

“Costly Engagement”**Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ****March 4, 2007****Rev. Dr. Janet L. Parker****Genesis 15:1-18****Luke 13:31-35**

Today’s sermon begins with a visual aid! If you will indulge me, take out your bulletin and look at the cover—really look at it. How often do you take the time to meditate on the art that the UCC provides for our bulletin covers each week? Sometimes it’s pretty bizarre. Sometimes, we might dispute the use of the word ‘art’ to apply to it. But I happen to really love the picture on today’s cover. Pause for a moment to just take it in—a young boy, sitting under a gnarled old tree, looking up at the night sky full of shining stars, with an expression of awe and amazement on his face. What does this picture evoke for you? Can you remember a time when you looked up at the night sky this way? What do you think the boy is thinking? Is he perhaps, wondering about his place in the universe, is he wondering about how he came to exist at all on this marvelous spinning blue ball swimming in the velvety blackness of space? Maybe he’s wondering about his future...about what he will do and be in the world as he grows up and becomes a man.

The protagonist in our scripture lesson from Genesis may have had some similar wonderings and questions as he had his own stargazing experience. Abraham was an old man, of course, not a boy, but still not immune to amazement, still full of wonderings, but wonderings that at his age had hardened into some bitterness and doubt. Abraham, still known as Abram in today’s passage, not yet having been renamed by God to mark his new identity as father of God’s chosen people, is wrestling with a promise. And he’s

wrestling with his purpose in the world, the meaning of his life, now moving on towards its sunset years. For you see, when he was much younger, God called him to move from his homeland into a foreign place, and promised to make him the father of a great nation, a nation through which God would bless all the families of the earth, but almost a generation later, Abram remains childless, and the promises of God seem remote and empty. So what does God do? God takes Abram stargazing. The text tells us that God “brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then God said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’”

But if you know much about Scripture, or about God for that matter, you know that things are never as simple as they seem. For the story doesn’t end with this beautiful scene, but it takes a dark turn. And the bright darkness of the star-filled sky is replaced with the terrifying darkness of a deep sleep in which Abram receives a prophecy from God. And we learn that the promise of God to Abram is shadowed by a troublesome warning, as Abram hears that his offspring shall be oppressed slaves in a foreign land for four hundred years before the promise of God to give them their own land will be fulfilled in its fullness. God’s promise will be kept, but it will also be delayed. As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, “the problem of faith is waiting, even when the delay seems unending.”

The story and the struggle of Abraham and his descendants, the people of Israel, is not just an ancient story; it’s our story too, and it’s the story of God in the world. It’s the story that takes its ultimate form for Christians in Jesus’ story, the story of God become flesh in order to redeem all flesh, the story of God’s embodied participation in the suffering and redemption of the whole world. Jesus’ story is also a story of promise

and delay, of suffering and redemption, of lament and faith. In the passage we read today, we meet Jesus as he journeys towards Jerusalem, still healing the sick, still performing miracles, still challenging earthly authorities with vigor and fearlessness. Yet he journeys toward the cross, and the tone of this passage is overshadowed with lament. ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem,’ he cries, ‘the city that kills the prophets and stones those that are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.’ Yet embedded in this lament, as in the Abram story, is a word of hope that assures us that God’s promises will be kept. For Luke tells us that one day, in the distant future, that eschatological future after both cross and resurrection have been accomplished, Jerusalem will welcome Jesus with the words he longed to hear, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

By now you may be wondering, what do these old stories, the story of Abraham and even the story of Jesus on his way the cross, have to do with us? What does it have to do with our life in the world today, as Christians, as a church? I hope you have already begun to make some connections between these biblical stories and your own life, but I want to use these stories today to help us reflect on the role of the church in the world, and on our own calling to believe in God’s promises despite all evidence to the contrary, and as our UCC statement of faith says, “to accept the cost and joy of discipleship.”

Over half a century ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned by the Nazis for his role in the resistance, wrote a letter to his best friend Eberhard Bethge. On April 30, 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote, “What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today.” Today, I’d like to share with you a question that has been bothering me, and borrowing from Bonhoeffer, I would frame it

this way, “What is bothering me incessantly is the question of what the Church really is, of what the Church is called to be for the world today.”

I ask this question from my heart, and it arises for me in the context of our marriage equality process that has been ongoing now at Rock Spring for the past year and a half, and which will soon reach its culmination with the congregational vote scheduled for March 18. At this meeting, we will vote on whether to revise our Open and Affirming statement to allow us to perform ceremonies of holy marriage for all couples regardless of gender within the church, and also to witness for full civil rights, including access to the rights, responsibilities and protections of legal marriage, in broader public arenas beyond our safe and inclusive church.

And it seems to me that the core of the challenge that has been placed before us by our denomination’s prophetic stand at the 25th General Synod, and by our marriage equality process at Rock Spring, is this question of what the church is for us today, and what the church is called to be and do in the world. Are we called into the church to find spiritual sustenance for our own personal journeys, and to care for one another and make our church a safe and inclusive space for all who come here? Yes. That’s why our worship life, our caring ministry, our youth ministry, our sacred circles and other aspects of our church’s life are so important. And that’s why there seems to be broad agreement on amending our ONA statement to make the marriage rite of the church available to all couples in the church, regardless of their gender. And if and when we do this, it will be a huge accomplishment! But is that all it means to be the church? No. Not because what we do within the church isn’t an essential part of God’s purposes for us, but because the church is called by God into existence to give its life for the world, as Christ gave his life

for the world. This means that the church as the body of Christ in the world has a very public vocation that it cannot avoid. Two of the greatest theologians of the 20th century, Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “resisted with all their might any sense of a church living only to itself.”¹ Instead, they understood that the boundaries between church and world are fluid and open.”² Bonhoeffer called this public vocation of the church its “responsibility toward history,” and its call to participate in the sufferings of God in the world.

What does this mean with regards to our marriage equality process and our open and affirming statement? I’ll tell you what it means for me, but in order to do so, I have to speak a little more personally than I sometimes do in my sermons, to make myself a little more vulnerable than I am generally comfortable doing. But I want to take the risk to do so today because, although it is always dangerous to presume to speak for others, I hope that through my own voice you might gain some insight into how these debates over marriage equality in church and society look and feel for those of us who are personally affected by them.

And so, let’s return to the Abraham and Jesus stories, but read them through new eyes. Let’s return to the themes of God’s promise, of historical delays, of the experience of an oppressed people waiting their turn to enter the promised land, of fearless courage in the face of great threats, and the experience of lament and faith.

For gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons, as for many other groups that are marginalized in our society, justice has been long delayed. As with Abraham, it is hard to trust in the promises of God that we too will someday enter the promised land of

¹ Larry Rasmussen with Renate Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer—His Significance for North Americans* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 86.

² *Ibid.*

full acceptance in our society. With Jesus, we lament that our cities, our states, and our neighborhoods do not recognize or welcome us, but seek rather to ostracize and abuse us. Yet, like Jesus, we set our faces resolutely towards Jerusalem, towards the centers of power in our world today, and demand entrance, defying the powers that presume to threaten and frighten us. On this journey of risk, faith and struggle, what we need most are allies, people willing to stand beside us, to speak up for us, to witness on our behalf to our human dignity and the integrity of our relationships.

We have learned not to seek allies in most churches; we have learned where we are not welcome, where we are treated as foreigners and aliens rather than as fellow members of God's household. Yet in the United Church of Christ, and at Rock Spring, we dare to hope for a different reception...we dare to hope for solidarity, friendship and hospitality. We dare to hope that our church might be willing to risk some of the costs associated with standing beside us outside the walls of our churches, where we are most at risk...in our places of employment, in our neighborhoods, in the alleys and schools where we are attacked, with our youth who are at much higher risk of suicide, and, yes, in our demand for equal recognition of the sanctity and legality of our most intimate and committed relationships.

And yet this hope is costly. It is costly to us when it goes unfulfilled, which is why so many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are spiritually homeless. And the solidarity and friendship we seek from our churches are costly as well. They demand of the church a willingness to engage in radical critique of all structures and powers that harm any of God's children, and they demand of the church the ability to imagine new worlds where justice can be embodied within the church and throughout the earth—to

believe that, as we pray every Sunday, God's will may be done on earth, as it is in heaven. As theologian Larry Rasmussen writes, "this hope...is costly. The "lordship" of Jesus...is contested until the very end of the age, embattled all the way. The outcome itself is certain only as a matter of the confident hope of the resurrection. The public life of the church is, in a word, the way of the cross as a community ethic."³

Yet, fortunately for us, it is the UCC way, and the Rock Spring way. Our history as a church is nothing if not marked by an enduring and constant engagement with our community, our nation and our world, both through the talents and gifts of brilliant laypeople like Olive Swinney and Anna Barber who have moved mountains in Arlington to feed the hungry, house the homeless, and speak out for justice, *and* through the concerted action of our church working together through the Social Action Board or as a whole congregation in taking controversial stands on issues such as racial desegregation or helping to create the U.S. Institute of Peace during the Cold War.

And in relation to our denomination, I'd like to quote from a book by Louis Gunnemann and Charles Shelby Rooks, called *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ*. The last chapter, written by Rooks, speaks to the willingness of our denomination to embrace costly engagement with our world on behalf of the marginalized. Rooks states "the United Church of Christ continually urge[s] the nation and the world to reconsider all barriers erected against human beings. United Church of Christ national entities have been unusually persistent in seeking social justice in the United States and throughout the world, even on controversial and contentious questions. Sometimes these advocacy activities have caused the loss of membership and income, but the

³ Rasmussen, 81.

denomination has been steadfast in its convictions about what is contained in God's requirement for love between people."⁴

To conclude with the words of Jewel sung so beautifully by Amy earlier in our service, this costly engagement with the world is not a matter of dreary duty, but an opportunity to lead an extraordinary life. As Amy sang, "We are tired, we are weary, but we aren't worn out. Set down your chains, until only faith remains. Set down your chains. And lend your voices only to sounds of freedom. No longer lend your strength to that which you wish to be free from. Fill your lives with love and bravery, and we shall lead a life uncommon."

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⁴ Louis Gunnemann, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ: An Essay in the History of American Christianity* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1999), 222.