

*“Moonbeam Clock”*

*Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11*

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*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

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We recently received the L.L. Bean catalogue and the main item on the rear cover was a reproduction of a “Moonbeam Clock.” The text reads, “First introduced in 1952, this unique ‘moonbeam’ clock wakes you with a gently illuminating light.”

ARE THEY KIDDING? The add goes on to say “if you fall back asleep, a bell sounds.” Now, maybe that works for some folks. I live in a household of people who generally sleep through alarms, radios and most natural disasters. In fact, here’s my alarm: (play alarm). That’s on a routine day. What about if things aren’t going well? How shall we hear and see God’s direction? Will a moonbeam clock work?

As I mentioned last week, through the month of January we hear the servant songs of Isaiah, and this is one. The servant admits to the disillusionment of failed service. She is ministering to the Jewish community in exile after the fall of the first temple in 587 B.C. He is worn out! Verse 4: “*I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.*” It’s not that she hasn’t tried, it’s that his best efforts have dead-ended. Got burnout?

Someone will notice I used both male and female pronouns. That’s because scholars disagree on who this servant is. A court prophet named Isaiah? A literary composite of the Hebrew prophets? The whole people of God? Personal and corporate definitions of the servant are relevant to us.

As God’s 21<sup>st</sup> century servants we sometimes feel like Isaiah’s author. We’ve worked the community supper here and at Golden Hill. We’ve made soup, provided nursery care, attended committee meetings, taught Sunday School, worked for the Fair on the Green, led building projects, worked at the Oyster Festival,

served in worship, paid our tithes and offerings. You name it at Mary Taylor Church and we've done it. Some have sensed a call to lay speaking or seminary.

Yet sometimes there isn't much to show for it. Families get in trouble and even break-up. Violence breaks out. Church vitality waxes and wanes. We reach out to welcome inactive folks; or the last, the least and the lost: and the silence is deafening.

Yet God is not stopped. In fact, God calls us to a great mission and a great destiny! The "us" is all the people who follow God, as suggested in verse 3: "*You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.*" All of us are called, with individuals receiving specific calls as part of a larger community. As I said in an e-mail earlier this week when one of a team of leaders was a bit hard on themselves, "there is no 'I' in 'team.'" And we have a great team! The call of God destines us for great mission together.

God equips us for the mission. The old saying "God doesn't call the equipped; God equips the called" puts the sequence in the right order. The text uses the metaphor of a sharp sword and an arrow—weapons of war—to denote the servant is equipped to act. The servant is hidden in the shadow of God's hand and God's quiver, protected by God's loving and nudging presence.

So, when we struggle to advance, what then? This is where the Lord speaks afresh. I think it is almost with a wink and a laugh. The servant is kind of whining, you know?

*"I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity: yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God."*

But God says:

*"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up Mary Taylor Memorial Church, to restore inactive people and to care for the needy we know; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth!"*

Okay, so God didn't say those words exactly! But isn't that it, really? God's vision is big! God's vision is bold! God's vision is brassy! When we moan about unfulfilled mission or things undone, God calls us to something bigger!

Whether this word from the Lord is a moonbeam clock or not is for you to decide. I think it is. I think it is God's "gently illuminating light." If we do not wake up and embrace our larger mission—if we fall back asleep—a bell will sound!

With that in mind I offer this current church snapshot. I think there is a general sense that we are moving in the right direction. Vital signs—money, attendance, members—are up. There is generally a spirit of harmony and cooperation. People feel good about the care they experience, one to another. In fact, last week's new member class gave me the privilege of listening to them talk about their experience of welcome here. And it is second to none!

The danger is that we get comfortable. That we like things as they are. So we stop listening to God, stop reaching out, stop sharing. How do we get our vision to align with this big, bold, brassy vision of God in Isaiah? One is to participate in our Long-Range Planning process, in which about 70 of us have participated by completing a survey. If you'd still like to, see the website link in today's bulletin. Or let me know you want a hard copy. One of my projects for the next ten days is to try to get our members under 40 years of age to complete this survey, since they are the next generation of our community.

The other is to look at areas that weaken our mission. I do not believe that focusing only on weaknesses is the best way to improve. People and churches improve by focusing on strengths and making accommodations for their weaknesses. I'm not a strong finance guy. I have surrounded myself in every church I've served with good financial people because I can't add a column of numbers and get the same answer twice! So I focus on areas where I'm strong and get good people where I'm not.

So while I think the same is true for our church—that we should focus on strengths—there are two areas that need attention sooner than later. The first is the enrollment in our Sunday School. This is not about the quality of our teaching, in which Sylvia Elliott and her staff have done well and I am confident Cathy Cono will also. It is rather about reaching out to our families that have children who are not enrolled. Christian spiritual formation happens mostly within the home, but Sunday School is an integral part of that process. So I will meet with Cathy, and Holly Firmender, our Assistant Superintendent, to plan ways we can help teachers and families by directly reaching families and children.

A new position I will seek is a Cradle Roll Coordinator. They will be given our baptismal records and track children and families after baptism. We had ten baptisms in my first year here and several more are on the way. We must not let these families drift in their connection with our community.

The second area is evangelism. Apart from Christmas, my guess is that most of us have not invited an inactive or unchurched person to church in the last 30 days. So, conferring with Michelle Craig, our new chair of Membership and Evangelism, we have set Sunday, March 30<sup>th</sup> as “Friends and Family Day” at our church. We’ll be planning that in the weeks ahead so, if you have ideas, I’m all ears. The purpose will be for all of us, pulling together, to **SHARE AN INVITATION** with those we know who do not have, or are not active in, a church home. Notice what I said: share an invitation. I did not say you are responsible for getting them here. That is up to them, and God. But all of us are responsible for being that “gentle illuminating light,” a moonbeam clock, that reflects the love of Jesus and the hope and new birth that comes with vital faith.

The clock is a metaphor for our wake-up call. God speaks and acts. The vision is big, bold and brassy. Let ours be, too! Amen.