

**TOGETHER WE GROW – MILESTONES OF FAITH HYMN SERVICE
OCTOBER 11, 2009; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN**

Commentary I: Our Faith Awakens – We consider today the trajectory of faith from the moment of our first awakening to our reception into God's eternal embrace. Some describe their spiritual beginning as being born again. They refer to a precise time and place when their eyes and hearts were opened. Others say their turning to God was the result of exposure to family and mentors who were living Christ-like values. Still for others, life becomes unmanageable – the erosion of a relationship or dream; the collapse of self-image or expectations caused by addiction or job loss or illness.

However our hearts are opened to the Holy One is less important than the first step the believer takes with this new awareness which is glad surrender to something beyond and greater than herself. We do so without anything even close to certainty but the mere inkling that something is there and just might respond.

Soren Kierkegaard called this the leap of faith. Our letting go of obsessive control is replaced by the signs of willingness to be shaped anew; our letting go of fear is marked by the emergence of trust in a transcendent order and goodness; our self-absorption loosens its grip, overtaken by a desire to listen, to give, to be generous, to serve.

Something in us awakens, comes to life: irrepressible hope, despite our circumstances; pervading confidence despite loss or despair; deep and calming peace despite bad news. This is the presence of God in our hearts. It leads us through tragedy or disillusionment and transforms us to see and participate in a world in which everything is the same but also profoundly different. How else can we respond but with dedication and praise for the God who gives us life, rescues us from ourselves, and is a light in the darkness.

Commentary II: We Are Taught and Fed – In the primitive church, Lent was the time new converts to the faith prepared for their baptism with rigorous study and discipline; they learned the stories and wisdom of the Bible and observed spiritual practices of prayer, fasting and service.

Then on Easter morning they were baptized into the body of Christ, the church, and invited to dine at the table of the Lord's Supper – partaking the bread and wine of new life. These are the two things Christ instructed his followers to do: to be baptized and to celebrate the special supper that recalls his death and resurrection.

Calvin talked about the mystical presence of Christ in the sacraments. Somehow, he said, the vertical dimension of God's Holy Spirit invades the horizontal dimension of human life and we are shaped and reshaped into God's people as we baptize those whom he has called and as we gather for the bread and wine. Perhaps another way to say this is to say that God's Spirit present in the act of baptism and in the act of eating the bread and wine fills the God-shaped gap in our lives and we are made whole. We discover the family of faith, the church, and find renewal in repeating these life-giving sacraments over a lifetime.

Commentary III: We Respond to God's Call – St. Paul said as we mature in faith we move from our reliance on the milk of the church's fellowship and support to the meat of sacrifice and service. The story of God calling ordinary people into history-shaping roles and responsibilities is the story of the Bible itself: God calling Noah and his family, Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos; then fishermen, a tax collector, and a community organizer by the name of Judas. Finally, you and me. In every generation saints, martyrs and servants, heralded and unheralded – founding hospitals, opening schools, speaking out for the underprivileged and oppressed, going where no one else would go often at great risk and danger to themselves.

They respond to the fragmented, complex, violent world in which they live with clarity and courage. They commit, not random, but intentional acts of kindness and generosity. They believe each day is an occasion for God to use them where they work and live and play. They are realistic about the darkness that engulfs lives and communities and are resolved to reflect the light of God's justice and compassion in the shadows of the world. They regularly encounter people and circumstances in which they make a difference.

Their lives take on a new depth of meaning and purpose. They suspect God can use them anywhere – privately, publically and professionally – not just when they wear their volunteer hat. They look for God's direction in their careers, marriages and avocations. Joyful, free and serene describe most of their days. Their interactions with others are candid and flexible not rigid and imposing. Somehow giving themselves away they find their lives anew and this is their reward rather than status or authority or material wealth from which they seem remarkably detached. In short, their lives are transformed.

Commentary IV: We Continue to Grow – Abundant life is what we've been describing and singing about this morning. It is not a thing to be grasped but a gift given to a life given for service. It is not usually found in isolation but among a community of believers because this way of life runs counter to much of the world's values and expectations.

There is no guarantee of continued growth; only the promise that if we repeat each day, in each relationship, in every new assignment the simple step of surrender to that which is greater and beyond us, that we will be lead in the way of life and continue to grow.

There are times of quietude and arid stretches in this journey. Occasions when we question what seemed to us from some spiritual pinnacle unquestionable. And so we need the example and encouragement of one another. "Be still and know that I am God," said the Psalmist. "I am not in the whirlwind or crashing thunder or swirling sea but the still small voice in your heart. Listen to that voice. Heed what it says. Follow where it leads and you will find me." Henri Nouwen said if we approach our lives with open hands willing to receive what God places in them, when we come to the end of our journey we will have the accumulated trust of a lifetime to face our death also with open hands and receive the gift of new awakening into a new life. "Then I will know even as I have been fully known," said St. Paul. "And there will be no more night," said St. John, "for the Lord God will be their light and they will reign forever and ever."