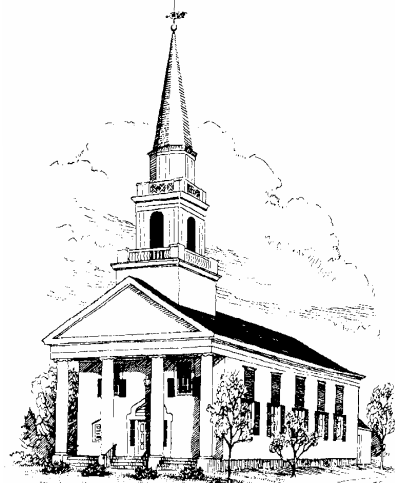


Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from February 25, 2007
Rev. Patricia L. Liberty
“Standing Into the Future”

Scriptures:
Psalm 91
Deuteronomy 26:1-11



A *wandering Aramean was my ancestor...* We are invited to lean forward in our seat as the story draws us in. And what a story it is—filled with promise, wandering, loss, betrayal, faithfulness, disobedience and more. It is the story of our forbears in the faith.

Most of us don't routinely read the book of Deuteronomy. Probably, that's because it's a little like reading the Manhattan Yellow Pages. It is a tome of instruction, the fifth book of the Torah taking its place with Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, which might be compared with the Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles and Houston Yellow Pages. Most of the 613 commandments found in the Old Testaments are contained in these five books.

Deuteronomy is unique in that it is instruction for the Israelites *after* they have come into the Promised Land. They have arrived and they are worshipping in the Temple. The Promise has finally come true. They are living their dream. You might think that their worship would focus on the future, the great things they were going to accomplish in the Promised Land, with God's help. You might think it would be a recitation of praise and thanksgiving for the great blessing that God gave to them in the land.

No. Their liturgy begins with remembrance. *A wandering Aramean was my ancestor ...* The litany goes on, as heard in our reading, to recount all that was true of their days—the oppression and slavery, the harshness of their life, and God's faithfulness in its midst. Now that their lives were filled with joy and blessing, the first fruits liturgy was a reminder to make a place in their story for all the parts they would rather forget. They were to tell the story, the whole story about their lives.

It's a model I want to borrow as we stand in the closing days of our shared ministry. It's to encourage us to take a look over our collective shoulder and ask, "What is the story we will tell about these days?" How will you write this part of your story and, by story, I do not mean the shallow fiction definition usually associated with the word. Rather I mean the essence of truth you will name from these days, truth that will inform and build up your ministry as the body of Christ.

It is not history because history is always written by the winners. And the task of this story is far more holy than creating winners and losers. It is about creating a narrative that points beyond the details to speak the truth of God's presence and faithfulness. How you speak of this time in the days to come will both reveal and inform how you understand ministry, covenant and community.

I doubt the Israelites wanted a reminder of their days in Egypt and a generation of wandering in the desert when they finally came into the Promised Land—*Look ahead, leave the past behind, we're here ... let's get on with it.* It is very tempting.

But the future always stands up to its knees in the past. We know from our personal lives that the truths we fail to apprehend about ourselves have a way of speaking in our lives. Hopefully we learn from the past and garner new insights for how to live our days. We have a few more tools in our personal toolbox as adults than we did as adolescents. And throughout our days we are formed by the stuff our days. We are always adding to our story.

Look around you. We are an amazing gathering of human beings. We are survivors of so many things: cancer, addiction, domestic violence, incest, discrimination, conflict, failure, prejudice, intolerance, disease, divorce, disappointment, accident, emotional manipulation, job loss, separation, dumb mistakes, family death and narrow mindedness, to name a few.

We have not run away. We are still here, in this moment, the body of Christ gathered in this place. It is here we belong. Each time we show up here we are invited to remember that whatever else we are or may fail to be, whatever we have done or failed to do, we are God's people. And the story I tell about my life, and the story you tell about your life, as different as they may be, hold that truth in common.

In our life together as a church, like every other church, we are a combination of success and failure, faithfulness and faithlessness, human and divine partnership in varying percentages. We have done some things well; we have failed miserably at others. We have learned and are still learning from the mistakes and miracles at work in our midst. It is all part of being the church—a wonderfully human yet filled with the divine community where people and ministry are ever in process and great things still manage to happen that bring glory to the God in whose name we gather.

Deuteronomy is careful to remind us to tell the whole story, even the parts we would rather leave out. How the story is told is as important as that it is told. How you as Mystic Congregational Church come to speak of this chapter in your life depends on how well you talk to and how well you listen to and with each other. It is not the triumph of one position over another or a rehearsal of blame. It is the creation of a common narrative informed by faith, grounded in biblical witness, guided by the Holy Spirit. Anything less will dishonor this time.

So how shall we come to speak of these days? *It was best of times; it was the worst of times.* Why reinvent the wheel when you can quote Dickens. The shared ministry of these last few months has asked more and cost more than any of us could have imagined. It is some of the toughest ministry that pastor and people can share together. The stress that it creates in lay

leaders, in pastors, in families, among long-time friends, and the families who simply stopped coming. This has cost us dearly. And the final tallies have not yet been made.

In the midst of those worst of times, we have also discovered strengths in ourselves and in each other that, perhaps, we didn't know were there—continued commitment to the ministries of the church, gifts set aside for the church's use. I have seen tremendous work done in our midst—the hard work of thinking through and feeling through things that just didn't make sense. I've watched as you have learned to listen in new ways and with new patience. I've watched as new partnerships were born of common vision for the church's healing.

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times ...

Second: never doubt God has a sense of humor. Coming to a community like Mystic was a bit of a stretch for me. I am a farmer at heart. Somehow I knew that lessons from things like milk ratios, horseshoe construction, and laying quotas for chickens wasn't really going to help me all that much here. I think I also realized I was politically, socially and theologically in a somewhat of a different place when, before I moved my first book into the office, someone firmly but politely suggested that I remove my bumper sticker that said, *Somewhere in Texas, a village is missing its idiot*. (So now you know, in case you had any doubt.)

I think it worked both ways. The church—not just this church, but the church everywhere—puts a lot of energy into finding the right leaders. Often times, that looks like recreating a slice of an individual church's past, some longed-for golden years that are no more. Other times, it mirrors a cultural image of what leadership should look like. What it still means for the church is that it seeks clergy who are young, married heterosexuals with 2.5 children and a wood-sided station wagon. Then you got me. Never doubt that God has a sense of humor.

Finally, a way to speak the truth of our days together is a favorite quote of mine by Dag Hammarskjöld: *For all that has been...thanks...to all that shall be...yes*.

If you have been in my office, you know that it is the scrolling marquee screensaver on my computer. It is a reminder to seek the kind of perspective that allows praise in any moment, not out of some blind, ditzzy denial of reality, but because no matter where we find ourselves, God is always there, comforting, cajoling, prodding and calling us to a future that stands up to its knees in the past and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is always more than the sum of its parts. What it means is that healing can come out of pain, unity out of discord, new visions of ministry out of the ashes of the past, and renewed joy and hope out of wrenching disappointment.

God's eternal invitation is to receive the present and the future in ways that heal, surprise, challenge, and bear witness. It means telling the entire story, and remembering that God is in the midst of it all. Thanks be to God and amen.

