

“THAT YOU MAY ABOUND IN HOPE” (Romans 15:13)

*Script for sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, December 4, 2016 – Advent Communion
Higganum Congregational Church – First Congregational Church of Haddam
Combined Service, Higganum Congregational Church, 10:30 a.m.*

Scripture Reading: Romans 15:4-7, 13

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

And may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

The fiery story of John the Baptist, which is the lectionary gospel reading for this, the second Sunday of Advent, turns out to be quite appropriate for today. Interim pastors like myself sometimes look to John the Baptist as our role model: not the fiery part, but the “prepare the way” part. One of our most important responsibilities, once the congregation has called their new settled pastor, is to help prepare the way for new pastoral leadership. So perhaps my calling today is to prepare the way: not only for for next Sunday's candidating services, but also for the arrival of your new settled pastor in January.

Just to be clear: I don't intend to end up like John the Baptist. Nor should you expect your new settled pastor to be Jesus. (Even if she can walk on water, it's just because she knows where the slightly submerged stepping stones are located.) And remember that you're not hoping for “an innovative pastor with a fresh vision who will inspire our churches to remain exactly the same.”

As you probably have guessed, I'm delighted that the settled pastor search committee has found the candidate they will be presenting to you next weekend. I'm delighted for at least three reasons:

First, this means that if all goes well next Sunday, my last Sunday as your shared interim pastor will be January 8, 2017. I'm delighted that I can anticipate being fully and happily retired as of January 9.

Second, this means that I will have spent almost exactly two years as interim pastor in this community. An interim pastorate lasting longer than 18-24 months is generally not a good thing. I'm delighted that my interim pastorate falls (just barely!) within this time frame.

Although I'm not a follower of astrology, a number of years ago I happened to come across this bit of wisdom in my horoscope: “You'll be charming and have an easy time getting to know people. You'll make a fantastic first impression, but that could fade if you stay too long at the fair. Remember to leave them wanting more.” I like to think of this as a good metaphor for interim ministry: don't stay too long at the fair. Remember to leave your congregation wanting more. I'm confident that I will leave you wanting more.

Which brings me to the third, and most important, reason for my delight. I am delighted that the energetic and faithful work of the pastoral search committee has brought you to this point. I am delighted that you can look forward to calling a **shared settled** pastor. Each of these adjectives is equally significant. By recognizing the nuts and bolts of your current situation, you have seen the practical wisdom of calling a **shared** pastor. It's also significant that you will be calling a **settled** pastor: someone who will settle in this community and stay here, serving as your pastor and teacher for what we all hope will be for several years.

The calling of a settled pastor is both an ending and a beginning. It's the ending of a time of transition and uncertainty, what I like to envision as a kind of wilderness journey. It's the beginning of a new and hopeful and exciting chapter in the long story of these two congregational churches in Haddam and Higganum, what I like to envision as a kind of crossing over into the promised land.

How fitting it is this morning that the theme of our combined worship service is “hope.” Today you are looking toward your future with hopeful anticipation—perhaps with some anxiety as well, which is quite appropriate. But today I want to focus on the theological virtue of hope, especially since one of our lectionary readings encourages us to “abound in hope.”

Jim Wallis, a progressive evangelical theologian, is fond of saying that “hope is believing in spite of the evidence, and then watching the evidence change.”

Here's my definition of hope, which makes one addition to Jim Wallis's definition. Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, and then **working** to make the evidence change. Hope is not only waiting and watching for the evidence to change; it is also working to **make** the evidence change.

One hundred and seventy-two years ago, when your Congregational forebears decided to separate and become two congregations, I imagine that they hoped that their two congregations would continue as thriving separate entities until long in the future—which is basically what has happened. Your hopes, however, will need to be very different—and you won't have the luxury of too much longer to wait and work for your hopes to become reality. In 2017, you will need to work out your own vision in fear and trembling.

I believe that God is calling you to become a “united Christian witness” in this very secular, very unchurched community. As you may have heard me say before, our best guess is that on any given Sunday morning, no more than 10% of the population of Haddam and East Haddam will be found in a church in this community. That includes Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Evangelical, Methodist, and Congregational churches.

I hope that after your new settled pastor has arrived in this community, and you have gotten to know her and she has gotten to know you, that you will engage in serious conversations about your calling to serve as a united Christian witness in this community. Let me be honest: the first step you will need to take to become a united Christian witness is to begin thinking of yourselves as one congregation, not as two churches.

I'm not naive about the obstacles that will stand in your way of taking this step, of understanding yourselves as one congregation, so that you can become a united Christian witness in this very secular community. Two church buildings three miles apart from each other is one church building too many. Two worship services on Sunday morning is one Sunday worship service too many. Two Sunday schools is one Sunday school too many. And so on.

These are significant obstacles. But there are also significant signs of hope as well. First and foremost is the combined choir which rehearses together every week and sings together on a regular basis—even as a pickup choir during the summer, which was quite remarkable. Second are the ways in which your mission/outreach committees are collaborating and cooperating together. Third is that you will be calling an experienced settled pastor who knows what it's like to serve a multi-church parish. Fourth is your own practical wisdom. And fifth, but not least, is, well, the Holy Spirit.

When St. Paul prays for you that you will “abound in hope,” notice that he says “abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” So you will need to be alert to the Spirit.

Be alert to those times when the Holy Spirit will sneak up on you and surprise you.

Be alert to those times when honest conversations about God will provide space for the Spirit to challenge you and inspire you.

Remember that hope is believing in spite of the evidence, and then working to make the evidence change.

Be ready to build a caring relationship with your new settled pastor. Be ready to roll up your sleeves and work with her to become a united Christian witness in these changing times, in this challenging community.

In all these ways and more, may you abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.