

“An Invitation You Can Refuse”
Philippians 4.1–9 & Luke 14.16–24
The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 9 October 2005

One of the nicest things that has happened to me this year was *an invitation*. Over the summer, Zvi Ish-Shalom, the new rabbi at Congregation Har Shalom, asked if Plymouth would be willing to open our facilities to his congregation for celebration of the high holidays – Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – as their congregation has outgrown its capacity. And as you know, we are between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur right now, so next week our sanctuary will be transformed, as it was last week, into a Jewish worship space. It’s been really wonderful to welcome our guests and to try to make them feel at home here at Plymouth, and I can’t tell you how appreciative they are.

So, what about the invitation? A group of folks from Har Shalom came over so I could show them the facilities, and at the end of the meeting I was chatting with Zvi, and I asked if it would be okay if I attended one of the services. His response was to invite me to read the psalm on the Erev Rosh Hashanah – new year’s eve. I can’t tell you how welcoming the congregation was. And is the tradition when they welcome a clergyperson or teacher, they sang my way up to the lectern to read the psalm. I’m still floating a bit from the experience!

I could have said no to Zvi’s invitation, but I didn’t. I even had a really classic anxiety dream the week before the service: I came forward to read the psalm (in English), and instead the reading had been changed to a passage from the Mishnah Torah (*in Hebrew*). Gee, what do you think Freud would have said about that dream?

Zvi gave a brilliant sermon that evening about some of the meanings of Rosh Hashanah, and I’m going to share some of his thoughts with you, for not only is Rosh Hashanah the new year, but it is said to be the annual day during which God judges all living creatures. According to Zvi, “We are taught that on Rosh Hashanah three books are opened: The wholly righteous are inscribed in the Book of Life, the wholly wicked are inscribed in the Book of Death, and the fate of those who are somewhere in the middle is suspended until Yom Kippur.”

Paul of Tarsus was a Jew from a Pharasaic family – a Jew who celebrated the high holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. So, listen carefully to what he writes about Euodia, Syntyche, Clement, and his other co-workers: Their “names are in the Book of Life.” (I love it when the lectionary provides us with these synchronicities.)

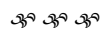
But listen to what else Zvi said last Monday evening: “Jacob Josef of Polnoy, one of the famed disciples of the Baal Shem Tov – the founder of Hasidism – points out that the Talmud never states that it is God who is doing the inscribing. According to him, this is because the intent of the Talmudic passage is radically different than what we might automatically assume. When the Talmud says on Rosh Hashanah three books are opened, it is actually saying that three books are opened before each one of us, and that *we each* have the power to determine our future by inscribing ourselves in whichever of the three books we choose!

If we accept upon ourselves and commit to fulfilling our purpose of creation in the coming year then we inscribe ourselves in the Book of Life; if, however, we intend to spend the coming year immersed in distractions and useless activity, then we inscribe ourselves in the Book of Death. By the way, this does not refer to actual physical death but spiritual death. In other words, a life that is not fulfilling its unique purpose is not a true life; spiritually speaking, it is akin to a state of death. The important point is that we each have the power, ultimately, to choose our own destiny.”

Going back to Paul the apostle, he enumerates positive attributes that lead us toward life. “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” And he tells the church in Philippi not just to think about them, but to keep doing them.

Later today, we as a congregation of God’s people, have a decision to make about how we live faithfully into our collective future. How do we perceive our unique mission as a congregation?

Like those who were invited to the great banquet, we can list all kinds of reasons for **not** initiating a capital campaign: the economy isn’t as robust as it was in the 90s (So why didn’t Plymouth conduct a campaign then?); We should spend all the money on outreach (Then why haven’t we done that already? And our building provides significant “in-reach” to over 30 community groups and agencies who use our facilities). There are all kinds of reasons we could come up with **not** to take a bold leap of faith.



Do you remember Marlon Brando’s portrayal of Don Corlione in *The Godfather*? “I’m going to make you an offer you can’t refuse.” That’s a pretty bold invitation, and it’s backed up by the promise of violence.

Unlike Don Corlione, God does not threaten us with violence if we refuse the invitation, as the excuse-making banquet guests did. We have free will to choose our path. Will there be ramifications about our choices? Sure. But we are given a choice, and hopefully we listen for the whispers of the Spirit to guide us.

Tell me if this invitational line from Jesus’ parable sounds familiar: “Come, for all things are ready.” It’s the invitation you hear from Sharon and me at the communion table, and it’s from the Parable of the Banquet.

“Come for all things are ready.” That doesn’t just describe the moment of invitation to the table or the banquet. It describes **καιρός** (kairos) – when things are ready at just the right time, when they occur at just the right moment, when things mature in due season.

Over the last several years, we have gone through several seasons in the life of our congregation. Rick Riddoch, our interim senior minister successfully led Plymouth through a winter of discontent and into spring.

Things really began to blossom at Plymouth. As we started this period of rapid growth, during our centennial year, I asked you many times for your dream for Plymouth. We gathered input from you, the members, to design a strategic plan, which charted how we would plow the field, and then we planted new seeds.

In our summer, we continued to grow, both in numbers and in spirit. Our membership has gone from 398 to 550. It is the season of our facilities Master Plan and preparing for a capital campaign.

And now we find ourselves in autumn – time to bring in the harvest. This is a **καιρός** moment in the life of our congregation. Will we reap what we’ve sown?

At every step, you – our members – have been invited into the process for input. We have tried to be attentive to the movement of the Spirit as well, listening through conversation with each other to discern where God is calling us as a congregation.

“Come, for all things are ready.”

Someone is giving a banquet and **you** are invited. Our response is up to each of us, and all of us together as a community of faith. “Come, for all things are ready.”

I'd like you to think back to the Hasidic interpretation of the Rosh Hashanah: it is we who must decide in which book we will inscribe the name of our congregation: the Book of Death, the intermediate book, or the Book of Life.

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Will you pray with me?

God of infinite past, present, and future, help us to listen for the subtlest whisper you offer us as we discern the next step of our path with you. Let us be attentive to the ways you call us.

You invite us forward in bold, new ways. You invite us to “do a new thing” in the life of this congregation. Embolden our trust in you, and give us the strength to answer your invitation with integrity, with faith not fear, with vision and imagination of what you are calling us to become as co-creators with you.

Thanks be to you, O God of invitation.

Amen.