

EXODUS 20:1-4

PSALM 19

PHILIPPIANS 3:4b-14

MATTHEW 21:33-46

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost; Twenty Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 8, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Onward and Upward!

Former president George W. Bush once declared, “The past is over!” The late pitcher Satchel Paige is said to have once observed, “Don’t look back, something might be gaining on you!” Others have observed, “Don’t live your life in a rearview mirror!” Many years ago, a certain someone stung me with that one! Finally, we all know the sage advice that those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it. And as we all know full well, some of the world’s history, including our own personal miscues, some of our individual transgressions, are not worth repeating! As we all know, we live our lives aware of the past, living in the present, while anticipating the future. At least we do so on our good, our hopeful and most fulfilling, days! The future always manifests itself in the present in real time, life’s journey an ever flowing, unfolding and evolving, continuum never pausing or waiting for us to catch up in our real time moments. Time marches on and waits for no one, but the time is always upon us to be doing something. We are always cognizant of the sands of history as we live in the here and now. It is never a good thing to get caught lagging, somewhere behind the curve! As we reflect in the glow of a very busy, full, and productive Annual Congregational Meeting, this yearly bellwether event serves as a marker, allowing us to measure ourselves, giving us cause for pause, an opportunity to stop and reflect on where we are and who we are as a congregation, and yes, where we are going, even allowing a little nostalgia, some satisfying reminiscing about where we have been. It is time to take a deep but quick breath as we embark on the busiest time of year on the Church Year calendar. As with most congregations our glass is either half full or half empty and

it is our perspective that will influence that reality and indeed will tip the scales. As the lectionary is prone to do, always amazingly so I think, there is a text today that speaks to this inflection point in our corporate life, intersecting with our current introspection. The apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians offers a springboard launching us into the dawn of our new day, reminding us to not look back, never to dwell on the past, but to look ahead, always forward thinking, determining our own bright future together as the first Congregational United Church of Christ, Eagle River, Wisconsin. The fate of Lot's wife once upon a biblical time, causing her untimely demise as she was smote, becoming a pillar of salt, is a sobering reminder of the danger of tarrying, too briefly or too long, being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yes, we control our destiny, led by the Spirit and by the wisdom of a most discerning congregation of Jesus followers.

In his epistle to the Philippians Paul addresses the need to keep moving ahead, admonishing this Pauline-guided flock to continue on a divinely illuminated path that leads to whatever wonders the future might hold. The apostle begins his conversation by stating the obvious, reminding his readers of his resume, his former pedigree, naming all the accolades that once adorned his person, accompanying this reformed radical defender of traditional Judaism, tempering this zealot as he changed course on his recently discovered personal and religious journey, a wild ride indeed, adventures and misadventures, a man miraculously reinvented in every way imaginable. Paul's former features and benefits, retail speak inserted here, provides a laundry list, a litany, of attributes that would have let everyone he encountered know that he was indeed a VIP, very important Pharisee, a red-carpet kind of guy, red being representative of the spilt blood of those he helped slaughter, gleefully aiding and abetting in their cruel demise. Paul dares anyone to even attempt to come close to his dazzling dossier, declaring that if anyone wanted a competition comparing personal and professional adjectives that he would win handily. No one could boast about their successes when juxtaposed against his! No one could have confidence in their advantages when placed against his! Paul had them all beat, yes, the gold standard for human achievement. Whatever anyone possessed, he proudly declared that he owned even more and there was no doubt that he had more than his fair share, probably double. Paul's hubris needed a bigger barn (Luke 12:16-21)! Unto whom much is given, much will be required. Unto whom much is given, much must be

given away, denied, even hated, to become a follower of Christ. Paul checked all the boxes! Listen to his glowing credentials once motivating him, stark reminders of his former life: **“I was circumcised on the eighth day; I am from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin; I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews; with respect to observing the Law, I am a Pharisee; with respect to devotion to the faith, I harassed the church”** (yes, he did indeed, approving and overseeing the murder of many early Christians); and finally, **“with respect to righteousness under the Law, I am blameless.”** Yes, Paul once had the big head, his head way up in the clouds, some would have said elsewhere, some would say he still did, simply changing his spots. Paul had tarnished a stellar reputation, once unblemished, untouchable in every way, though he counted all his previous life, his behavior, including his violent actions, as **“rubbish,”** as **“sewer trash,”** you know the word. And, unlike some politicians today whose blather is all smoke and mirrors, facades of fantasies and false narratives on steroids, Paul could back up his bravado, proving the pudding of his once but no longer future braggadocios capacity. As a friend of mine likes to say, if you can do it, it ain't bragging! Nobody needs to point out their own credentials as these hallmarks always reveal themselves, speak for themselves! No doubt everyone knew Paul's status, all of which proceeded his arrival on any scene. Surely, everyone bowed to his eminence when he made an appearance.

And yet Paul found all his personal and professional trappings just that, trappings, an immense burden, baggage, not luggage, a millstone hung around his neck, a weight he could no longer bear as he was confronted by what surely was a palpable level of guilt. He now pondered the things that matter most, was forced to consider the things that matter at all. When compared to the cause of Christ Paul realized his life was nothing more than a mirage, a hollow shell, smoke and mirrors, nothing of true merit or lasting, yes, eternal, value. As you remember Paul had experienced a profound awakening, a dramatic conversion, as he traveled a lonely road to Damascus, declaring that he audibly heard the voice of Christ questioning his motives, his very life's purpose, **“Paul, why do you persecute me?”** (Acts 9:4). An existential moment in time indeed! Rare is the lightning bolt effect on someone's soul, causing an individual to radically shift perspective, change direction. Paul was a grateful recipient. But, oh the proverbial cash and prizes, perversely perceived blessings perhaps, all the inherited and earned heirlooms of a

lifetime achievement previously awarded that he suddenly had to give up, forced to jettison as he responded to a transcendent moment in time, that he might be so graciously fortunate to gain the ultimate prize. His new inheritance was a gracious gift that would give him his life and cost him his life, a dynamic that often comes with attaining anything of the greatest value, a pearl of price (Matthew 13:45-46), with or without pursuit. And it was out of the whirlwind of his sudden and serendipitous encounter and adventures on what turned out to be a road to somewhere way beyond and greater than Damascus that Paul now wrote, offering sound advice that is as useful now as it surely was back in the day.

And that brings us to the point of all this Pauline background. Describing the desire to reach the goal of the resurrection of the dead, mystical, but not metaphorical, language indeed, Paul offers some unintentional symbolism that perhaps even the apostle was not aware he was providing as he put proverbial pen to paper from within his prison cell. Yes, a significant aspect of living the life we have been graciously granted as a good, no greatest, of gifts, is our ability to navigate, to negotiate, the tension of balancing our past, present, and future perspectives, gaining equilibrium and a holistic centering of life, amassing discernment and wisdom, along the way. We cannot forget or ignore our past! Nor can we run from it, hide from it, or escape it! Neither can we choose to live in it, much less wallow in it. Sometimes we must recover from it! I will always be a recovering fundamentalist! Hard to believe, I am sure! Even so, we must learn from the richness and impoverishment, the bane and blessing, of our history, be educated by it, informed from it, learning the lessons we must. There is no making anything great again because God is always making all things new. The present may be continuous, a continuum of timeless reality, but each precious moment only comes within that specific moment, within a nanosecond of time, and then it is gone, fleeting, passing away as the Psalmist opines. The only way to get the most from each and every moment in time is to prepare for it, to be sensitive to it, ready for it, and yes, responsive, not reactive, to it. The future can wait and yet it will not wait! Time waits for no one, we are told. Our lives will be determined by the way we encounter all our moments in time, singularly and collectively. As a living, growing and evolving, organism, churches only survive, thrive it possible, if they are willing to literally ride the winds of change, to be sensitive to the wildest call of the Spirit, willing to take risks without the promise

of reaping rewards, to boldly, courageously, be willing to cast bread upon the water, to be daring enough to step out into the abyss of God's creative chaos. Like Star Trekkers, uh, Trekkies, we are called to go where no one has ever gone before, ironically, finding the strangest peace and calm, the most bizarre comfort zone there. Christianity is not based in comfort and security, nor has it ever been. Followers of Jesus have always signed up for the paths of most resistance, the max common denominators seeking to shift society, to alter the human landscape, to change the dynamics of injustice, to be a prophetic witness against all the comfortable conversations that make nice but are nothing more than polite, pious and pretentious Pollyanna platitudes. Love the "Ps"! Following Jesus is not the stuff of billboards and bumper stickers! As the Gospel declares, "many are called but few are chosen!" (Matthew 22:14). This pathway is not for the faint of heart! The routine of the earliest disciples, not just the twelve apostles, was the narrow way, the narrow gate (Matthew 7:13-14) of agonizing persecution, terror and torture leading to the most painful, excruciating martyrdom imaginable. Christendom in today's contemporary, postmodern, setting seems to be dictated, dominated, by the false narrative promising ease and comfort, safety and security, that we are supposedly granted because of and through our faithfulness when we sign on the dotted line.

In Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation from September 26,¹ he talks about liminal space. He declares that "we keep praying that our illusions will fall away. God erodes them from many sides, hoping they will fall. But we often remain trapped in what we call normalcy—"the way things are." Life then revolves," I would say devolves, "around problem-solving, fixing, explaining, and taking sides with winners and losers. It can be a pretty circular and even nonsensical existence . . . To get out of this repetitive cycle, we must allow ourselves the freedom, the room, to be drawn into sacred space, into liminality." Sidebar – liminal is defined as occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold; or, relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process. Rohr continues, "all transformation takes place here. There alone is our old world left behind, though we're not yet sure of the new existence. That's a good space where genuine newness can begin. We must get there often and stay as long as we can by

¹Center for Action and Contemplation, "Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation," *Liminal Space*, September 26, 2023. (Online journal from week thirty-nine: Sacred Space.

whatever means possible. It's the realm where God can best get at us because our false certitudes are finally out of the way. This is the sacred space where the old world is able to fall apart, and a bigger world is revealed. If we don't encounter liminal space in our lives, we start idealizing normalcy. The threshold is God's waiting room. Here we are taught openness and patience as we come to expect an appointment with the Divine Doctor." Rohr adds, "I believe that religion's unique and necessary function is to lead us into liminal space. Instead, religion has largely become a confirmation of the status quo and business as usual. Religion should lead us into sacred space where deconstruction of the old 'normal' can occur. Much of my criticism of religion comes about when I see it not only affirming the system of normalcy but teaching folks how to live there comfortably . . . culturally, we don't want to embrace liminal space or recognize our natural egocentricity. In fact, we try to avoid experiencing it at all . . . Yet the irony is that liminal space doesn't have to be difficult. While it can be challenging, it can also be extremely rewarding. I discover there is another Center. And it's not me! . . . Liminal space relativizes our perspectives. When we embrace liminality, we choose hope over sleepwalking, denial, or despair. The world around us becomes again *an enchanted universe*, something we intuitively understood when we were young and somehow lost touch with as we grew older."

The Psalmists almost seemed obsessed by the length of our days as the human species, the span of our lives, reminding us of the brevity of our time on earth, our time like "a breath, a passing shadow (Psalm 144:4), seventy years considered a great run, eighty if we are strong (Psalm 90). So much for the mythology of Methuselah! The writer was offering a sobering reminder that what we do in the interim, in this between period, from birth to death, matters immensely. Yes, life is fleeting, "handbreaths" another Psalmist declares (39:4-5), and so we are admonished to make the most of it, the best of it, making a difference, here and now, goodness and mercy, peace and justice, gracious love, all germinated and planted for the future. I disagree with the writer of Ecclesiastes who was a harbinger of gloom and doom, claiming that everything is vanity, generations coming and going, toiling for nothing, that there is nothing new under the sun. Oh, woe is me! We are doomed! Nonsense! This preacher did get it right, however, with the reminder that there is a season, a time for everything! Well said! History

has shown that we leave a mark, for good or for ill! Nothing remains the same! The epistle writer of I John (3:2) proclaims that as God's children "what we will be has not yet been revealed . . ." The same can be said, and is surely true, for the world and all its inhabitants. The human story is a blank slate, a blank canvas, just waiting to be completed with ultimate beauty and God's loving grace. Yes, every human being chooses every day what that day will be, knowing that circumstances can change in an instant.

A question for the ages always seems to get framed this way, "What have you done for me lately?" Frankly, we should always be playing for something bigger, something greater, than ourselves, knowing our nearly unlimited capacity as the human creature. One of the challenges that I gave Church Council as it began the nomination process was the reminder that everyone needed to have a baseline in managing the institution, facility and fiduciary, but that we also needed visionaries, those who would challenge status quo, stretching our imagination, modeling reformational transformation, as my supervisory professor Malan Nel calls it in congregational development, helping us all to playfully participate in God's realm in the here and now as we look toward a bright future. Folks, that really is the assignment of each and every one of us as we live and move and have our being right here and now and in the unlimited potential days to come. By design we are created with the capacity, an amazing human dynamic, that compels us to always be building, changing, evolving, hopefully maturing, never static, never stationary, metamorphosis an inherent part of our being and doing that so many see as a threat, unfortunately choosing to fight what is a natural process because of the fear that it will be tainted by our humanity that is somehow perversely equated by the anxiety-ridden with sin. We need to get over it and beyond it, becoming the creative sparks as individuals and groups we were designed to be. We have the opportunity to begin anew with each new moment, with each new day, with every precious breath we take. Let's get started! Actually, let's keep it going! Onward and upward!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and beckons a new day for us with every rising we are granted, resurrection being the operative word! For such a time as this! Amen and amen.

