

**“In the Beginning”**  
**Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore**

**Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17**  
**San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ**

**January 9, 2011**

The calendar has brought us out of the season of Christmas, a season of enormous symbols of faith and meaning. We are people made to resonate with symbols. Symbols make concrete within our hearts what is difficult to grasp any other way. Symbols appeal to the senses in ways that elaborate all the emotion and spiritual meaning that words fall short in capturing. Though Christmas is the mother lode of symbols, we never escape the importance of symbols in our lives and as expressions of our faith.

In the poetry of Isaiah 42, God expresses delight in his chosen servant, who will bring justice to nations, a servant so gentle as to not break a reed or throw out even a wick so dim it barely burns. It is the God of creation, the God who in the beginning tamed the waters, formed the land and gave breath to the people, the God that is now promising a new thing about to spring forth. The chosen servant Isaiah had in mind is thought to be Cyrus the Great. He was a Persian king who created a vast kingdom, and he was known to act justly and wisely even to the nations he enveloped into his world. When he entered Babylon, where the Jews had known 40 years of captivity, he allowed them to be free to return to their land in Canaan and gave reparation for the rebuilding of their temple. Isaiah declared that God employed Cyrus as a servant. Later in history, Jesus is God’s servant who will open the eyes that are blind and set the captives free. If we listen carefully to the gospel in Matthew we hear echoes of Isaiah’s pronouncement, but this time it is God’s delight in *Jesus*, the chosen one, as Jesus is baptized in the river Jordan. And the spirit of God descending like a dove on Jesus is a symbol that heralds a new thing about to spring forth.

In many biblical passages, water is an important symbol of life and transformation. God’s spirit hovered over the waters in Genesis, God led the Hebrew slaves through the water of the Red Sea to freedom, and God allowed them to cross over the Jordan into the land of promise. Jesus travels no short distance from Galilee to the river Jordan because it was symbolic that he be baptized in that river. Water was life; water was freedom; water was the symbol of something new springing forth. To emerge from Jordan’s waters also meant a new Exodus, a transition from slavery to freedom. Later Paul adopts this theme taking it a step farther by comparing the sacrament of baptism to Jesus’ burial and resurrection. As adults, through baptism we say to the world that our purposes are directed towards God’s purposes.

In our Wednesday Bible study, Jerry mentioned the book by Greg Riley, *The River of God*. The symbol of the river of God as the body of water enduring throughout all time where people have met the Holy and where faith has brought a new creation and new possibilities. Through millennia, people of God place in the river’s flow their faith, their hopes, their contributions to God’s creative, responsive love for the world. Today we can see and read and experience the scripture, sacrament, song, and symbol of what those who came before us did – the lessons they learned, the successes and failures, all their attempts to live for God. And now, today, we symbolically join that river of God with our worship and mission in our time and place.

If you’ve had a chance to read the newsletter and bulletin announcements, you may sense that we as church are welcoming God’s new creation to spring forth among us. In one way, we always welcome this; yet, as we are very soon to reach 100 years of our own history, it seems appropriate, celebratory, and faithful, to observe more carefully and with a degree of intentionality, and with an openness to the spirit of God descending on us, to ask what God intends for this gathered people to become and to offer the world in our next 100 years. Again symbols play a role here. One hundred years is a landmark. It is a point in time to remember with gratitude and

to never forget the sacrifice of those who came before us to sustain a gathering of the faithful in San Dimas. It wasn't always easy street. This church lived through tough times, wars, depression, the ebb and flow of the citrus industry that was so important to the economics of this area. For those who cherish history, we have before us the opportunity to look back and learn and appreciate and ask if those before us find us faithful today.

If you've noticed announcements in the bulletin and newsletters of a new committee named "The Centennial Planning and Long Range Task Force", it is because the council has appointed this committee of seven to guide this exciting process. Yet, everyone of you is an important member of the process and everyone of you will be heard through small cottage meetings to which you will be invited to come and share your hopes and dreams for our church. I think that one of the most meaningful Christmas events for me this year was when the Shipmates did something like this at their Christmas party. To hear the deep love and yearnings expressed for our church encouraged me and energized and touched me. In February everyone will have a chance to do something quite similar as we meet together in small groups to share. After these cottage meetings, we'll have an all-church event to talk about our history. I know you've done this before, but it was even before I came here as your pastor. This will be a unique opportunity for those of us to hear those old stories, and for our newest members it will be a time of discovery.

All these intentional reflections will most likely result in something new springing forth just as our seasonal spring enters full bloom. It may be a wonderful surprise as well as a joyful affirmation of what already is. It will likely help us meet new friends and become an even closer caring community. We may be called to be bold, to be risk-takers on an errand or two for God. Perhaps God will make it known that we, too, are chosen servants whom God will employ to heal and bring justice to the nations. This coming May when we begin the last year of our first century as church, we will initiate a year long celebration and dedication to culminate in 2012 at our 100th birthday. We are pretty good at parties and potlucks so I imagine a lot of celebrating will happen within these walls.

The gathered people of God are those who live in relationship with God and with each other. We can never underestimate the importance and meaning of relationships; they cannot be taken lightly. Relationships require devotion. When Tom works too hard and doesn't pay me enough attention, I get cranky. I may even act out a little to get my attention deficit met. Relationships within church also require dedication and time. Sometimes we may wonder if we're up to the task, but we know that God has freely entered creation in order to be in relationship with us, and so as followers of God-in-Christ, we enter into relationships with those gathered around us with whom we share the joys and the sorrows of life and faith.

One metaphor that has always moved me is that described by Norman Maclean in his story, *A River Runs Through It*. He writes, "Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are the words of those I have loved."

To continue the metaphor: eventually, all things merge into the oneness of God, and a river runs through it. And so as we give ourselves freely to the relationships of those gathered here for whom, through baptism, we have declared our intentions, and to the divine one who calls upon us in this hour, we add our words to the river of God so that the old, old story of God's unending love will flow forever into the future.