

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

**18 November 2018
Pledge and Thanksgiving Sunday**

“Behold, I Am Doing a New Thing!”

**Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 43:16-21
Christian Scripture: Matthew 28:16-20**



Can you believe it is Thanksgiving already? Can you believe we have had our first snow fall? It seem like just yesterday, in July, during my candidacy sermon that we were all baking. I recall I asked one of the deacons for a towel, so I would not perspire on the bread and wine.

This week we look forward to Thanksgiving. For many, it is time of reconnecting, of reuniting. Since the time is too short for my children to visit, I must satisfy my urge to be an ‘annoying Dad’ by choosing two real zingers, you know ‘Dad jokes’, to deliver on Thursday via phone. I would you to evaluate both of them and determine whether they are worthy.



For my son, who just did very well on his Calculus and Physics midterm exams, I have this one: Q: “What do you get if you divide the circumference of a pumpkin by its diameter?” A: ‘Pumpkin pi’.



And for my daughter who in the New Year will begin to look at universities: Q: “If Pilgrims traveled on the Mayflower, what do college students travel on?” A: ‘Scholar ships’.

Thanksgiving. Our scripture reading speaks about Thanksgiving, but not in a manner most of us would normally think. We traditionally think about Thanksgiving for things of the past, or of the present.



Yet, our reading from Isaiah curiously encourages those listening to “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?” The prophet continues, “I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland” (Isaiah 43:19).

I find it strange for a prophet in the Hebrew tradition to advise one to “forget the things of the past” when his primary practice of faith is to remember, to remember, to remember. If one examines the Hebrew faith, the traditions, the feasts, the scriptures, the teachings..., they are primarily about *the past*. The Hebrew faith, then and now, orients itself around an emphasis of how fundamental it is to the soul to recall the ways in which God has been faithful *in the past* (and yes, the present too). And this looking-back on the past is important. It is beautiful. It is an imperative. The past is a treasure to ponder when we observe that our God has been with us all along.



The greatest act of Divine presence in the Hebrew scriptures is the Exodus. And it is *precisely* the Exodus that the Isaiah remembers with deep reverence (Isaiah 43:16-17). But immediately

after conjuring the images of the chariots drowning in the sea, the prophet advises us to forget, to not dwell on, that which is remembered. And there is the paradox. As Richard Rohr so often asks, “Can you think like that?” Can you hold to opposites at the same time in creative and life-giving tension? Can you not dwell on the past that you should not ever forget? If you can, that is wisdom.

The writer of Isaiah seems to know that a life that remembers *only* the past is dead; a life is dead if that which is to come cannot be celebrated. The writer of Isaiah knew that to only give thanks for the past is a sign of spiritual decay and death.

Friends, I always want to be honest with you. Like many this Thanksgiving, I will be struggling. I will struggle with the loss of my childhood family and the annual Thanksgivings I spent in rural Massachusetts and Maine. It is a past that I remember was simpler, sweeter, more loving, calmer, fundamental, essential and nurturing. I will also struggle with the loss of my most recent family. My past with them in South Africa was rich, fulfilling, meaningful, loyal, loving, exciting and reassuring. My wife is now ‘former’ and my children are out of my nest. Yes, I am thankful to God for everything in my past.



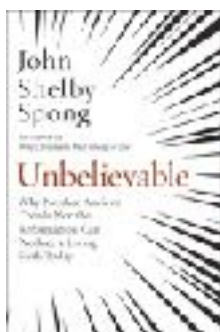
But the scriptures remind me, I am dead if I remain only there, only thankful for the things of the past or things present. The scriptures and my God call me to be thankful for what is to come! Can I do that? Can I thank God for that which is yet to come? Can you thank God for your future? Is it possible? Do you have enough faith? Do you have enough confidence that God is still working through and in us?



A mantra of our faith tradition is “God is still speaking...”. I love this mantra because it points to an imperative to offer thanksgiving for the future that is to come! God, says to us every day, “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?” Friends, I encourage us to on Thursday to offer thanksgiving not simply for past or for the present, but rather for our future to come! ‘Thank you God, for tomorrow!’



Our Christian scripture reading captures this hope for the future for which we are compelled to give thanks! It is celebration and awe for the new things that are to come that ought to be celebrated this Thanksgiving. Jesus assured his disciples, “All heaven and authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations [...] and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20). Now, I ask you, is any of that about the past? No! It is all about the future.



I and those in Women Spirit read these words about this morning’s gospel reading: “Was this a missionary charge to the heathens? Not a chance! There was no institutional church at the time that felt a need to gain converts. The risen Christ was saying, rather, go

beyond your boundaries, your fears, your lines of security; learn to give yourselves away and know that you are part of who I am. We cannot be separated!”¹

Friends, you may have thought that I forgot this is Pledge Sunday. I promise you, I have not. Our pledge cards are our thanksgiving, not necessarily for our past or present, but for our future. These pledge cards indicate our faith and confidence in the future more so than our nostalgia for the past or appreciation for the present.



With my pledge card I give thanksgiving for the *new things* that God will do with Loaves and Fishes. With my pledge card, I give thanks for the *new things* that God will do with the Brattleboro Centre for Children. With my pledge card, I give thanks for the *new things* that God will do for our sister parish in El Salvador. With this pledge card, I give thanks for the *new things* that God will do with Carry Me Home. With this card, I give thanks for what God will do

¹ John Shelby Spong, *Unbelievable: Why Neither Ancient Creeds Nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), 186.

with this building, which is an instrument of God's peace in this community. With this card, I give thanks for that which God will do in the lives our young ones through Christian Education's Faith in Action. With this pledge card I give thanks for the ways in which God will use Mary, Bruce and John to enable our ministry to be the most effective it can be. With this pledge card, I give thanks for the way in which God will continue to increase my love for all of you and will further graft my spirit to this ministry. Yes, I give thanks with this pledge card for the past and present, but I give more so for what is to come in the future.

This was the word of God, preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, 'Amen'!