

“Windows”

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Isaiah 25: 6-9
Revelation 21: 1-6
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The century-and-a-half story of this church and the story of my life happen to intersect in a name that appears beneath two of the windows in this room.¹ On Sundays during the earliest years of my childhood here in Lake Forest, after the service while my parents were greeting their friends, sometimes I'd come over to stand underneath them and just look up. That, I suppose, is how I first began to learn that this room was part of the meaning of the word “home”. I was too young then to understand that the reason we came here, week by week, was so that my parents could look out through the window of this church on the landscape of events that were swirling around us in those years of the early 1960's: look out into the ominous shadows of the Cuban missile crisis, look out on the death of President Kennedy, and into the spasms of desegregation in the south. Ultimately, I suppose, they came here to look through the window to try to see beyond the end of their marriage.

Your Pastor Christine's invitation to come and cheer as you pass this milestone in your story got me searching my memory for other windows through which to look back onto the landscape of the ministry of this church. It was, admittedly, a long time ago ... but, nonetheless, I found three. (Just in case you were thinking that the things that happen in Sunday School don't make a lasting impression...)

In second grade, somewhere upstairs, I learned how to make an angel out of a light-bulb. My recollection is that it took weeks to accomplish this task –

¹ “The Sword of the Spirit,” in the south aisle of the sanctuary, was given in memory of my great-great grandparents, Devillo and Ellen Holt (among the founders of the Village of Lake Forest as well as the 1st Presbyterian Church) by their daughter and granddaughter, Ellen Holt and Jeannette Rumsey Holt. “The Guardian Angel,” designed by the Tiffany Studios and given by Mrs. Simon Somerville Reid in memory of my great-uncle Alfred Lincoln Holt and his wife, Lily Reid Holt, is in the north aisle.

probably all fall. Now, in hindsight, I see what an astute curricular plan this was, how well and for how long the project must have tamed us. Unfortunately age takes its toll: I don't think it's a skill I can reproduce any more.

Second, I remember a remarkable woman named Miss Bechtel, who used to preside over the opening of Sunday School every week in a large room over in the Bell House (where only a parking lot now remains), before we split up into classes by grade. I don't remember much about the weekly routine; probably there was singing, maybe "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know" (because I must have learned it somewhere). But I do remember that she talked about prayer – and, in particular, that she often asked, "Could I be praying now?" (then stood for a rapt few seconds gazing thoughtfully toward the ceiling) – a question which she'd trained us to answer in unison with a thunderous "YES!!!" Again in hindsight, I see how worthwhile this postage-stamp-sized lesson was – though I also see that it must have taken a great toll on Miss Bechtel's own spiritual life, because any hope of prayerful calm would have been utterly shattered by the way we tried to outdo each other in bellowing our affirmative answer.

Third – and most vividly – I have a memory from Junior Choir rehearsals – where there certainly was singing, and where another saint presided: Mrs. Speidel. Music, as we all know, can saturate itself with memories and truths and find its way more deeply into the living tissue of us than just about anything else. For some reason I remember a little ditty that Mrs. Speidel taught us to sing at the beginning of each rehearsal – to coax out of us some of the integrity of posture and attention that true praise requires. Actually I only remember a fragment of it any more, but my memory won't let go of the last 2

lines of what must have been a four-line verse: “...*Organ pipes and singers too / must be straight so the tone comes through.*”

We moved from Lake Forest in 1965 to New England, where I’ve lived more or less ever since. In other places there have been other lessons to learn from windows: like the clear windows of the New England meeting houses that are my spiritual landscape now, which our stern Calvinist forebears insisted should be unadorned and transparent – where the point was to be able to see without obstruction *both* looking out *and* looking in, for the sake of accountability. And like the windows of the great Gothic cathedrals of Europe, where the whole biblical story is set in acres of medieval stained glass up a hundred feet or more in the clerestory, though no one down on the stone floor could possibly have been expected to read the pictures – where the point was that the very light you saw by was filtered through the sacred story.

The image from the book of Revelation of a new heaven and a new earth, with “the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adorned for her bridegroom” (Rev. 21:2) might seem at first to work better in stained glass than as any kind of a window through which to see *this* earth. As biblical literature it belongs to another time when events were swirling all around, when the view was mostly ominous shadows of persecution and terror, wars and rumors of wars, and when the meaning of the word ‘home’ for the Christian family was about hunkering down, surviving, keeping the little flame burning in the gale-force winds of history. But it’s worth pausing to read the name underneath the window of this text: “See, the home of God is among mortals” (21:3). The vision of the book of Revelation ends with a glimpse of the countless thousands of the faithful about whom we’ll sing in a few minutes: robed in splendor, praising the Lamb –

*From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast
Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host
Singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost:
Alleluia! Alleluia!*

No wonder that hymn has worked its way so deeply into the living tissue of us: this is the story in which each of our names is written. This is where God has made angels out of even the dimmest bulbs among us. You should stop and name all the names from time to time, it seems to say – you can read them written on your heart if you pause beneath this window. You should stop and look up with the clear eyes of your heart into the faces of those who are part of whatever meaning of ‘home’ there is for you in this room, or in any room with this Table and this Font: Speidel, Bechtel, Pollard, Hutchinson, Kreisler, Chakoian... you know the names. All of them are sealed with the Name in which all our stories intersect – the name that we have now given to each other: the name of Christ-bearers, Christians. All of them, citizens of the holy city, are visible in the window, in the picture of all things made new. Their images filter the very light we see by, down here on the floor of this ministry.

Two or three years ago, not long after Christine began her ministry with you, in about this church's 147th year, I had occasion to come back to Lake Forest for the first time in more than 40 years. I felt the adrenaline of homecoming coursing through me as I walked up the steps and into worship that Sunday – and, of course, I was thinking about the family windows I was about to see again. But as I came through that door and into this room, it was the chancel window² that took my breath away. Somehow I had forgotten that one – but that visual reunion was perhaps a small taste of what our reunions will be like on the far side of life in the city that has no end. That face was

² “The Resurrected Christ,” designed by the Tiffany Studios – given in 1902 by Mrs. Henry Clay Durand in memory of her husband.

where I first learned who Jesus is. And whenever I've been invited to the Table for Communion, in all the years since, by the words of Jesus in the old Book of Common Worship – “the one who cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37) – in some mystical way, *that* was the face I saw. When I was asked as a confirmand to answer the question “who is your Lord and Savior?” that was the face I saw. When I went to Jerusalem a few years ago and tried to imagine the morning of resurrection breaking over those contentious streets full of the gale-force winds of history, that was the violet light of dawn that I saw. That window – its light, its story and all of its feelings – is part of the meaning of the word ‘home’.

And if Mary Magdalene, broken-hearted in the dim light of dawn, had looked up with her eyes streaming with tears and wondered, “could I be praying even now?” – that was the face in which she could have read the answer. And if, in the midst of the turmoil of our unfinished quest for a truly just and compassionate society, aching and heartsick from the effects of racism or terrorism or even just individualism, any one of us should wonder, “could I be praying now?” – that face in the window is the answer to both the question and the prayer. Could we be praying as we lay to rest a broken dream or a finished marriage or as we pour every ounce of energy into an urgent hope? The answer is a whisper now, not a shout – but it comes to us down the ages from the voices of all the saints, and it is full of their confidence and full of the joy with which they know the story ends: *yesssssssss*.

Yes, we could be praying even now.

“Lo, this is our God,” says Isaiah; “the One we have been waiting for” (25:9) – waiting for 150 years, or 2000, or forever; waiting by the violet light

of dawn outside the tomb; waiting for the longing to be eased, for the struggle to end; waiting for tired old things to be made new; waiting at the window. Waiting for the tears to be wiped away; waiting for the stone that is too heavy for us to move by ourselves to be rolled away. We could be praying now. And even in the times of rejoicing – the times of festival and celebration, when all the grand parade of history comes home and the lost are found, the Table spread, the candles burning brightly even against the gale-force winds of history – even then. Even on *this* mountain – this green place beside the lake – here where the wine is indeed strained clear and the feast of rich food is prepared and the waiting seems done at last – even here, we could be praying... For the promise is not complete “until the shroud that is cast over *all* peoples has been destroyed,” until the ominous shadows of poverty and fear and prejudice and loneliness have been taken away from *all* peoples and until *every* tear of sadness and suffering has been wiped away.

Yes, we could be praying now – for there is always more to pray for. The prayer could be a song – because music, as we all know, carries memories and truths out of the deepest places in the living tissue of us more powerfully than just about any other medium –

*And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song
And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong!
Alleluia! Alleluia!*

Or the prayer could just be the breath itself, coaxing the integrity of posture and conducting the electricity of attention that true praise requires, making the music of respiration – the music of *con*-spiracy as we breathe together the

breath of life, like organ pipes – the prayer that is only a sigh too deep for words. Yes, we could be praying now...

Yes, we *are* praying now – here at the window of the church, looking out upon the heartbreaking, heart-mending world with all its swirling history and all its ancient memories and its high hopes and all its unfinished business. And we *will be* praying, for another 150 years or however long it takes until the only weeping left to be done is for love and beauty, and the only tears left are the tears of joy in the recognition of all the saints we have loved and all the holy ground we have ever walked.

And we will stay at the window, *this* window God has opened for us, this church, this faith, this community – because of what it helps us to see that we could not see otherwise, or could not bear to see – because of the way it teaches us to see. We will stay at the window because Jesus stands beside us, looking out into history – even when parents are gone, even when the meaning of ‘home’ changes, even when the church as an institution fails us. We will stay at the window with him, looking out upon the world, praying, until the day comes when all the saints of this world, the rich and the poor, the privileged and the unlucky, the hungry and the satisfied, the important and the impotent, all become part of the meaning of the word ‘home’ to each other, and until all of them together hear the thunderous whispered *yessssssssssss* of God’s love, and hear their own names in the Name in which all our stories intersect and in which all of history finally comes home.