

The Light Upon Our Shore

Matthew 25:1-13

Two weeks ago, when the lights went out in Noank and the surrounding area, it left us in the dark for a couple of days (only a hint of what our poor friends in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean Islands are suffering through). Normally, when I look out at night, you can easily judge who is a year-round Noanker and which houses are owned by seasonal residents. However, when the power goes out, all but the most prudent are left without light (the prudent being those with generators and an ample supply of fuel). The rest of us hold onto hope that our batteries will last and the food in the fridge and freezer won't spoil before the power returns. Had the lights not come back on Tuesday evening in Noank, many of us would have been in dire straits and perhaps even a bit more cranky than we usually are!

Whenever Noank goes dark, I've been told that many in town miss seeing the light that is cast upon our steeple—a sight that seems to matter to villagers. Certainly, for many years, it has served as a landmark to sailors coming back to port after sunset. More visible than the lighthouse at Morgan Point, the lighted steeple of our Meetinghouse provides a reassuring sign that the mouth of the Mystic River is within sight. Not being a sea dog myself, I look for its ambient glow when driving along Rt. 215 near Beebe Cove or coming from Gorton Long Point or once I cross the trestle to enter the village, as a pleasant reminder that I'm almost home.

I don't know exactly how long we've provided that luminous service to the area. I assume it's been awhile. Granted, T-Mobile customers certainly have been vested in the value of our steeple over the past decade, but long before that, Noankers and visitors have appreciated its stately appearance

and evening's luminescence, enough that we've received contributions from some in the area as an expression of their gratitude. Even the current work on restoring the steeple has been the topic of conversation at Carson's and for those who enter through the doors of this Meetinghouse week in and week out. People are interested in what we do here. If a worshipping congregation doesn't appeal to them, many in the wider community would still miss something of importance to them if we weren't present in this place. In our own lives, of course, this church symbolizes a special presence of God—the light upon our own shore, in a manner of speaking—the light of God in our lives and a landmark of goodwill and safety for our souls, our families, and for the values and concerns we hold dear to our hearts.

The storm of two weeks ago did remind us, however, that we live in vulnerable times. As you may have heard, Sherman's Market didn't survive the loss (much like the Universal didn't after Sandy), so they have closed for good. We don't know what will replace it (if anything), but the loss of the store leaves an indelible mark on the village.

Unrelated to the storm, our own Corner Closet also closed its doors after a half century of service to the community and region. That's due to the impending sale of the building and we can only hope that sometime in the future, we might be able to negotiate a return with the new owner. But in the meantime, it too leaves a lasting mark on the character of this village and, of course, what we are known for as a congregation. Will we continue this ministry in a new location, or will it come to an end? That depends on several factors, including if we have the volunteers to staff it.

Given all these changes and as we near the church's 175th anniversary in 2018, it's possible some will view it as a sign of our decline, as if the light we cast upon this landscape is somehow dimming. There's good reason for

that concern. Across America, there is the lessening of individual loyalty to churches, denominations, and organized religion (especially among younger people), so that alone is enough to ask: will we still be around for our next milestone in 25 years? Will we make 200 years as a steadfast presence in this town? Or will we go the way of so many other houses of worship—with dwindling attendance, downsized staff, cutting back on programs and activities, unable to keep up our budget or mission support, so that eventually we become an empty shell of what we once were?

So far, we have bucked this trend sadly evident in many Connecticut churches, but our good fortune hasn't come without some dedicated effort and foresight. It's challenging to keep churches operating at the levels they once were. But rather than focusing on our fears and lamenting the losses that have come, most of these changes can serve as a fair warning to redouble our commitment to make certain we won't herald the day when people say, "Did you hear the Baptist church is closing?" For if that should ever be the case, what would that mean to our lives, or to our village or wider region, and to all the souls who have benefitted from the good generated in the Meetinghouse and from our congregation's ministry and presence? What would life in Noank and the surrounding area be like if our lights went out permanently? It would be a very dark day, would it not?

The parable of the ten maidens from Matthew's Gospel offers some perspective. This is an advent story—in the sense of awaiting the coming of Christ to return to earth to redeem the world. Its original context would have been for the followers of Jesus to remain vigilant—to not give up their trust and faith in God to deliver Zion from the imperial control of Rome and to reestablish Israel's greatness as was promised. This initial messianic hope only lasted a few decades when just the opposite occurred and

Jerusalem's walls came tumbling down. Then, the hope in Christ was transformed into an eternal one for ultimate redemption into immortality.

Metaphorically, though, the parable serves as an admonition for us to keep enough "oil in our lamps" to keep the fires going and to maintain a light in the darkness to brighten the landscape. The moral of the story was to prepare for darkness—be prudent with your resources and exercise foresight to make sure that you are ready for the long haul. For ordinary life, when everything is plugged in and operates like it should, is not necessarily the test of our spiritual fortitude—normal care will only allow us to keep the fires lit when everything is going well. It's when we are faced with unusual challenges that the real test of our commitment begins.

The parable offers a comparison: five of the women prepared for the eventuality of needing ample oil, while five didn't. When the night came, those who didn't plan well pleaded with the resourceful ones to borrow some of their oil to light their lamps; but they were refused, because in doing so, it wouldn't allow those who had planned ahead to sustain theirs. The fault was not in sharing, but in the lack of prudence and preparation shown by the shortsighted ones. Those who didn't look ahead and then realized their predicament were required to run to the dealer to buy a sufficient supply—the time during which, of course, the bridegroom came, and they were left out of the wedding banquet and out in the darkness. Their lack of foresight and preparation doomed their ability to be ready when called upon. We know what this means: when the storms hit, when the darkness comes, those who will weather it best are those who have done due diligence to prepare in advance.

It's fairly easy to draw life lessons from a story like this, but I'll limit it this morning to where we stand as a congregation with a legacy of providing

light to this shoreline area. We've been fortunate to have among us those who are like the five resourceful ones—people who have repeatedly stepped up to financially support the church in extraordinary ways and in times of need, as well as those who have faithfully labored to do the programs, activities, ministries and missions to keep what we are about relevant and meaningful to many people. We would not have survived 175 years without capable and committed ones like these. They have kept oil in their lamps and have always been ready and present to keep the fires stoked and the light emanating from this shore.

But, like any worshipping congregation, we have a number who are not quite as resourceful or ready. The church and its ministry matters to them, but not necessarily any more than other charitable organizations. Relatively speaking, they give a much smaller amount of themselves to this ministry, even compared to what they could do. There's nothing wrong with that in normal times; we find a way to keep going to maintain this place. Every year, people choose to give what they do, or volunteer as they will, according to what makes sense to them at the time.

However, as you and I know, the storms of life can and will hit us on occasion. The kind of power outages we face are when important leaders and significant supporters die or move away, or people become frail and unable to participate as they once could, or their personal needs at home rise to a level which prevents their regular attendance here. The lamps they lit so brightly no longer are there for us as a congregation to rely upon. If someone else doesn't step up and take their place, then our collective light begins to dim or can't be sustained and the impact of our church starts to wane. We may still shine a light upon our shore, but the light isn't quite as brilliant or effective as it once was or as it could be. Generationally, like any

church, we have reason to be concerned about the next 25 years, as it could very well determine our ability to keep the lights beaming from this shore.

So, realistically, for each of us to do our part, it means being wise, thoughtful, resourceful, and reliable—to not approach this minimally, but to recognize how much the church’s ministry depends on each of us. The overall effectiveness of our church life—the light we shine—depends on how much of a priority it is to us, personally. We need to be serious in our individual intentions and prayerfully prioritize and plan what we will contribute to the ministry and mission of the church, for what we will be and do as a congregation depends on what we can afford. To be prudent, we should account for the challenges that still lie before us, rather than lament what we’ve lost from the past, because another sudden “storm” could bring about a loss from which we might not be able to recover, especially if we are unprepared for it. The truth is, we will only remain the light upon our shore as long as we are prepared and willing and able to keep the lights on. Without light, all you’re left with is darkness.

Last Sunday, when I was in Tbilisi participating in the 150th anniversary of the Peace Cathedral, I recognized what a milestone this occasion was to a congregation about our size in a setting that, historically, has been very challenging (to say the least!). Yet, what a beacon of light they shine in the darkest moments—exposing what’s wrong and illuminating what’s right!

Under the leadership of Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, they have been on the forefront of women in ministry (they have ordained the only female bishops and pastors in their entire country of Georgia). They also have led efforts to shelter and feed refugees from the Chechen-Russian war and the bombing of the city of Gori by the Russians nine years ago. More

recently, they have publicly stood up for the LGBTQ community in a culture that is historically homophobic and oppressive to this portion of their population. Both Malkhaz and Peace Cathedral have paid a dear and personal price in the process.

Yet, this courageous ministry carries on with a bold vision inspired by their faith in Christ and radiating from their leadership and laity. At present, the good folks of Peace Cathedral are finishing work enhancing their building, which over the next year will become a multi-faith setting, as they add both a mosque and a synagogue integrated into their facility. That would be an extraordinary accomplishment and statement even in the U.S.!

What makes this even more remarkable is how Malkhaz has managed to share this vision to where the mosque will be supported by both Sunni and Shi'a communities, who will worship together come 2019. Leaders of these communities (as well as from the Yazidis, Armenian Orthodox, and Roman Catholic communities) were present last Sunday for the anniversary celebration. What I witnessed was an amazing example of multi-faith cooperation and goodwill in a region where religious and sectarian hostility abounds!

I thought to myself, this is why faith matters and why the world needs churches like the Peace Cathedral in Tbilisi as an illustration of what peace can look like and what humans can be at their best. Though they barely scrape by on their limited income, this congregation continues to dream big dreams and serve as a light of hope in their city and to the world by expressing selfless love and compassion to those who otherwise could and would be their enemy. The community sustains their ministries through great personal sacrifice and loyal commitment, spreading leadership responsibilities among all ages, while taking on new challenges and giving

witness to their faith by what they represent in Christ, and more importantly, by what they do in his name. Every day and in every act of mercy, they plug into the power of the Gospel to transform darkness into light!

I believe we are much the same when we are committed to the ministry we share. We also have a remarkable legacy and continue to provide a witness of God's light to this world by following the ways of Jesus and expressing our ongoing commitment through tangible deeds of service and prophetic hope. The landscape around us would darken considerably if our light upon this shore is dimmed. Since God's Spirit is the light that shines from within and among us, to not keep our lamps burning brightly lessens the divine mission to bring hope to this world and peace to our lives.

Our commitment to this church over the coming year and into the future will largely determine how bright a light we will cast upon this shore. May we take this challenge seriously, not only this morning, but throughout the coming year. May we give of ourselves generously and sufficiently; may we stretch ourselves beyond the norm to reach the possibilities before us. May we sustain our ministry together far into future generations, that our descendants will know, it is by the radiance cast from our love, faith, and generous spirit that the landscape of their lives will have been brightened, not only with light, but with divinely-empowered courage and hope.

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12 November 2017