

“Once Upon God’s Time”

Reflections on 300 Years

Text: Jeremiah 29: 11

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“I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord, “they are plans for good and not for harm; to give you a future and a hope.”

Our spiritual forbearers at First Church knew those words. I am certain of this because they relied on the same Bible that we look to yet today, though their translation was in the King’s English ó which I know some of you still prefer!

It was the same Bible from which the ordination sermon of our first pastor was offered 300 years ago today.¹ Most likely, it was a service held in the late afternoon to allow for the wider fellowship of other pastors and congregations to be present, the “Consociation” as that body was called, each of these others having some distance to travel on roads that were not terribly reliable. That authorization thus bound this church and her new pastor, twenty three year-old Benjamin Colton, and set in motion what we have come to inherit.

Just imagine! George Washington had not yet been born! It was sixty-some years before the revolution that would bring independence to our still-settling America. Our church, called the fourth Church of Hartford at her founding, played an active role of advocacy and encouragement in that revolution. Our second pastor, Nathaniel Hooker, spoke urgently for the cause with our pulpit as his rallying post: “In all respects the laws of the British Parliament are detrimental to what we suppose to be our interest in these colonies!”²

On the cusp of our 100th birthday, Thomas Jefferson had just finished two terms as President and Abraham Lincoln was only three years old. Nathan Perkins, our third pastor (with the longest tenure of all any of our leaders), preached a sermon that was called by many “perspicacious and clairvoyantly prophetic.” He was an ardent abolitionist 50 some years before Lincoln would sign the Emancipation Proclamation.

Just to sharpen the context here: church records indicate that some of our members owned slaves (more politely called servants), and these servants, seventeen in all, were allowed to attend church, but not to sit with their owners. It is not clear how many of these servants were here at any one time ó or whether they were present across a number of years or decades. Still, our pastor stood firm: “This is a sin attended with awful consequences ó and this is one of the most aggravated which is ever committed. Some have pretended to excuse or justify it. But we have no more right to make slaves of others than they have of us . . . God has made of one blood all nations for to dwell on the earth.”³

Friends, this is our living history, present with us today because of our affiliation with and devotion to this church! God had plans, our forebears had the challenges of their day,

and our own First Church provided the epicenter as West Hartford found her way to becoming its own town.

We have also had, as have any church or community, our day-to-day moments of less notice and fumbles and foibles along the way. There have been sad and joyful episodes most certainly, and ways and times when life was just plain entertaining.

I understand that at one time, this is in 1766, certain members were taking it upon themselves to invite other itinerant pastors to preach ó quite a controversy for the Church Council and the pastor at the time. So what did they do? They formed a committee, came up with a statement forbidding such practice, and wrote it into their rules of practice.⁴

There was, as well, a controversy over wine versus grape juice at the Communion Table.⁵ One pastor was called here three times before saying yes.⁶ Another was fond of what were called òreligious improvementsö to certain Biblical stories ó that is, he had a creative flare for embellishing a passage beyond its intent.⁷

How entertaining our story seems to be! We could never know of them all, these moments of forming and growing, settling and sorting our church home. Just as 300 years from now, little will be known of the lesser - even if more interesting - moments along our church's way.

There were revivals as faith that was more nascent and spirited came up against the established more structure ways: we still have that today! There were theological controversies over who would be in and who would be out ó still with us today on the religious landscape! And there were struggles with resources to do the work of the church just as there are today ó indeed, as was said on our first day, òour Society is at present small and our undertaking considerably expensive!ö⁸

Did you know that we had one period of very rapid turn-over of pastors? No, it's not what you think! This was in 1838! In 12 short years we had three pastors come and go! Wait, did I say one period? I didn't mean that! I meant two periods! Fast-forward to 1876, and it happened again! In the 14 years that followed, we had another three pastors come and go in short order. Wait, did I say two periods? I'm sorry, I meant three! This time, it's within our own remembering, as three pastors again came and went in twelve years! If you do the math, you'd discover then, that 9 of our 20 senior pastors - nearly half - had very short tenures. The shortest of all was only 3 months, when a pastor of some promise died unexpectedly; and the longest was 66 years.

But, through it all, we have always had good, faithful, stalwart, caring, generous people keeping watch. Along the way, we have lived and grown with roots in the reformation and Protestantism, in free-church tradition and congregational governance, trusting Biblical authority and covenantal understanding, looking to a Gospel that embraces both spiritual nurture and the work of justice, and of the radical (I daresay even progressive) principles and values of Christ. And now, still informed by such a history, as a

congregation of the United Church of Christ, we are a part of actively seeking the realm and blessing of our still-speaking God.

My point is absolutely singular this morning: I simply want us to appreciate this larger story today ó because it is an awesome story. I do not mean to enlarge our history beyond its due, or to look forward by looking back. But today of all days: 300 years in service to the goodness of God and the Gospel of Jesus in the heart of West Hartford!

I am humbled to be a part of it with you. And I believe deeply as that the promise still holds fast: **“I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord; they are plans for good and not for harm; to give you a future and a hope.”**

What a gift! What an inheritance! What an entrustment! What a day to remember! And what a mantle of responsibility as we begin our fourth century!

In the living Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

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Notations from Matthew Spinka. [A History of The First Church of Christ Congregational, West Hartford, CT; 1963.](#)

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