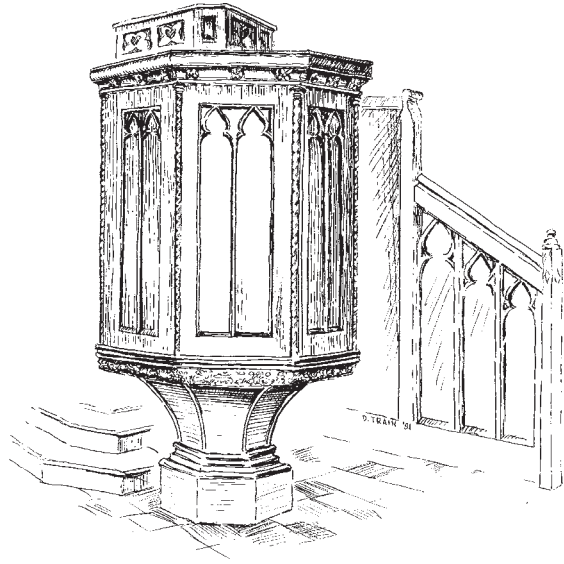


January 3, 2010

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

The Grand Opportunity By The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

What are the brightest lights of the Christmas season? Do you know? The brightest lights of the Christmas season? I didn't know, until earlier this week someone told me. I thought it might be the light at the top of the Christmas tree or the light of the Yule log or the light of the candles we lift over our heads as we sing *Silent Night* on Christmas Eve, but I was wrong. My friend set me straight. I was surprised when he said, "The brightest lights of the Christmas season are the tail lights on the car of the last relative to pull out of your driveway."

Perhaps that's a little too cynical for Sunday worship, but there must be some truth in that little quip. Even for the most avid Christmas junkie, there is a little relief in beginning normal life again and in the opportunity of a new year.

The wisdom writer of Ecclesiastes had great insight, "To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot..." (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2) – a time to journey to Bethlehem and a time to return from Bethlehem. Yes, there is a time to lay down one's cares and duties and to run with excitement to Bethlehem and to the manger, "to see this thing that has come to pass." There is a time to follow that bright yonder star. But, there is also a time to return – to the hillside flock of sheep, back to the Magi homes, to the office, to the laboratory, to the classroom - to the scene of one's labors - to begin again where we left off. Yes,

there's a time for every season - a time to journey to Bethlehem and a time to return from Bethlehem.

The trite sentiment that "It should be Christmas every day" just doesn't reflect life as we know it. For every mountain top experience, there is the hard reality of beginning again in the valley. Beginning again where we left off – this time in a new decade and a new year - 2010!

In the ancient Western calendar, the New Year came not in January, but in March. For those living north of the equator that makes sense. In March there is a sense of new life that one can see in the earth and feel in the air. In harmony with the natural elements of spring and renewed life, one can easily affirm that there is a new chance, renewed hope - things need not necessarily be as they have been.

Thus, the appropriateness of Easter is that it occurs when all nature can affirm it. Not like Christmas where snow and gloomy cold days give overwhelming evidence that refutes life in the face of death - light in the face of darkness. It's harder in January than it is in April to go back from the altar to our work feeling that something has happened to us, yet that is precisely what we are called upon to do.

The world has not changed. The duties that we have avoided or put off await us with grim determination. The challenges are still there. Hopefully, what is transformed is ourselves. Like the Magi we are called to go home by another route. We are different somehow. We have encountered the world of the possible in the midst of the impossible. We, like the shepherds and the Magi, have seen God face to face and have survived to tell the tale. We move about not knowing that our faces shine with the encounter, bearing the mark of the encounter forever, marveling in the darkest nights of the soul at that wondrous star-filled night.

So here we are – the first week of 2010 – called to go back where we left off and yet to make a new beginning. It is an old choice and a new chance for us and for the world. Christmas and creation are part of the same process of God. They have everything to do with one another. They each speak of loving purpose and renewed hope. That's why at the beginning of his Gospel John chooses to emphasize that through the divine Word all things were made.

Our gospel is a gospel of creation and renewed creation – a gospel of second chances and new opportunities to share and express love in the world – new opportunities to discover who we are and what we can become in Christ. The routine beckons; the familiar haunts require our attention and our presence. We are called to begin where we left off. Before too long the memory of this holy time will disappear and be packed away with the Christmas decorations; and yet with God's grace may we be open in 2010 to Christ's surprising presence in our midst.