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Text: Revelation 21:10; 21:22-22:5

The Place of Church

How many of you really know your history of First Church? Do you remember where it all began? In 1709, well before West Hartford was even incorporated, three residents of the West Division of Hartford petitioned to have their own congregational church. There were already three congregations in Hartford, but none were close by. The petitioners decried the distance and the poor state of the roads to the center of Hartford, birthing a distinguished lineage of folks disgruntled with their commute into Hartford. Of course, I'm sure none of you here stands in that 300-year-old tradition.

All joking aside, those early West Division residents wanted a centrally located church, and not just in the geographical sense. They wanted their church to be the spiritual center of the town, a place for their children and themselves to grow in faith. In 1711, the General Assembly of the Connecticut Colony granted the residents the right to form their own congregation, and the congregation went on to call their first pastor in 1713. Wanting more unity between their spiritual lives and their everyday lives, they built the first meetinghouse here in the Center.

Overtime landscapes and places evolve. The story of West Hartford in many ways tracks the trajectory of scripture: it begins in a garden and ends in a city. From a biblical perspective, this references the Garden of Eden in Genesis and the passage we just read about the New Jerusalem in Revelation. Both are idealized places in which human beings are in right relationship with each other, nature, and God.

Knowing that both embody paradise in their own particular way, it makes you pause and wonder about what it means to be in right relationship in a suburb. If the Bible were written today, would its authors look to the suburbs instead of cities as a paradigm for Christian community? We do have a compelling case right in front of our eyes. What began as a small country church of farmers evolved into a robust congregation with hundreds of members, endowments, and a bustling campus nestled in the heart of our affluent and increasingly diverse community. First Church's story mirrors that of the community around it, so why not claim the connection?

In our reading from Revelation, an angel transports the author, identified as John, to a mountaintop to watch the New Jerusalem descending from the sky. Now I want you to play with me for a moment. Imagine that I'm taking you to a clearing on top of Avon Mountain and you have an unobstructed view of the reign of God, the pinnacle of communal life settling in West Hartford. Living waters flow from the idyllic Reservoir; holy manna from heaven fill two Whole Foods, a Trader Joe's, and a half dozen other grocers; passengers move along our streets with alacrity and dignity and there is bountiful parking in every lot! Did I go too far? I did say we were imagining, right?

The author of Revelation knew fully well about the achievements and limitations of cities. The Romans founded hundreds of cities around the Mediterranean, and they built them according to a common plan. These cities produced amazing cultural achievements and also grinding injustice and poverty. In many ways, John offers the antithesis to the Roman city. There is no need for temples, God is fully present throughout the city already, lighting the way for all. God's throne is not separate from the people in a palace but among them in the middle of the city. It borders the river that offers the water of life. It is near the tree that perpetually offers fruit. The gates never close and only the good enter in. The New Jerusalem is plentiful, beautiful, and righteous, and frankly unlike any city that has ever been. In Revelation, John wrestles with the iniquities of the past and imperial present in order to imagine God's vision for the future.

Let us imagine going back to that mountaintop. In the same Spirit that moved John, let us imagine a new West Hartford that does more than build on strengths but subverts the iniquities of the past. Let us imagine a place where God is at the center of our lives both physically and spiritually.

Some local teachers and high school students already have offered a head start. This week I received an e-mail from a student at Kingswood Oxford. She wanted to interview me for a Podcast for her U.S. History class taught by our very own Katie McCarthy. Her class and other classes at schools all over West Hartford are investigating our town's relationship with slavery. They are interested how we tell stories and what narratives stick with us. For people who live north of the Mason-Dixon line, we buy into the narrative that slavery was a uniquely southern institution. We claim our abolitionist heroes proudly but are slow to name our complicity in the system that explicitly dehumanized people of color as property. There were at least 25 slave-owners and 62 enslaved people in West Hartford, and their stories are not easy to find. This is no accident. Rather than confronting this painful history, the impulse for too long was to ignore it.

Knowing the intimate link between place and faith, it should be no surprise that the history of slavery in West Hartford and First Church is intertwined. The two longest serving pastors of this church, Benjamin Colton and Nathan Perkins, owned other human beings and so did prominent members. We emblaze their names on street signs and schools to remember their roles as leaders and let the names of the ones they enslaved recede into oblivion. Mercifully, there were some meticulous record keepers who did not allow for enslaved peoples memory to be totally erased. These records, many from our own church archives, reveal births, deaths, marriages, baptisms, commitments to marry, and membership in the church. Digging through whatever documents they can get their hands on, local educators and students are piecing back together the stories of those so many tried to forget.

They are also using this history to do more than simply imagine a new vision for the landscape of West Hartford. Just yesterday I took a walk up North Main Street to the Old Center Cemetery, and I found amongst the aging headstones two small bronze plaques in the ground. The first reads, "Jude / Born 1753 / Farmer / Enslaved here by Stephen Sedgwick / Ran Away 1774." The second reads, "George / Born circa 1730 / Baptized 1758 / Farmer / Enslaved here by Timothy Goodman." Modeled after the tiny memorials to Holocaust victims in Europe, students are installing these "Witness Stones" to help us all come to terms with our town's history with slavery and to commemorate the lives of enslaved people of West Hartford. Their first

installation ceremonies were held here in our Meetinghouse last September. The pews were filled with local students as they listened to their peers lift up the stories of the forgotten before they walked together to the Old Town Cemetery to install the stones.

This week First Church will host three more of the ceremonies, and I am thrilled that teachers and students chose to return to our Meetinghouse. It offers us yet another chance to repent for our part in perpetuating slavery by using our pulpit to lift up the stories of enslaved people rather than using it to erase their humanity. It allows us to take part in reshaping the broken narratives of the past.

When West Division residents built that first meetinghouse, they knew of the power of sin to separate us from God, the land, and one another, but they had deeper faith that God heals the wounds of brokenness. They aspired for this congregation to be a spiritual center in the heart of their community. Surely, they would have imagined John's Tree of Life in the New Jerusalem as they built that simple building with no steeple or tower. They would have imagined the fruits that nourish year round and the branches that offer healing to the nations. They would have imagined their future congregation in a fifth meetinghouse being that tree to their community.

As we know from scripture, children are often the ones who hear God's call and lead us down the righteous path. Whether they know it or not, they are doing God's healing work through their research and the creation of these "witness stones." They are transforming the landscape of our town and offering a new vision for what West Hartford can become not just as a place but as a community. I am grateful we as a church can support and celebrate their gift to us all. We need not hide from the sins of our past. We should name them, learn from them, and let a new narrative transform our present and future. God transforms the world through this work of reconciliation, and God has a future in store in which each and every one of us are not forgotten.

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