

“Discerning New Paths”

I Kings 3.3–14

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Congregational UCC, 17 Aug 03

As I read through the lectionary texts for this Sunday, I decided that the one I really wanted to use for the sermon was the lesson from the Hebrew Bible, describing King Solomon. (I think it’s a lot more interesting than the rather moralistic text from Ephesians warning against wine drinking, which the author considered debauchery...it’s a good thing he wasn’t with Jesus at the wedding feast in Cana, when he changed water into wine.) It’s interesting, too, because Solomon was a fascinating character. A great leader, he was known for his wisdom and for building the Temple in Jerusalem. And the text is also interesting for a theological reason.

Most Christians don’t typically think of the work of the Holy Spirit in the context of the Old Testament, but that’s what it sounds like again and again when God speaks to people like Jacob, and Samuel and Solomon through a dream, even if the Holy Spirit isn’t identified by name.

Sometimes, God speaks to us through dreams, and at other times, dreams are a product of our own psyches. Last week, I was talking with Jim Greuel while we were backpacking with our sons in Rocky Mountain National Park, telling him about visiting my former colleagues in the Connecticut Conference Office in Hartford while I was on vacation. Things are pretty bleak there, too, as a result of the decline in Our Church’s Wider Mission support from local churches. Last week, at 10,000 feet, I had a dream about the Connecticut Conference staff dropping from 20 members to 2; their beautiful brick office building had to be sold off, and the conference minister and her secretary were holed up in an dingy industrial park in a tiny office with Formica desks. (I sure hope that wasn’t God speaking!)

It may be difficult to know just who is speaking: is it God or your own super-ego? One yardstick might be that if the dream is consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus, at least it doesn’t *rule out* the movement of the Holy Spirit. If it’s not congruent with who Jesus was and what he said and did, my surmise is that it isn’t God.

Indigenous Australians have a really fascinating take on this issue of approaching the sacred or the numinous through what they call “the dreamtime.” All over Australia, Dreaming stories tell of the ancestor spirits who created the land and everything on it. In fact, Creation is often referred to as “the Dreaming.” For humanity, it is hard to create what we cannot dream.

In the Jewish and Christian traditions, dreams are one of the typical ways that God communicates with human beings. While some of us Christians may think that the Holy Spirit came into being with the Pentecost event, it seems to me that people throughout the narratives of the Bible have been moved by the force of the Holy Spirit, moving in us and through us, and which empowers and embraces us. The Holy Spirit is older than the first century and broader than the Christian tradition. (We also need to be mindful that Christianity is the offspring of Judaism, and many of our concepts derive from Jewish experience and custom.)

But even if the Spirit is trying to get your attention, you need to be awake enough to answer the call. The New Revised Standard Version says that Solomon asked God for “an understanding mind to govern your people; able to discern between good and evil.” But in a looser translation, the New English Bible, Solomon asks for “a *heart with skill to listen*, so that he may govern you people justly and distinguish good from evil.” I find the

latter phrase more telling: “a heart with skill to listen.” To me, that’s really the core issue of discernment – and to unwrapping and living out our dreams.

Solomon, of course, isn’t asking for this gift out of self-interest, but rather so that he can be a servant-leader on God’s behalf with the people of Israel. And God grants Solomon amazing wisdom. (This story in I Kings is followed by that memorable telling of the story of two women vying for possession of one baby. Solomon tells his guard to cut the baby in half and give one-half to each woman, and the real mother says, “No! Don’t do that. Let the child live with her.” And, of course, Solomon realizes that the self-giving woman is the real mother.) And a chapter or two later, Solomon builds the temple in Jerusalem. Clearly, Solomon had what George Bush the Elder called “the vision thing.” Wisdom was helping Solomon *discern new paths* as a leader of Israel.

It’s no accident that the word “movement” is often associated with the Holy Spirit. In the overall narrative of our scripture indicates God never stands still; God is always moving somewhere, messing with someone.

If you reread the words of the hymn we just sang, you’ll see that it’s loaded with verbs to describe God’s activity: moved, called, coaxed, swept, stung, goaded, spoke, sang, cried, whispered, blew. It’s an amazing litany of the way God moves in the stories of the Bible, and how God moves through us still. “You call from tomorrow, you break ancient schemes, from the bondage of sorrow the captives dream dreams; Our women see visions, our men clear their eyes. With bold new decisions, your people arise.”

This is not the story of God’s people who want to stand still. It’s about people who are attentive to the Spirit, *discerning new paths* and who have “a heart with skill to listen.”

And the lynchpin is paying attention to the Spirit. That’s also the key to our current strategic planning process that is underway at Plymouth. One of the things I did on vacation was to review the manuscript of a new book on strategic planning for churches by two consultants from the Alban Institute, Gil Rendle, a United Methodist minister, and Alice Mann, an Episcopal priest – who is our consultant in the planning process here at Plymouth. You’ll love the title of this book: it’s called *Holy Conversations*. To paraphrase Gil Rendle, strategic planning is really a **conversation**, because it’s a dialogue within a congregation and with God. So far, Plymouth’s Strategic Planning Team has held two meetings to involve members in the process of shaping our mission and values statements, and more opportunities are coming! It’s **holy** because it is about our deep understandings of who we are as a community of faith.

Who are we?

What is God calling us to be?

Who is our neighbor?

We’ve gotten great response – people are excited – because I think you’ve sensed that these were not just meetings; they were “holy conversations.”

As we continue, we’re going to be looking at where God is calling us to move as a congregation, in terms of **congregational life** (finding new ways for our members to get in touch with their passion for different ministries, small-groups, fellowship groups, and lay Caring Ministry); in terms of **worship settings** (the times and places we worship to ensure that we’re including as many people as possible), and in terms of **staffing** (exploring how we can staff our church to get beyond the plateau in our membership, which historically gets stuck at about 270 people attending worship on a Sunday, while meeting the community’s need for a broader progressive Protestant presence).

“When planning is understood as discernment,” says Rendle, “it becomes a means to a much longer and more faithful process of questioning in which leaders and members are continuously involved in conversation with one another and with God.”¹

And some things will shift and change here at Plymouth, not all of which will be easy. But, I want you to do something with me, if you will. (You can close your eyes if you wish; that helps some of us imagine better.) Imagine that you are a member of Plymouth and the year is 1956. You are outgrowing your building on Whedbee Street. Fort Collins is growing; population is just beginning to shift south of Old Town. You start to have a vision of leaving your stone building, which has been your church home for over 50 years, and you begin to imagine building a new church home for Plymouth. Can you feel how difficult and uncomfortable it is to move into unknown territory? What will the founding members think? Will people still come to church? Can we afford to build a new building? Will Plymouth still feel like home to us?

And now, as we focus our attention on Plymouth today, may we each feel a deep sense of gratitude to those who took risks, invested their time and money and built this church, realizing their dream.

Each of us is the inheritor of that legacy of holy conversations. Those women had visions, the men cleared their eyes, and they imagined a new Plymouth. God did not call our forbears in the faith to be comfortable; God called them to be faithful. And God still calls us out of our comfort zone and into faith.

We surely will not change simply for the sake of change; we will be faithful to where God is calling us to be, and if that involves some adjustment, I’m sure that we’ll do it. (Just to allay your fears, I don’t think we’ll be asking you to consider moving and constructing a new church.)

The Holy Spirit is still at work with us. God is active. It’s up to us to find ways of listening to the still, small voice and to *discern new paths*.

May we, like our forbears at Plymouth, have *holy conversations* that move us forward in our faith. And may we, like Solomon, have God-inspired wisdom to unwrap a vision for the future of this magnificent community of faith.

Amen.

¹ Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations* manuscript, p. 48.