, or friends or siblings that some of you are taking on. We can face work issues, and home issues, and relationship issues, and transition issues, and health issues. Add to all of that any concern you or I might have about the state of the nation or the world—and there has never in history been a time when such things weren't a concern to at least some degree or another, by the way, never in the history of time has there been a time when such things weren't a concern. So, we might indeed find ourselves with Mr. Grumpy: skeptical about 2018 and its prospects. But moving through life day after day with arms crossed is really no way to live

There's another choice available to us, however, a choice that we can learn from the gardener, who **expected** flowers **because he planted and watered** flowers. There is a parable in his dogged determination to set an intention and to engage in specific practices that lead to its realization, knowing that not every seed he plants and waters will necessarily bloom, but nevertheless doing the work in hopes that at least some will.

Most of the time, results don't come simply because we wish for them to come. They happen because we do the work to make them happen—and then, just like planting and watering and fertilizing flowers, we leave the rest up to God.

Sometimes we forget that. I love the story of the man who kept praying to God to win the lottery. Week after week he prayed and he prayed and he prayed to win the lottery. Then finally after one of his prayers, God reached down to him for a special private conversation. God said, "Do me a favor.

At least buy a ticket!” We have to plant and water and fertilize the flowers. Then we leave the rest up to God.

The Apostle Paul, who elsewhere spoke of how he planted and Apollos watered but God gave the growth, knew a little something about this phenomenon of doing the work and leaving the results up to God. In today’s epistle lesson, Paul, writing from prison—so many of his letters were written while he was in prison—speaks of *the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God*—that is, the good news that *the through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might be made known*. Paul speaks of that plan, that mystery being made known, the hope that Jews and Gentiles, outsiders and insiders, would become fellow-heirs, reconciled members of one body in Christ. Paul talks about God’s plan for this to happen. But even as he does so, the apostle refers to his role and the role of the church in making it happen.

He was given a commission of God’s grace, Paul writes, he was assigned a task and a role. You could put it this way. Paul was given seeds and a gardening shovel and a watering can and told get to work. I’ll be with you.

Paul asserts that his commission was in service of an ultimate plan. It is Paul’s contention, and the assertion of the Biblical witness, that there are grand, God-ordained intentions for the moral arc of the universe. That arc, as the 19th century abolitionist Theodore Parker insisted and Martin Luther King, Jr. reiterated, **is long but it bends towards justice**. And beyond that, I would add, it bends towards wholeness and healing and reconciliation and new life. But here’s the rub. We have a part to play in that bending.

The part we have to play in that bending is summed up nicely in what the African-American theologian Howard Thurman called the Work of Christmas. He wrote, in words that were on our bulletin cover last week:

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.¹*

That work doesn’t get done by us crossing our arms and saying, “Oh, ain’t it awful?” It happens through baptized folks like you and me getting on our knees, whistling while we work—even if it’s the blues—and taking gardening shovels in hand to dig the holes to plant the seeds that will become flowers. Not every seed we plant will grow and bloom. But it has been my experience that some will.

¹ Howard Thurman, *When the Song of the Angels Is Stilled*, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/when-the-song-of-the-angels-is-stilled/> (last accessed 9 Jan 2018)

I've seen flowering in my own life and in this church and in the larger world through seeds that you have planted.

Seeds like a word of encouragement to a fellow Immanuelite.

Seeds like the expression of gratitude to a friend or neighbor who helped you.

Seeds like the smile given to a stranger.

Seeds like the visit made, the card sent, the prayer lifted.

The making of a meal, the driving of a van, the giving of time.

The effort to really understand what it's like to be an immigrant, or homeless, or a person of color, or someone who is transgender, and then to do some service or advocacy on their behalf.

Seeds like honest and vulnerable conversations with someone with whom you may not always agree, but the conversation is based in love and respect.

Seeds like time set aside for study or meditation or a small group or a twelve step meeting. All of these things are seeds planted.

They will bloom, at least some of them. And they have bloomed in beauty, and joy, and hope, and love, and growth—and that's not going to stop in 2018.

Today we begin our annual confirmation program in earnest by giving our young people Bibles and commissioning their faith mentors. And you could say that the whole process is to some degree about the kids, the mentors, the staff, and the whole congregation, digging and planting seeds that we hope will flower, if not in 2018, then somewhere down the road. But it's not just about planting seeds, it's about setting intentions.

This is why I like that we launch the process right after Christmas, right after the New Year, in that sweet spot around Epiphany and Baptism of the Lord, because what we are asking the confirmands and their mentors to do is not just to plant seeds, but to set their sights on something as they begin a journey. Like the wise ones who followed the star to the place where the child Jesus was, like John the Baptizer who came to prepare the way for Jesus, the goal in front of us determines the direction we head and the sorts of seeds we strive to plant. So we set intentions.

For the last four or five years, I've invited you to join me in choosing an Epiphany star word for the year. In some churches, like Judith's church for instance, people come up and draw a pre-written one and get what they get—like children on a playground being passed out popsicles. We may try that next year. Here we let you pray over your star and decide for yourself what your word will be. But we do ask you to choose a word that you believe will lead you deeper in faith, nearer to God, closer to God's love embodied in Jesus and in human beings like you and me. If you get stumped this week and need help in picking, I've got a series of words that I can randomize and pick for you. Seriously, pick a word. Try it.

Over the last four years, the words I have chosen have been present, enlightenment, joy, and this past year, courage. It is my practice to tape the star (I duplicate it a few times) to my car dashboard, to my bathroom mirror, to my computer monitor, and to the threshold of my home and my office. It's a way of keeping me focused.

As I said, this past year, my word was courage. I thought it was going to find expression in me taking brave stands for what I believe in, and I suppose to some extent maybe it did. But it worked on a different level. I saw it play out in the words of the serenity prayer, which asks for the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

I began this past to year to have the courage to change the only thing I really have the ability to change, and that is my own actions and attitudes.

I began to see that while I can use my influence, I cannot really control world affairs or anyone else's behavior. I can't make people see my way. But I can love them just the same.

What I can control, what I can change, is the way I think and behave. It takes courage to do that.

I lived with that word all year.

It was with me when Katie brought the idea—that John Schell had originally planted—of doing a Hypothermia Shelter at Immanuel during the week before Christmas, and the Session began to embrace it at our retreat this past June. I held on to my courage star, knowing that this project was something new and different and might have its challenges, but could wind up being a tremendous blessing for our congregation and the people we were serving. And then I watched as Katie, and Dana Pratt, and Sue Henry, and Lee Rainie, and Flynn Bucy as part of the Session planning team set to work digging holes, and planting seeds, and I saw, the week before Christmas what bloomed. And you know what? It wasn't perfect. But it was beautiful. It was beautiful.

What we did was based in a sense that there is a larger purpose at work in the world than just what feels comfortable to you and to me. It was based in the trust that God is working God's purpose out as year succeeds to year and that we, like Paul, are called to get to gardening. And we do it in Jesus' name. *Amen.*

Charge/Benediction:

As you leave this place take your star, or pick one up on your way out if you didn't get one coming in, and think about what you're going to write on that star. Think about what will draw you closer to and to the embodied love of Jesus in the year ahead and remember that what we bring 2018 part of what it is. So get out your gardening tools, because I'm expecting flowers.