

Sermon: Undergoing God
Scripture: Luke 4:14-21
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: January 24th, 2019

We have layers and layers of time that come into play in the scripture this morning. Ben Wilson is here in 2019 reading words written about 1900 years ago by Luke and Luke was writing about what happened with Jesus about 60 years earlier and Luke writes about Jesus reading the ancient Hebrew scriptures which were written about 700 years earlier than Jesus' time by Isaiah who was – are you following me - referring to the events of the Exodus which happened about 2000 years before Isaiah! The word is spoken across the arc of history bringing us from God's liberation of the Jews from Egypt some 3000 BCE to where we are now, 2019, considering what God's liberation looks like in this year of our Lord to us and those around us.

The whole notion of existence being linear; that there is a past, a present, and a future, is a way of understanding the world that comes specifically from the Jews. History is a specifically Jewish notion. Without the Jews we would be thinking about life and time in circles and cycles as many of the people of the east do. But the Hebrew people influencing the West gave us a sense of the movement through time and opened the door to our working for progress and development through the arc of time. It's central to our Judeo-Christian theology because the church says that history is ultimately going somewhere, which is toward fulfillment and completion.

History for the church isn't understood as the story of the super-powers of the world, the lands that have been conquered or the rise and fall of empires but rather the story of how God has been at work in relationship

with humanity to complete or save us. The church's word for it Salvation History. The Christian assumption is that history is a process that we and the world have been undergoing towards salvation, a process of world creation and world becoming that God is unfolding around us and with us.

But the scriptures name this process of becoming in a very particular way and we hear it in what Ben read of what Luke wrote of what Jesus reads of what Isaiah said in referring to the Exodus story of the Hebrew people. The process of becoming, of salvation, is the process of the human being moving from enslavement to freedom, from oppression to blessing, from being bound to being unloosed, from being blind to given its sight. That's what God's work in our lives looks like whether individually or corporately. The two archetypal stories are the freedom of the enslaved Jews and the resurrection of the crucified and entombed Jesus. So as we look at history we are to see it as a process of unfolding like this, of being released and freed and awakened. I was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see!

All our individual and corporate awakenings and moments of discovery and reform and course correction seen together from a bird's eye view or God's-eye-view our Christian faith affirms that we are in process of being saved... or as the theologian James Alison names it: "We are undergoing God."

It all started with this little band of rag-tag nomads in the Middle East through whom the Divine Source of all that is sought to reveal Herself and Her purposes to the world. And it was a process of revelation because, one can only imagine, if All Truth and All Light and All Love revealed Herself to us in one fell swoop we would be burnt to a little pile of ash, so glorious and mind-blowing would it be! We can't just merge with God - PERIOD - we have to grow into God. God could not just reveal everything, all truth

and purpose and light, to the Hebrew nomads in one fell swoop without obliterating their freedom, so there was a point in time, a beginning when God began unveiling Godself in the life of a man named Abraham and it was his descendants through whom God would begin unveiling the Truth, the Light, the Love that is the source and destination of it all.

And so they got it... and they lost it. They were freed and they were enslaved, found their way to the Divine and lost their way. That's what the story of the Bible shows. They heard that God was one and there were to be no other gods worshipped and they honored that for a time but they liked having something they could touch and see so they made a golden calf and worshipped it. They taught that this One God was defined by love and justice and peace, of mercy and forgiveness and impartiality, and they forgot it and presented God as violent and sectarian, angry and brooding, on our side and not theirs. So the prophets came to remind them again and again about who God actually was and what their responsibilities were – to love God and worship God alone, to reveal God to the world and love their neighbors as themselves and they got it again and then lost it and forgot it and so on. That's how this unfolding of salvation history went. It might have looked at times like they were just going around in circles and not getting anywhere, but from a broader perspective, they were in fact undergoing God and growing towards salvation.

And then there came a time, at a particular point in history, that a most amazing thing took place and it wasn't the rising of a mighty empire, nor was it a cataclysmic act of nature, but a single baby was born, a little Jewish kid named Jesus. And he came in the footsteps of so many Hebrew prophets before him as the voice and presence of God bring help to us who needed some saving from ourselves – he came “bringing good news to the poor,

proclaiming release for the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and letting the oppressed go free.” And we say this coming was the pivotal point in the history of the world, the point by which all history from there on out would be defined, which is why in fact we date our calendars based upon his birth. Jesus came as the definitive and cumulative expression of God’s presence in the world and in him was the culmination of all salvation history: **THE HUMAN BEING FINALLY ARRIVED AND FULLY DIVINE!**

And we’d love to say and we all lived happily ever after, but as we all know we as humans have not fully stepped into our inheritance as sons and daughters and children of God. In fact we really couldn’t handle the revelation of God in human form much at all so instead of poofing into ash ourselves at the revelation we took him and killed him in hopes of saving ourselves and as a result the painfully long process of our becoming continues and still, 2000 years later salvation history unfolds in us and around us.

We in the United Church of Christ have named this reality by saying ”God is still speaking”. Jesus Christ’s impact upon us and our world is still unfolding. It’s a good thing to remember for each of us individually when we think we’ve done a lot of personal work and growth and we find ourselves right back into same old deadening patterns that we thought we had dealt with. Or when we are in a particularly dark time in our lives, a dark night of the soul or a wandering in the wilderness, it’s so important to remember we are a work in progress and we mustn’t despair at finding our way, we mustn’t stop believing that we will reach the promised land or rise from the tomb of our troubled relationships, that we can be healed of our various addictions and released into the light of a new day of freedom. In God’s time. With our commitment and labor but in God’s time.

And the same is true for the life of the world. We as the church must tell salvation history and remind ourselves and the world along with us that God's salvation is occurring as bleak as the individual snapshots of this or that situation might seem, we are still undergoing God. There is liberation and resurrection going on, we just have to recognize it, point it out, celebrate it when we witness it. All movements towards justice and care for all creation, towards the unity humankind, care for the poor and release of captives, were in seed form in God's initial revelation to the Jewish people 4,000 years ago and such things were concentrated also in the fullness in Jesus Christ. And now it is that reality expanding outward to all humanity. The Kingdom of God, the heavenly realm, the New Jerusalem, as the Bible refers to it, is a place, a reality of freedom and love and justice and restoration and fulfillment. We know we are not there yet but we are invited to take the next best step we know how, however small, to bring it about so God's love becomes reality at the culmination of history... and in the meantime Ben Wilson and Ben Wilson's children and great great grandchildren will continue to speak the words of promise and hope in the church for what is to come. Amen!

Welcome and Announcements

We welcome you this morning to First Congregational Church in Winchester, UCC and hope that you know whether you've been coming here for decades or it's your first time joining us that our aim is to facilitate your prayerful worship of God so that your faith journey, wherever you may be along that path might be enriched by this joining together in song and prayer and praise.

We welcome you to join us for conversation and something to eat and drink downstairs in Chidley Hall immediately following worship. If you have a particular interest in the intersection between the Christian faith and ecological responsibility our Green Congregation Taskforce invites you for conversation down there as well as we consider how to better "green" our congregation. Notice of that is in your insert as are other opportunities to live out your faith and come together as a community... like if you are into rokus parties there's going to be one in Chidley Hall on Friday night – I mean, Bruce and Steve, look all holy and formal up here in the choir, but wait til they unleash it on the Chidley stage!

We love and welcome having infant noises in worship but if parents need a place to be more free they can still view and hear the service in the Family Room or there is a nursery downstairs with caregivers who are happy to be with your kids and text you if there's any issues.

Please consider filling out a Welcome Card and/or a prayer request on the backside and placing it in the offering plate when it passes mid-way through the service.

We begin this morning as we do each Sunday with a time of stillness and silence, just a moment to breath deeply and gathering into the Spirit, remembering the charge of the ancient poet who wrote in Psalm 46 - "Be still and know that I am God."

BENEDICTION

Will: The God who weaves together the sun and the moon, the sky and the earth, is the very same God who knit you together in your mother's womb.

Judy: The God who brings new stars to birth in far off galaxies is the same God who brought you to birth and placed you at your mother's breast.

Will: Enter this week with confidence, friends, as surely as the sun, as certain as the moon, as solid as the earth, know that you have place within God's unfolding grace!

Judy: Please pass the peace of Christ to one another as you depart.