

Call to Me
Jeremiah 33:1-3, 6-11, 14-16
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational UCC
2 December 2012

Back in July the Worship Ministry held a brainstorming session to discuss this year's Advent. I went over some basics about the season, its history and purpose in the liturgical calendar. I reviewed some of the scripture texts assigned by the lectionary. And then we had a wide-open discussion.

My notes record the following thoughts. "God wants us back – come back to me." "What motivates you to get up?" Fred Felger asked, "What do we focus on not to get distracted?" This after Ken Friedman-Fitch said that he often experiences Christmas, with all the activity and the commercial side, as a distraction from faith. Someone else said that when Jeremiah says "The days are surely coming," instead of hope and joy, they experience it as anxiety-inducing as they count down the days to Christmas. The advice of the Ministry, please don't make Advent about ticking off the days till Christmas.

Pretty quickly the group focused in on restoration as a theme that stood out, though later in the conversation we would move away from it. But while contemplating restoration, someone pondered why restoration was necessary and asked the significant question, "Why does the world have so many problems?" Someone else followed with "Given all the problems, what can we do to make a difference?"

It was then that Laura Mitchell told us a story. Just a few days before she and her son Elliot had been talking and Elliot had asked her "Mom, if you could have any wish what would it be?" Laura thought for a moment and responded that she needed "purpose, work, and a challenge." Elliot then thought for a moment before he responded, "Yeah, but what else would you wish for? I mean something like flying or a superpower."

When the staff later met in order to take the brainstorming session and fashion it into a meaningful and workable theme and worship series, this question of Elliot's captured us. "What's your wish?"

The Sanctuary Decorating Team took the idea and its childlike playfulness and designed this year's visual representations of the theme.

And our advertisements ahead of time have announced: This Advent, call forth your inner child, use your imagination, and awaken to your deep desire, in order to become who you did not know you could be.

Now, some of you may be thinking that "What's your wish?" just doesn't sound serious enough. Then I go and use a pop song like "Call Me Maybe" to introduce the idea and that confirms it for you!

So, let's think about apples for a moment. Do you have a favourite variety? Are you a Red Delicious person, Granny Smith, Jonagold? Of the varieties you can get in the grocery store, I prefer Braeburns. I once had a friend who made the best homemade apple pies and while I knew her one year the Braeburns were the best they've ever been, and she made me an apple pie from that year's wonderful fruit. We really all need more friends like that.

Prior to the 20th century, the apple was used primarily to create alcohol. During the temperance movement, the apple industry created a new public relations campaign with the slogan "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." Did you know that that was an advertising slogan?

The apple industry began to encourage the eating of raw apples, which meant that the varieties they promoted changed. What mattered for the industry was sweetness. It became more important than tartness, which is common in many apple varieties. Also, the look and colour of the fruit became more important. Over time the dozens of varieties that were popular in the 19th century gave way to a small handful that were commercially available, with the Red Delicious leading the pack.

But, over time, these apples have lost their flavour. And they've done so because our domestication of them has robbed them of their necessary wildness. In our effort to provide the perfect apple, we've robbed it of some of its necessary vitality.

In his book *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan writes that one source of the problem was "a pinched modern idea of what constitutes sweetness." 100 years ago, sugar, for the very first time, was readily available, and sweetness became limited to sugariness. He writes, "in a culture of easy sweetness, apples now had to compete with every other kind of sugary snack food in the supermarket." What had happened, according to Pollan, is that a "complex desire had become a mere craving."

So, when I ask you "What's your wish?" I'm not asking about any mere craving. I want you to think about your complex desires. Don't go for the easy Red Delicious, aim higher and deeper.

Throughout this year, the topic of desire kept appearing in my theological reading. Too often we associate religion with seriousness and asceticism, but those were not common themes in my reading this year.

I read a book on the role of desire in the Calvinist tradition. Yes, in the Calvinist tradition. For instance, the Puritan theologian Richard Baxter wrote "We shall never be capable of clearly knowing till we are capable of fully enjoying." [in Belden Lane's *Ravished by Beauty*.]

I read books on the incarnation, race, the saints, atonement, and the doctrine of God, and desire appeared again and again. Often these contemporary writers were recovering ideas of early church writers.

For instance, St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote that desire leads us to God. "The desire for God is God; . . . To desire God is already to participate in God, to be produced by God's desiring." [in Gerard Loughlin's *Alien Sex*.]

And then there is the teaching of the early church father St. Irenaeus which has inspired me as I've prepared for this Advent season, "The glory of God is a humanity fully alive."

God desires us. God says, "Call me!" And God invites us to desire, wish, and dream as

well. What will make you fully alive? What will the glory of God radiating in you and through you look like? These are the sorts of questions that I hope you will ponder this Advent season. Actually, not just ponder, play with. Relish and enjoy and delight in them.

For I have good news to deliver to you today.
God,
Who brought the world into being,
Who formed us in the womb,
Who delivered us from slavery,
And led us to the promised land,
Who entered into covenant with us,
And declared a steadfast love and mercy for us,
That God, the God of our Mothers and Fathers,
Is restoring the fortunes of the land.

God is about to do a new a wonderful work among us, which will fulfill the promises made in the past. The fulfillment will bring justice and righteousness, healing, abundance, and prosperity. We will be cleansed. We will be rebuilt. We shall sing with joy and radiate with glory. For God is good.

And if you want even more good news

God is inviting us to be a part of this wonderful work. "Call to me," God says, "and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known."

Let us respond. As God has called to us, let us call to God. For God is in a giving mood. God is giving back, and part of the gift is that you can call upon God. Part of the gift is that you can wish.

What is your wish?