

Mission Moment

Wandering

Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden. Genesis 4: 16

A colleague tells the story of a single man who joined her church and dove in with the zeal of a convert. “I used to have no idea what to do with myself on the weekend,” he said. “Each Friday I would face the terrible prospect of an endless, empty Saturday and Sunday. Now my weekends are so rich, and I can't wait for Sunday morning.”

The land of Nod is not actually a place. The word Nod means “wandering;” for the author of Genesis, a life of wandering, without home or destination, is a terrible enough prospect that it is a fitting punishment for fratricide. In the UCC Statement of Faith (www.ucc.org/beliefs), God seeks “...to save all people from aimlessness and sin.” Here, aimlessness isn't a punishment for sin, but it is a sorry enough condition that it has its own place in the list of things from which we need saving.

Not all who wander are being punished. But there are a whole lot of people out there living their lives in Nod, wandering from mall to mall, or from Web site to Web site, or from spiritual fad to spiritual fad with no aim or goal in sight. It is a terrible prospect.

With our God, no one ever need face it again.

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January 2010

God is still speaking,



Mission Moment

Tears of Frustration and Joy

The lady in the registration area was crying. It had just become too much—her concern about her child’s special needs, her recent job loss. She apologized, “I’m usually stronger than this. I just don’t know where to turn.” Tears are common at United Church Outreach Ministry (UCOM), but tears of frustration and pain often turn to tears of relief and sometimes joy when this ministry is able to connect people with the resources they need. Serving more than 50,000 people, UCOM is a ministry of the Grand West Association of the Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ.

Many of the 800 volunteers who spend their free time helping in the pantry, clothing room, office, warehouse, and food repacking room are low-income, sometimes unemployed or underemployed people or students, who give freely of themselves. For these neighbors, UCOM is able to offer periodic incentives. They offer donated furniture, appliances, computers, and other useful items as they become available. The first on the list to receive these rewards are those who have contributed 10 or more hours of volunteer time or those who have graduated from the Spanish-language financial skills classes.

Part of the joy of receiving these household items is knowing that they are earned by the work they do on behalf of their neighbors. “Not many people want a handout,” says one client. “Most of us want to do what we can to earn the things our families need. This is one way we can do that.”

January 2010

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Mission Moment

Feeding the Right Wolf

Over the last several years, the enmity that existed between Turks and Arabs has gradually calmed. Some see the increase in tourism to Turkey as part of the reason for this change, along with Turkish television shows being aired in Syria and Lebanon. Familiarity, in this case, seems to be breeding respect.

Unfortunately, the Turkish Jewish minority is not experiencing this same upswing, as anti-Semitism was on the rise in early 2009. Despite this community having been an instrumental part of Turkish society and culture for generations, there is growing concern about the increased hostility and religious rhetoric encouraging Turkish solidarity with fellow Muslims in Palestine.

Alison Stendahl, who serves with the Near East Mission in Istanbul, saw a ray of hope for peace and reconciliation with the inauguration of President Barack Obama. But her optimism is still tempered with concern. She continues to pray for guidance and leadership for all of the world's leaders; for the Muslims, Christians and Jews of the Middle East and for all those who suffer; for those who build bridges between peoples instead of blowing them up.

Stendahl's hope for the future can be summed up with a story told by Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins at the prayer service the day after President Obama's inauguration: "One evening a grandfather was teaching his young grandson about the internal battle that each person faces. 'There are two wolves struggling inside each of us,' the old man said. 'One wolf is vengefulness, anger, resentment, self-pity, fear. The other wolf is compassion, faithfulness, hope, truth, love.' The grandson sat, thinking, then asked, 'Which wolf wins, Grandfather?' His grandfather replied, 'The one you feed.'"

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Epiphany

Epiphany (from Greek, meaning to show or to manifest) is a feast day of the church's year. Epiphany falls on the last of the twelve days of Christmas. The Gospels for this season all have to do with the manifestation of the identity of Jesus - starting with the wedding at Cana and ending with Transfiguration.

Celebrating God coming to earth in human form, Epiphany reminds us that Jesus comes to the world for all people. Wrapped up in the idea of *ta theophania* (The Theophany), as Gregory of Nazianzus noted, is the understanding that "God is with us." We are not alone.

Epiphany this year comes at a time of anxiety and hope. Many of us are struggling and are afraid. It's not easy to hope when times are bad. But, hope has come and has been made known to us. During this part of the liturgical cycle of the church we not only reflect upon Christ's Baptism but also upon what we are called to do, because of our baptism, in the church and in the world.

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Mission Moment

An Invocation for Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

O God, all people are your Beloved,
across races, nationalities, religions, sexual orientations
and all the ways we are distinctive from one another.
We are all manifestations of your image.
*We are bound together in an inescapable network of mutuality and
tied to a single garment of destiny.*

You call us into your unending work of justice, peace and love.

Let us know your presence among us now:

Let us delight in our diversity
that offers glimpses of the mosaic of your beauty.
Strengthen us with your steadfast love and
transform our despairing fatigue into hope-filled
action.

Under the shadow of your wings in this hour
may we find rest and strength, renewal and hope.
We ask this, inspired by the example
of your disciple, Martin Luther King, Jr.,
and in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

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