Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
December 20, 2015

“Looking Forward through What is Hard to Conceive”

“… Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country …”
Luke 2:39

Prelude

Not much time remains till Christmas comes.
If your house is anything like mine,
a low level sense of panic is on the rise,
a fear is palpable that not all will be done
to ensure a wholesome Christmas observance.

The church allots four weeks for Advent.
This isn’t much time, really, so there is urgency
to tend to what is essential.

This morning I want to address the theme of
“looking forward – through what is hard to conceive.”

Are we looking forward – and tending
to what is essential for a Christmas celebration?

Can we look forward through the uncertainties
and beyond what hardships fill our lives?

Can we look forward to something more
than the end of our lives,
   into what is greater than our lives,
   a goodness and mercy and love
   that endures forever?

James Thurber once said:
“Let us not look back in anger,
nor forward with fear,
   but around with awareness.”

This is good advice. I keep it close to my heart,
It is fit for any people of faith.
But sometimes our moments,
our “now times” are filled with such hardship,
our circumstances so dire,
that you can’t help but yearn for
   an altered state, a change of fortune.
Often we pray for different conditions
to prevail in our lives, do we not?
Something other than what is.

So we are a forward-looking people –
through what is hard to conceive.

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If you ever have opportunity
to travel in the Holy Land
   as a Christian pilgrim,
a likely spot to visit is the city of Nazareth,
located in the north of Israel.

Nazareth is said to have been the home
   of Jesus in his youth.

Nazareth is variously mentioned in our Gospels.
In Mark we read: “In those days Jesus came
   from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by
John in the Jordan” (Mark 1:9).

Nazareth is the hometown Jesus is said to have left;
Jesus set up shop in Capernaum;
that is where the ministry first gets up and running.
Mark mentions that Jesus later returned home,
but Nazareth is never named; it is simply identified
as his “native town” (Mark 6:1; J.B. Phillips).

In John’s gospel, when disciples are first being
assembled, an exchange takes place between
Philip and Nathanael. Philip speaks:
“We have found him about whom Moses in
   the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus
son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathanael
was anything but impressed. It was the
place, not the person, who Nathanael questioned.
Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”
he asked.

In Matthew, Nazareth gets mentioned as
the town where Joseph relocated
the holy family when it was safe
to take leave of Egypt.
They were forced to flee as refugees for
    fear of King Herod.
When Herod died, Joseph apparently
    thought of returning to Judea; but then,
    having been warned in a dream,
    he thought better;
an angel recommended Nazareth,
    which is where the Holy family
    made their residence (Matthew 2:23).

Jesus mentions nary a word about Nazareth,
but he was linked with Nazareth both in life
    and in death. Pilate ordered a sign to be
    put on the cross:
Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews (see John 19:19);
    which is often abbreviated with the acronym: INRI (Latin).

In our UCC we continue to identify and
    address Jesus by way of his zip code.
Jesus was a common name in the age of the Advent.
So our Statement of Faith is clear to proclaim:
    “In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth.”

If you happen to visit Nazareth today,
you won’t find a Joseph house, with a
carpenter’s bench and a Jesus swing set.

There is, though, a Church (Basilica) of the Annunciation.
The Church is built over what is said
    to have been the house of Mary.
If you descend into a lower level of the Church,
you’ll come upon what is called
    the Grotto of the Annunciation,
a fairly wide vault carved out of rock,
said to be the spot where Mary had her encounter
    with the angel Gabriel.
Centered within the Grotto is an altar with
    Latin script proclaiming:
Verbum Factum Hic Carno Est,
    which (roughly) translates:
Here the Word Becomes Flesh,
for it was there that Mary said,
    Here am I, the servant of the Lord;
let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).
So Mary, mother of our Lord, is with Child. And I’m guessing she can’t help but look forward and wonder. What will become of me? What will become of the Child I carry?

Mary, did you know?

Mary did you know that your baby boy
Would someday walk on water?
Mary did you know that your baby boy
Would save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy
Has come to make you new?
This child that you’ve delivered
Will soon deliver you.

Mary, were you able to look forward through all that was hard for you – to conceive of all God had in store?

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Our scripture lesson speaks of Mary having an encounter with Elizabeth who was herself facing an unexpected and unlikely pregnancy. We aren’t given to know who texted whom, whether Elizabeth was asking for help or if Mary needed a get away. We only know that Mary made haste and headed south, with no mention of any escort. Did she just show up and say, “Here I am?”

The text is clear. Mary entered Zechariah’s house, and greeted Elizabeth (1:40). And then, with Holy Spirit inspiration, Elizabeth declares:

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

It is a wonderful blessing. There is no probing of the past, no questioning of who, how, when, where. She is in the moment, hopeful of its significance, and daring
to look forward to conceive of what their pregnancies might portend for all that come. She proclaims, good has come upon us; and good will comes through us for good in the world. Elizabeth is offering an important, needed word of encouragement. It is filled with hope. And love.

I’m mindful – so much of our minds have been molded by the church’s teaching on original sin. This lesson should be emblazoned in our hearts and minds – for it is original blessing. It is reminder of the Holy Spirit being an undercurrent, working in us, through us, before we had any idea or inclination.

It was 15 years ago that the church (Roman Catholic) issued a document called “Memory and Reconciliation: The Church, the Faults of the Past.” There it was written: “Memory becomes capable of giving rise to a new future” (see Constantine’s Sword, p. 599, the chapter: Agenda Item No. 5: Repentance).

Some memories to which we are tied can torment and keep us locked in a past that denies us the blessing God intends for us. Memory best serves to advance the future we need for the life we pray. Memory of goodness and mercy can give rise to a new future.

We are people who look forward through what is hard to conceive.

We look forward to what will become of Mary with Child.

We look forward to what will come of our Christmas devotions.

We look forward to our words becoming deeds.

We look forward to the Table being plentiful for all who hunger and thirst.
We are a forward looking people, 
   through what is hard to conceive.

Are you looking forward to Christmas? 
Are you looking forward to a Christmas 
   that will keep us moving forward 
   even through what is hard?

It was 200 years ago that a poet 
went on a rant, noting “smooth and solemnized 
complacencies … on Christian lands … where 
profession mocks performance.”

Earth is sick, Wordsworth said, “of hollow words. 
Which States and Kingdoms utter when they 
talk of truth and justice”
   (The Excursion [Fifth Book, The Pastor] 
Wm. Wordsworth, 1814).

This came to mind when I was encountering all sorts 
of sacred song in the most unexpected places. 
In theatres and entertainment venues. Far away from church.

It didn’t irritate me. But it was all rather disconcerting – 
disconnecting. There was sentiment in the singing. 
Hope and yearning. But was the hope for a cozy 
projection of a past, or was it suited to give rise 
to a new future?

I can’t say for sure. What I can say is this – 
Christmas comes to bless us. 
Christmas comes to trigger more in us 
   than we can conceive in ourselves.

Christmas comes that we might do what we 
can with what we have to keep moving forward 
while there is time.

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Martin Luther King, Jr.

“If you can’t fly, then run; 
if you can’t run, then walk; 
if you can’t walk, then crawl; 
but whatever you do, 
you have to keep moving forward”
(Martin Luther King, Jr., Washington University, St. Louis, 1957).

(Sermons are typically composed in haste, for the demands of the day are many; so be charitable as you read; and remember: the contents of this sermon have not been edited and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)