What did you expect to find the first day you walked into Plymouth? (I know that a few of you were carried into the church in your parent’s arms, but for the vast majority of adults, we made a decision to come here.) Were you expecting to find a church just like the one you grew up in? Or maybe you weren’t raised in any particular religious tradition and thought it might be like a church service you’d seen televised. Perhaps you were expecting a praise band and projected PowerPoint during the sermon. What did you expect to find?

What were you seeking when you came? Sometimes people come to church in the midst of a personal crisis, after a divorce or as part of their sobriety or as a response to illness. Maybe for you, it was an effort not to be alone, to find community, to find a way to educate your children about spirituality in a progressive context. Maybe you had a not-so-positive experience in another church and were giving Christianity one last try.

For me finding a church was something of a pilgrimage. I remember when I was in my 20s and living in Santa Barbara, I felt the need to find a harbor where I could safely ask the questions that still floated around like flotsam from my childhood faith. I needed a more adult faith. A college friend and I did the rounds of churches together: we went to All Saints Episcopal, which has now grown into a wonderful congregation, but was then pretty staid. I then tried First Congregational UCC, and I was far and away the youngest person in the church. (I had just returned from graduate school in London, and the elderly man sitting next to me chatted about the last time he was in London...after the war...in 1918.) And finally at the invitation of one of my colleagues at the university, we found our way to the Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara, which looked like a Spanish mission church, had a great pipe organ, a choir that robed and processed, and a minister who had been a United Methodist clergyman. And they welcomed my spiritual quest.

That was what I was seeking in my 20s, having rejected the Protestantism of my youth and the Buddhism I tried to practice in college. (I was what one Buddhist abbot calls a “Barnes and Noble Buddhist:” one who reads books and practices without the benefit of a sangha or community.) And the Unitarians were a great home for me for awhile. I loved the liberality of their approach...but for me there was always something missing. (And I don’t mean this as a slam against our Unitarian cousins in any way.) I wasn’t able to identify the absence at that point. It was as if just at the time I had arrived in a crowded room, someone else had just walked out ...and somehow the dynamic changed...the person who was the life of the party wasn’t there.

A few years later when we moved to Boulder, my former wife and I didn’t find a good fit with the Unitarians, and so I convinced her to try First Congregational UCC. Here is what I expected: plenty of men dressed in suits and women in dresses, an order of worship unchanged from my New England Congregational roots, and a sense of propriety and decorum. And their building – a big turn of the century stone edifice – contributed to that sense that this would be a church of the establishment, not the movement. What I found instead was a vital, engaged, non-artificial Christian community that really celebrated the sacraments, and I discovered that one of the missing elements for me had been communion: sharing the living presence of Christ through the elements that represent his body and lifeblood. And in the midst of the freshness of their approach,
the church maintained enough tradition in the service to keep us connected with our roots.

Things are not always what they seem. And our expectations are not always so closely in line with what we hoped or feared. So, I invite you to take a moment and consider what you were seeking when you first came to Plymouth and what you expected to find. … Were there pleasant surprises? disappointments? differences? What are the elements you found here that keep you here? Are there friends you couldn’t bear to leave? Is there a presence that is still part of our worship with whom you commune – at least for an hour each week? Is there a sense that this is a place where people are still trying doggedly, faithfully to help change the world and bring in the kingdom of God here and now and still unfolding?

Our souls cry out for something…what does yours yearn for?

These miraculous, trouble-filled, joyous, frustrating, fascinating, struggling journeys that we call our lives are best when we listen deeply beyond the blare of the television or the constant diversion of the internet. If we don’t take time to look at the wonders of light within our lives and the light that shines from the lives of others, we will miss it…miss the meaning and the depth of life in all the pain and the joy of it.

We will miss the light of the Spirit.

Do you imagine that there was some hunger, some deep driving force that led three ancient astrologers across the desert sands and into a foreign country? Was their pilgrimage meant to satisfy their intellectual curiosity? What political reality did they hope to uncover? After all, they came to pay homage to a new king. What passion drove them into the court of Rome’s puppet king, Herod, and then to the manger in the animal stalls where an unwed mother laid her baby?

One of the things that motivated the magi is probably something that drew you to this place. No, you didn’t have to cross a desert to get here and your trip to church was not likely as arduous…but yours in a pilgrimage nonetheless. Perhaps these journeyers, these unlikely heroes, these gift-bearing foreigners are a model for stepping out of our comfort zones in our pursuit of finding “the more” in our midst.

Their expectations may have been to find the establishment, but instead, they helped to found the movement. It is ironic that the church over the millennia has often struggled to emulate the political and temporal power of government when all the time, those who follow Christ are doing something very countercultural. Even these astrologers from the East knew it when they saw it…not Herod, not Rome, but a helpless peasant, an infant in a coarse bed of straw was to lead them.

What were the hallmarks of their pilgrimage? To seek new light? To find a different way of seeing the divine in our midst? To share the gifts not just of their wealth but of their very presence?

The magi undertake a classic mythic journey of being called, setting out on a quest, encounter, and return. That is a cycle that we see in our own pilgrimages: we yearn for something more than we our affluent culture has to offer; we have the possibility of encounter with the sacred; and we go out beyond as changed people who have something to share with others.

We know that they magi “left for their own country by another road.” But we never get to learn what became of them, how their lives might have been transformed once they had gotten home or ways the lives of these pilgrims touched others. One tradition allows that one of the magi started the Coptic church in Egypt, but we really
don’t know for certain. What we do know is that their mission, their pilgrimage, has inspired our creative thinking for 2,000 years and continues to do that today.

In a sense we embody much of this cycle in our mission statement and in the three-year themes that our staff and church council laid out for us: inviting (being drawn into the quest), transforming (encountering the sacred), and sending (going beyond and sharing). We turned those themes into very Plymouth-ish language: extravagant welcome, dynamic faith, and passionate pilgrimage.

I hope that at some point during the seasons of Advent and Christmas you found yourself touched by the sacred in some way, even if it was a visit from Charles Dickens’s ghost of Christmas-yet-to-come. Now, it is time to turn the work of Christmas into journey and continue the pilgrimage. We are being sent out into the world to help transform it, not just sit here on a Sunday morning and meditate on the goodness of our own salvation or enjoy the music.

Our passionate pilgrimages this year may involve a choir trip to France, returning to the Navajo nation to work on inferior housing, working to end homelessness in Fort Collins, extending financial support for seminaries, supporting girls schools in Angola, reaching people who need to know that the words “progressive” and “Christian” can be linked in the same sentence, and helping young adults know that you can be both spiritual AND religious. We need to get up off our backsides to do this, and with the leadership of our new Board of Outreach and Mission we have our work cut out for us.

Sometimes, we start off on a journey of faith not knowing what it is we are seeking…perhaps we just know that something is missing. And at times we begin a pilgrimage not knowing where the Spirit will lead us…we simply have to take the first step.

So, get your walking staff and your hiking boots ready, because Christ needs the gifts we will bring to the world in his name.

Amen.

© 2013 Hal Chorpenning, all rights reserved. Please contact hal@plymouthucc.org for permission to reprint.