

## **Information for Worship Service for Annual Meeting Weekend -June 5, 2011**

### CALL TO WORSHIP

In the silence of these moments let us draw near to God.

*(a time of silent centering)*

Holy One, speak to us words of wisdom.

**We are listening.**

Holy One, speak to us words of challenge

**We are ready.**

Holy One, speak to us words of hope.

**We are needy.**

Holy One, speak to us words of love.

**We are eager.**

Holy One, speak to us in our silence and in the noise of our lives.

**Draw us into you that we may hear your still, small voice  
and heed your word.**

### PRAYER OF CONFESSION

**There are so many voices in our lives that clamor for our attention and we are too often drawn away from you, the Source of our Being. We say with our words that we want to follow in your way, but the paths of our lives tell a different story. Forgive us, O God, and turn us around. Unstop our ears and open our eyes that we might hear and see you abundantly present in our individual lives and in our life together as congregations and as the Vermont Conference.**

### SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

### \*BENEDICTION

For all that God can do within us, for all that God can do without us,  
**thanks be to God!**

For all in whom Christ lived before us,  
for all in whom Christ lives beside us,  
**thanks be to God!**

For all the Spirit wants to bring us,  
for where the Spirit wants to send us,  
**thanks be to God!**

Listen, Christ has promised  
to be with us in the world as in our worship.  
**Thanks be to God!**  
**Let us go to meet him!**

Looking Up, Looking Out  
Jeremiah 29: 4-9; Acts 1: 6-14

*“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.  
Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your  
daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not  
decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the  
LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare  
you will find your welfare.”  
(Jer. 29: 5-8)*

*“...as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.  
While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven,  
suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said,  
“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”  
(Acts 1: 10-11)*

It had been a troubled couple of months for Jesus' disciples, who were now called apostles, "those who are sent." They had gone to Jerusalem to celebrate a Passover, feted Jesus to an impromptu parade, watched as tensions between Jesus and the authorities increased. They had a last Passover meal with him and saw him arrested, tried, and crucified. They heard the news from the tomb that he had been raised from the dead, had seen him in various places, and even eaten with him. Now they were now on the mountain called Olivet in Bethany, where he appeared one last time, and was taken up into heaven. All in all, it was quite an amazing time. It is no wonder that the apostles were stunned by everything that had happened. As they stood on the mountain their gaze was upward toward heaven, where they had seen him ascend. Suddenly they were joined by two men in white robes. The men said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" Well, why wouldn't they look up? That's where Jesus went. The men said Jesus would come back the same way they saw him go and left them standing there.

The apostles then went back to Jerusalem, to the room where they had been staying. Luke says there were "certain women" with them, including Mary, Jesus' mother, "as well as his brothers." Women played crucial roles throughout Jesus' ministry, yet they are hardly even mentioned, or named. Except for Mary, Luke says, "certain women," and leaves it at that. It is a reminder that women have been important throughout the history of the church.

The apostles didn't expect anything miraculous to happen, just as we don't expect miracles. They hadn't received the power and authority of the Holy Spirit yet. Jesus said they would receive it, but that would come later on Pentecost. They did have Jesus' command and promise, ". . .you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." That seemed almost impossible to believe.

There were some crucial decisions to be made. As things stood, they were fugitives, hiding from the Roman and Jewish authorities. How could they be witnesses "to the ends of the earth?" It didn't seem possible. They were just trying to stay alive and come to terms with what had happened to Jesus, and to themselves.

Luke tells the extraordinary story of their transformation into witnesses. Eugene Peterson, in his introduction to Acts, in *The Message*, says, "Because the story of Jesus is so impressive—God among us! God speaking a language we can understand! God acting in ways that heal and help and save us!—there is a danger that we will be impressed, but only be impressed. As the spectacular dimensions of this story slowly (or suddenly) dawn upon us, we could easily become enthusiastic spectators, and then let it go at that—become admirers of Jesus, generous with our oohs and ahs, and in our better moments inspired to imitate him."

That is something Luke wants to avert. He wants the story of Jesus, the Gospel, to be a living, acted out faith; in other words, a faith worth living! The story of how the apostles transformed their experiences of walking with Jesus into the faith we know today is miraculous. But it didn't happen through their efforts alone. It took the Holy Spirit to instill in them the vision to go out into the world to preach and live out the Gospel.

The apostles were really exiles in a Roman dominated world. They were suspect in the eyes of their own religious authorities. They had hoped Jesus would lead a revolution, topple Roman rule, and the religious establishment, but that hadn't happened. Now they were strangers, exiles if you will, in their own land. They were without wealth or power and, since Jesus had vanished into heaven, without a Messiah, also.

Yet, they had an example of living as exiles. Centuries before, the people of Israel were exiles in Babylon, a defeated people, forced from their beloved Jerusalem into a foreign land. They had no power, no hope, until the prophet Jeremiah

spoke a word of hope to them. He wrote, *“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD.”*

The apostles’ situation is sort of like where many of our churches find themselves today. We are small, poor, dispirited groups, exiles in our own communities. We were once “the” church in town. People had to belong to the Congregational Church to have status. No more. The independent, evangelical church outside of town has the full parking lot. We’ve gone from ‘mainline’ to ‘sideline.’ Many people don’t even go to church. Look around. Do you see the majority of townspeople here today?

There are lots of “prophets and diviners” today preaching false gospels of prosperity and power. For many of us just paying the bills has become a burden, much less providing for a full time ministry. Lynn Bujnak spoke of that in her call to the annual meeting. “While there is much to lament as a part of mainline churches in decline there is simultaneously much hope and potential.” It’s that hope and potential we should celebrate, just as our faithful ancestors celebrated it.

We may want to look up to heaven for Jesus to return and make things right again, to go back to the “good old days,” but that just won’t happen. There never really were any “good old days.” We have only the present which presents us with opportunities for mission. We need to see the hope and potential of the church, right where we are.

The men standing on Olivet that amazing day gave the apostles the right direction. Don’t stand around gazing into heaven. Go into the world and do the work of the Gospel. Heal the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoners; in other words – change lives!

If the apostles had stayed locked up in that room in Jerusalem, none of us would be here today. They had an example and direction, and fear. What happened?

Pentecost happened! Do you have any idea what a mind boggling experience Pentecost was? It literally transformed a small group of fearful believers into doers of the Good News.

Do you realize Pentecost is next week? Do you have any idea what could happen if each of us decided our faith is really worth living? The Holy Spirit literally drove the apostles out into the streets and into the world! The Holy Spirit is still moving in our world! It wants to drive us out into the world also! Yes, God is still speaking in ways we can understand.

The Holy Spirit sent the apostles out into the streets of Jerusalem and into the world. The Spirit sends us also. We may look up toward heaven, but only for a moment. Then we must also look out toward the world. That is where the action is. That is where the needs are. They are all around us in the towns of Vermont. We have a faith worth living. Go and live it!

Amen.