

“Something Happened”  
November 8, 2020

Ezra 1:1-4  
Acts 1:1-8

Well, where are we?

I ask this question as we record this worship service on Saturday morning.

And when I wrote this question as I prepared this sermon on Friday, I realized even then that where we are now—as I speak—will not be where we are when you watch this on Sunday morning or later.

In this year when time often seems distorted, one meme tells us “Thirty days has September, April, June, and November. All the rest have thirty-one. Except for March, which has 8000.”

Some things just seem to go on and on.

Election *Day* quickly became Election *Week*—we kind of knew that would happen.

As of this morning, Election Week threatens to continue for days to come.

On Friday I was listening to the radio and the host of a talk show was having some technical problems getting her guest on the air. When the issues were resolved and the guest could be heard, he said: “Something happened.” And they both agreed that’s pretty much what all of us have been saying this year.

This, then, is the ringing affirmation with which I start this sermon: Something happened.

Check the internet or cable news to find out just what that “something” is right now—because it keeps changing.

We’re still trying to figure out where we are, what day it is, and where all of this is going. So I can’t speak this morning with any great certainty and I won’t offer sweeping assessments of where we are and where we are going.

No one who has listened to my preaching over the past four years will be surprised to know that I will be rejoicing and relieved if and when Joe Biden is declared the winner of this election. And, let’s be honest, no one who has been involved with this congregation over the past four years will be surprised when I say that the rejoicing and the relief will be shared by many—if not most—in this congregation, both those who proudly call themselves Democrats and those who proudly call themselves Republicans. There’s been a lot of bipartisan agreement here.

We are tired of the lies.

We are tired of the racism.

We are tired of the attacks on immigrants, the turning of our nation's back to desperate refugees.

We are tired of the downplaying of this deadly pandemic.

We are tired of ignoring the growing threat of climate change.

We are tired of the ways in which the word "Christian" has been linked with the lies, the racism, the attacks, and the ignorance.

So this morning, even while there is much that is unknown, I'm taking some time to rejoice, I'm taking some time to rest in the relief of how this election has gone.

And even if you are not rejoicing, even if you feel no relief but are troubled by the election results, perhaps you—and all of us—can be glad in this: as UI professor of Political Science and Congregational UCC member, Caroline Tolbert, told the adult education gathering a couple of weeks ago, it is good for democracy when people vote.

It's *good* when people vote! And people voted in record numbers this past week. That's *good*! That's something we can all celebrate.

Many have felt—and I think rightly so—many have felt that our democracy has been greatly threatened in recent years, even in recent days as the lies and unfounded assertions coming out of the White House have only accelerated. But the great number of people who voted in this election is a sign of hope for democracy, for this nation, and for its people.

We, off course, need to recognize that this election—and any election in and of itself is neither the end of the world nor the coming of God's realm. What we do *after* elections to live out our faith and our commitments is as important as what we do *before* elections.

Recall the conversation that we heard this morning between the risen Christ and his followers.

It can be difficult to let go of old, worn out expectations. We understand the feeling when the followers of Jesus drag out their hopes like some old moth-eaten coat: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Memories of faded glory still dance in their minds. Maybe now. Maybe now they will experience the restoration of the old kingdom. Maybe now they can build back better.

Maybe now. Maybe now our hopes will be met simply because of whom we have elected. Maybe now people will see.

"Is this the time...?"

How does Jesus respond to such hopes?

"It's not for you to know. . ."

All hopes for a revival of the past, any hopes for a quick fix in the future are put aside. The new task is to find a vision for a future that is unknown and uncertain.

These are words for people settling in for the long haul. They call us to look at what we have lost, to consider in faith all that is absent. And they invite us to be open to new power, new ability to act for the well-being of our nation.

Nothing that we have sought as individuals, nothing that we have worked for as a congregation will now suddenly appear as the result of a new president.

As we rejoice and find relief, then, I think we also need to recognize the rebuilding that we must do.

The norms that have held our democracy have been both shattered and slowly eroded over the years.

The racial fault lines in our nation have been shown in all their starkness.

The gap between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots continues to grow, as does hunger and homelessness.

The political differences between people have become a cause of enmity rather than an opportunity for understanding.

So I recall the opening of the Old Testament book of Ezra. Ezra and Nehemiah form a single book in the Hebrew Bible, although they have been separated in the Christian tradition. The words we heard this morning tell of King Cyrus of Persia announcing the end of the Jewish captivity in Babylon and telling the people they can return to their homeland and rebuild Jerusalem.

Release from captivity and the rejoicing that came with it also meant the long period of rebuilding and restoration that is chronicled in Ezra and Nehemiah. The walls of the city needed to be reconstructed; the Temple needed to be rebuilt; the people needed to find new ways to govern themselves and live with one another. It was a period of over 100 years in which the nation rediscovered and reinvented itself.

We're not used to thinking in such long terms, but the rebuilding of Jerusalem challenges and informs our situation today. There is much in our nation that simply needs to be rebuilt—"Infrastructure Week" became a running joke during the last four years even as our roads and bridges and public transportation systems decayed and failed around us. Of course nothing can be rebuilt until we address with scientific and medical honesty the pandemic that besets our state and nation and world. Our religious life has in many ways become a joke as well with scandal and hypocrisy and outright hatred seeming to define much of what is labeled as "Christian" while those who have tried to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God have been derided as fools and pushed toward obscurity. We just don't get along with one another. Many are breathing a sigh of relief that Thanksgiving will *not* be celebrated because of the pandemic, so that contentious political arguments will be missing at the table. Neighbors cast a suspicious eye at each other when signs supporting different candidates appear in yards.

We need to continue to do the work that we are already doing, recognizing that is still unfinished. Let us continue to: work for interfaith understanding, cooperation, and acceptance,

include people of all sexual orientations in the life of our nation as we do in the life of our congregation, strive to overcome the racism that clings so closely, speak the truth about the reality of climate change before it's too late—and time is running out, pursue paths of economic justice, live toward peace, and—I'll keep saying this until it happens: in all things seeking the good.

What I've said this morning is tentative and brief because the situation is rapidly changing.

But don't worry, I'll have more to say—with more certainty—in the coming weeks.

But yes, this morning I rejoice in the new possibility that appears on our nation's horizon.

I find relief that we the people are keeping our fragile democracy from descending any further into authoritarianism.

And I look forward to being a part of the rebuilding of our common life along with all of you.

Something happened. By the time you watch this, you will probably have a better sense of what that "something" is.

Something happened. What we do next will make the difference.