WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC February 10, 2019

AMAZING SURPRISES

The Rev. Ervin Graves

GOD OF UNWAVERING LOVE, YOU ASK US TO LISTEN, AND WE TRY. TODAY YOU ASK US TO LOOK, BUT WE SEEK ONLY TO POSSESS, AND EVEN THEN WE UNDERESTIMATE WHAT WE SEE. TEACH US LORD TO MOVE BEYOND LOOKING ONLY WITH OUR EYES, LISTENING WITH ONLY OUR EARS, AND LEARNING WITH ONLY OUR MINDS. SHOULD WE BE SO INCLINED WE MIGHT BE OPEN TO THE WONDER AND AWE THAT AWAITS US IN THE SMALLEST BUD, THE EARLIEST SUNRISE, OR THE UNEXPECTED INVITATION FROM A NEIGHBOR. LET US ALWYS BE EXPECTED TO FIND YOUR LOVE BEARING FRUIT AMONG US IN NEW WAYS, O LORD OUR ROCK AND OUR REDEEMER. AMEN

 HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE FAITH? WHEN I ASKS, DO YOU HAVE FAITH, WHAT THOUGHTS CONJURE UP IN YOUR MIND. ONE WAY TO CHARACTERIZE WHAT FAITH IS WOULD BE TO SAY THAT :

 IT IS THE REFUSAL TO UNDERESTIMATE GOD. FAITH IS THE REFUSAL TO UNDERESTIMATE GOD. AND IN TODAYS WORLD YOU REALLY NEED FAITH – AN ABUNDANCE OF FAITH.

 IT IS UNDERSTANDABLE THAT WE LEAN INTO OUR OWN SURVIVAL INSTINCTS AND WORK FROM OUR OWN STRENGTHS MOST OF THE TIME. WE ALWAYS TRY TO DO THINGS ON OUR OWN. BUT THE PASSAGES READ THIS MORNING REMINDS US THAT GOD IS ALWAYS PRESENT, BREAKING IN TO SHELTER US, (SOMETIMES FROM OURSELVES) TO FEED US, AND SHOW US HIS GLORYAND EXHIBIT HIS POWER.

 THROUGH THE OLD TESTAMENTTHRU INTO THE NEW WE FIND GOD BREAKING INTO OUR LIVES IN ONE FORM OR ANOTHER.

 WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU WERE SURPRISED – AMAZED? WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO AMAZE YOU? YOU PROBABLY HAVE TO THINK ABOUT THAT A BIT.

WE GET UP IN THE MORNING SEEING AND HEARING OF THIS LIFE WITH THE TAWDRY AND MUNDANE ASPECTS OF IT –THE PAIN OF VITROLIC DISCOURSE, THE AGONY OF WAR TORN BODIES, VILLAGES DECIMATED, THE RAVAGES OF DISEASES UNTREATED AND CAPABLE OF BRING DEFEATED BUT BECAUSE OF THE ROUTINE - THE NEVER CHANGING ROUTINE WE FIND OURSELVES BECOMING IMMUNE TO THE SUFFERING AND THE HURT.

 AND BROTHERS SND SISTERS WE KNOW THERE IS ANOTHER WAY.

O YES, WITH GOD AT THE HELM, WITH GOD AS OUR COACH, WITH GOD AS OUR MENTOR, WITH JESUS AS OUR SAVIOR WE KNOW THERE IS HOPE . H.O.P.E THE ACRONYM **H O P E** MEANS **HOLD ON PAIN ENDS**

NOTHING LASTS FOREVER! BY HOLDING ON WE APPROACH LIFE WITH THE WILLINGNESS TO BE SURPRISED BY WHAT GOD CAN ACCOMPLISH. GOD IS NOT JUST GOD, GODIS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE THAT WE HAVE TO INCORPORATE IN OUR EVERYDAY THINKING – OUR EVERYDAY LIVING.

 BUT HERE IS WHAT HAPPENS –IN CRITICAL MOMENTS WE NUDGE GOD ASIDE BECAUSE WE OFTEN THINK WE KNOW THE RESULTS OF OUR EFFORTS BECAUSE WE’VE ALWAYS DONE IT THIS WAY BEFORE.

 WHEN WE BELIEVE WE CAN PREDICT THE OUTCOME, WE START TO UNDERSESTIMATE OURSELVES, JUDGE OTHERS, AND WITHDRAW OUR FAITH FROM GOD.

SOMETIME, JUST SOMETIMES, GOD ASKS US TO BE OPEN TO THE POSSIBILITIES THAT SOMETHINGS COULD BE DIFFERENT, TO TAKE ANOTHER LOOK, AND TO TRY AGAIN. LIKE ALL OF A SUDDEN BEING ABLE TO CATCH A BOAT FULL OF FISH, OR A CALLING TO HELP OUT A NEW CHURCH, OR A CALLING TO HELP A GROUP TO FIND A HOME FOR ITS WORK WITH A SPECIFIC POPULATION WITH NEEDS. JESUS SAYS TAKE ANOTHER LOOK.

IN OUR TEXT THIS MORNING, WE HEARD ABOUT SOME FELLOWS WHO HAD BEEN ON A FISHING TRIP THAT THEY WOULD LIKE TO HAVE FORGOTTEN. – BECAUSE THE FISH JUST WEREN’T BITING. THEY DIDN’T TALK ABOUT THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY BECAUSE UNFORTUNATELY IT SEEMED THEY HAD ALL GOTTEN AWAY. THEIR NETS WERE EMPTY. THEY HAD ALL GOTTEN AWAY.

THEN JESUS SHOWS UP AND HE TOOK THEM ON A FISHING TRIP TO REMEMBER.

 THIS MORNING THERE ARE A FEW SPECIAL ELEMENTS IN THIS PASSAGE FROM LUKE THAT SPEAK TO THE CHURCH.

 GOD ALWAYS HAS A WORD TO SAY ABOUT CHURCH AND TO OUR HEARTS NOT JUST TODAY BUT EVERYDAY.

 JUST AS HE DID FOR THOSE FISHERMEN, HE WANTS TO TAKE US ON A FISHING TRIP.AND I DON’T MEAN ONE OF THOSE KINDS WHERE YOU DROWN A BUNCH OF WORMS; DONATE BLOOD TO THE MOSQUITOS AND COME HOME EMPTY HANDED. JESUS WANTS TO TAKE YOU ON A FISHING TRIP TO REMEMBER. A FISHING TRIP TO CATCH NEEDY SOULS, HURT BODIES, AND SUFFERING SAINTS.

FIRST, LET’S CONSIDER THE VESSEL PETER AND THE OTHERS USED. UP UNTIL JESUS’ ARRIVAL THE BOAT HAD BEEN A PLACE OF TOIL, LABOR AND FRUSTRATION. IT WAS A VESSEL EMPLOYED TO EEK OUT A MEAGER LIVING. BUT WHEN OUR JESUS CLIMBED ABOARD, THE BOAT BECAME A PLACE OF PERSONAL CLOSENESS ,A PLACE OF INTIMACY AND FELLOWSHIP.

IT WAS NOW A VERY UNIQUE AND SPECIAL PLACE WHERE ALL WHO WERE ON BOARD WERE ABLE TO BE CLOSE TO THE MASTER

THAT’S EXACTLY WHAT THE CHURCH IS, OR AT LEAST, IT IS WHAT THE CHURCH OUGHT TO BE A VERY SPECIAL PLACE..

THIS BUILDING IS JUST A BRICK AND MORTAR STRUCTURE SITUATED ON PONDFIELD ROAD UNTIL THE PEOPLE OF GOD ENTER. AND WHEN THIS BUILDING IS OCCUPIED BY THOSE WHO KNOW THE LORD, THIS STRUCTURE BECOMES A PLACE OF CLOSENESS, A PLACE OF INTIMACY AND A PLACE OF FELLOWSHIP WITH THE LORD JESUS.

 LET’S FACE IT – IT’S THE BODIES, THE PEOPLE THAT CREATE THE VIBRANCY. WHEN THE SAINTS COME MARCHING IN, WHEN THE CHOIR RAISES IT VOICES, WHEN THE ORGAN BELLOWS, THAT’S WHEN IT BECOMES A REALLY, REALLY PRECIOUS PLACE. AND WHAT MAKESTHIS PLACE SO SPECIAL IS WHEN THE CHILDREN OF GOD GATHER IN THE PEWS.

 IT IS SPECIAL BECAUSE OF WHO SHOWS UP HERE – THE REDEEMER IS HERE! THE REDEEMED ARE HERE.

 IT IS SPECIAL BECAUSE OF WHAT WE DO HERE: WE PRAISE THE SOVREIGN GOD, WE PREACH THE SON OF GOD,, AND THE SAINTS OF GOD ARE PERFECTED HERE – THEY ARE BAPTIZED, WELCOMED, AND ABLE SHARE IN THE SACRAMENTS.

IT IS SPECIAL BECAUSE OF WHAT WE FIND HERE – THERE IS FOOD FOR OUR SOULS; FREEDOM FROM OUR SETBACKS; AND FELLOWSHIP WITH THE SAINTS.

FOR SOME OF US THE CHURCH MAY HAVE BEEN A REFUGE, FOR OTHERS AN OASIS IN THE DESERT OF THIS WORLD. NO MATTER, FOR ALL IT IS A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS. IT IS A PLACE OF REFUGE AND REVIVAL FOR WEARY HEARTS IT IS A PLACE OF HOPE AND HELP – **A PLACE OF INSTRUCTION FOR THE SOUL.**

 **THERE WAS NO QUESTION THAT THE VESSEL WAS A PLACE OF IRRITATION.** PETER WAS OBVIOUSLY IRRITATED BECAUSE HE AND THE OTHER FISHMEN HAD FISHED ALL NITE AND ACCOMPLISHED ZILCH – NOTHING. THESE MEN WERE TIRED; THEY WERE FRUSTRATED AND THEY WERE FOR ALL INTENT AND PURPOSES – DEFEATED. THEY HAD DONE EVERYTHING WITHIN THEIR POWER TO BE SUCCESSFUL AND THEY FAILED. VERSE 2 TELLS US THAT THE FISHERMEN WEREN’T EVEN IN THEIR BOATS, BUT WERE ON SHORE WASHING THEIR NETS. THEY WERE ENGAGED IN GOOD WORK AND IN BUSY WORK; BUT THEY WEREN’T ACCOMPLISHING THE MOST MEANINGFUL WORK – CATCHING FISH. ON THAT DAY THAT BOAT, THAT VESSEL HAD BECOME A PLACE AND SOURCE OF IRRITATION.

 I WONDER SOMETIMES WHETHER THAT MIGHT BE LIKE THE CHURCH TO YOU. DO YOU EVER JUST GET TIRED?

I MEAN, WE COME HERE WEEK AFTER WEEK; WE SING, WE PRAY, WE PREACH, WE DO COMMUNION, WE HAVE HAVE COFFEE AND CAKE, CELEBRATE BIRTHDAYS AND HAVE TEAM MEETINGS AND WE GO HOME.

 WE COME AGAIN AT THE APPOINTED HOUR AND DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN. WE ARE SURELY BUSY AND WE ARE DOING A GOOD THING; BUT IT SEEMS LIKE SOMETHING IS MISSING. WE STRUGGLE FOR ANSWERS – REMEDIES FILLING OUR NETS, BUT WE ARE JUST NOT CATCHING ANY FISH.

PEOPLE COME, SOME STAY FOR AWILE OTHERS COME AND GO.

 NOW, PETER AND THOSE OTHER MEN KNEW HOW TO FISH. THEY WERE PRPOFESSIONALS BUT THEY STILL STRUCK OUT THAT NIGHT.

 WE KNOW HOW TO FISH AROUND HERE AT WEST CENETER, DON’T WE?

 WE HAVE THE RIGHT BAIT – MUSIC, WORSHIP, A BEAUTIFUL SANCTURARY, FRIENDLY FOLK

WE HAVE THE RIGHT TACKLE; AND WE BELIEVE WE KNOW WHERE THE FISH ARE, BUT WE JUST CAN’T SEEM TO GET THEM IN OUR BOAT. IF WE AREN’T IRRITATED, WE ARE AT LEAST FRUSTRATED.

WE CONSIDERED THE VESSEL. THE VESSEL IS FINE. OUR BOAT IS SEAWORTHY, BUT PERHAPS ARE HEARTS AND MINDS ARE LESS TRUSTWORTHY EVEN AS JESUS ORDERS US TO TAKE IT OUT TO DEEPER WATER. THERE IS NOTHING WRONG WITH THE VESSEL. YES! THE WATERS MAY BE ROUGH; SOME OF THE CREW MAY BE A LITTLE DISCONCERTED.

 SOME ARE PROBABLY AND POSSIBLY SEA SICK; AND OTHERS ARE PLAINLY FRUSTRATED. OLD FOLKS MIGHT SAY, THE OLD SHIP OF ZION IS RUNNING TRUE THIS MORNING. I SAY TO YOU, REGARDLESS OF ANY FAULT YOU MAY WISH TO FIND WITH THE CHURCH, IT IS THE **ONLY** BOAT AFLOAT.

**AND YOU DON’T FIX A LEAKY VESSEL FROM THE OUTSIDE**

**YOU KNOW WHAT I AM SAYING, YOU CAN ONLY FIX THE CURCH IF YOU ARE ON THE INSIDE.**

THE VESSEL NEEDED TO GO WHERE THE FISH WERE – NOW JESUS KNEW THAT THE FISH WERE NOT WHERE THE BOAT WAS. IF THE MEN EXPECTED TO CATCH ANY FISH, THEY WOULD HAVE TO GO WHERE THE FISH WERE SWIMMING AND IT MEANT MOVING INTO DEEPER WATERS.

THE POINT OF THE SCRIPTURE IS THAT THE SAME HOLDS TRUE WHEN WE SPEAK OF REACHING FOLKS WHO ARE IN SEARCH OF A GOSPEL MESSAGE AND MESSENGER. I AM SURE THOSE WHO WERE IN THE METRO ASSOCIATION ‘CASTING YOUR NETS’ EFFORT YEARS AGO WOULD AGREE VERY OFTEN WE ARE CAST4ING OUR NETS TOO CLOSE TO THE SHORE. THE FISH ARE OUT THERE IN THE DEEP WATERS OF THE WORLD AND IF WE ARE GOING TO CAST A NET OVER THEM WE’RE GOING TO HAVE TO GET OUT THERE WHERE THEY ARE.

YES, WE CAN PRAY AND ASK GOD TO SAVE SOULS; BUT UNTIL WE ‘JESUS’ HAND AND FEET’ GO TO WHERE THE SOULS ARE WE WILL BE PRAYING IN VAIN.

 THE TRUTH IS A NET WILL NEVER FILL UP WITH FISH UNTIL IT IS FIRST LET DOWN – THOSE MEN COULD HAVE WASHED THOSE NETS, MENDED THEIR NETS AND HAULED THOSE NETS ALL AROUND THAT LAKE, AND THEY WOULD HAVE NEVER CAUGHT A FISH UNTIL THOSE NETS WERE FIRST LET DOWN INTO THE WATER..

 THEY COULD HAVE BOUGHT THE FINEST NETS MONEY COULD BUY AND STILL THEY WOULDN’T HAVE CAUGHT ANY FISH UNTIL THE NETS WERE LET DOWN.

 THEY COULD HAVE STUDIED ALL THE NEWEST WAYS FOR CASTING AND DRAWING NETS; BUT UNTILTHEY LET THE NETS DOWN INTO THE DEEP WATER, THEY WOULD CATCH NO FISH.

 THEY COULD HAVE TALKED ABOUT FISHING WITH OTHER FISHERMAN AND DISCUSSED VARIOUS WAYS OF CASTING THE NETS, THE RESULTS WOULD HAVE BEEN THE SAME.

THE PICTURE HERE IS VERY CLEAR. SOME FOLKS THINK THAT AS LONG YOU HAVE THE RIGHT BIBLE, RIGHT KIND OF PREACHING, THE RIGHT KIND OF MUSIC, THE RIGHT KIND OF STANDARDS, THE RIGHT KIND OF CLOTHES, AND SAY THE RIGHT THINGS. THEN FISH ARE GURANTEED. WE KNOW THAT IS NOT THE CASE.

 THERE WAS CONCERNON THAT BOAT, ESPECIALLY FROM PETER WHO REMINDS OUR SAVIOR THEY HAVE ALREADY FISHED ALL NIGHT AND CAUGHT NOTHING. ALL THEY WANTED TO DO WAS GO HOME AND CALL IT A NITE. WE’VE CAUGHT NOTHING – LET IT GO JESUS, LET IT GO.

WHAT HE IS SAYING “LORD, WE’VE ALREADY TRIED AND IT DIDN’T WORK! WE ARE THE PROFESSIONALS! WE KNOW WHAT WE ARE DOING AND NO OFFENCE, BUT AREN’T YOU A CARPENTER? LEAVE THE FISHING TO US! WE TRIED IT ALREADY AND IT DIDN’T WORK. THERE’S NO USE IN OUR GOING OUT THERE AGAIN,

 IT IS SAD. BUT PETER SOUNDED LIKE THE TYPICAL UCCC-ER. WE HAVE A TENDENCY TO LOOK AT THE PROGRAMS WE HAVE TRIED IN THE PAST AND SEE VERY LITTLE, IF ANY SUCCESS AND WE SAY. ‘THERE’S NO USE TRYING THAT AGAIN! WE KNOW HOW TO DO IT, AND WE TRIED IT BUT I DIDN’T WORK. MAYBE WE ARE LIKE THE DISCIPLES. MAYBE WE HAVE ALWAYS TRIED WITH OUR OWN POWER. MAYBE WE JUST DIDN’T GO WHEN HE COMMANDED OR TO WHERE HE COMMANDED. GIVE THAT SOME THOUGHT

MAYBE HE WASN’T EVEN INCLUDED IN THE THINGS YOU DID THEN. MAYBE HE WASN’T ON THE DISTRIBUTION LIST OR WASN’T COPIED. IT’S ALL IMPORTANT TO OFTEN REMIND OURSELVES, ACCORDING TO JOHN 15-5 **WITHOUT HIM, ALL OUR EFFORTS ARE DOOMED TO FAIL**.

BUT PETER DID GO OUT THERE AGAIN. IN SPITE OF BEING TIRED, WEARY – FEELING DEFEATED, FRUSTRATED AND FILLED WITH DOUBT. PETER OBEYED THE COMMAND OF JESUS. BECAUSE HE DID, HE GOT IN ON SOME MIRACLES THAT HE WOULD HAVE OTHERWISE MISSED. **INCIDENTALLY, GOD CAN WORK IN SPITE OF OUR DOUBTS, IF WE WILL OBEY HIM – LISTEN TO HIS VOICE – TRUST HIM.**

SO MUCH OF WHAT WE ARE TAUGHT IN LIFE IS TO DEFINE THINGS AND OURSELVES – TO BREAK THINGS DOWN TO THE COMMON DENOMINATOR.

WHEN WE MEET SOMEONE NEW, WE INTRODUCE OURSELVES, AND WE MAKE OUR VERY BEST IMPRESSION.

WHEN WE TRY SOMETHING STRANGE, WE DRAW ON WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW, THE STRENGTHS AND CAPACITIES WE PRACTICED TO GET US THROUGH IMMEDIATELY COME INTO PLAY. REASON AND INQUISITIVENESS ARE SHOVED ASIDE.

 DOUBTING OURSELVES, DOUBTING OTHERS, MAKE US WANT TO DEFINE AND PROTECT WHAT WE DO KNOW, WHAT WE HAVE RELIED ON THRU OUR LIFE EXPERIENCES EVEN THOUGH THEY MAY NOT BE THE MOST EFFECTIVE. A COUPLE SUNDAYS AGO WE TALKED ABOUT GIFTS – EACH OF US HAS SOME GIFT FROM GOD THAT IS WAITING TO BE TAPPED.

 FAITH IN GOD INVITES US TO HAVE FAITH NOT ONLY IN OURSELVES, BUT FAITH IN OTHERS, AND TO SHOW THIS THROUGH A WILLINGNESS TO BE SURPRISED BY THE MANY IMAGES OF GOD THAT APPEAR IN PEOPLE AND CREATURES ALL AROUND US. THAT IS WHAT WORSHIP IS ABOUT, THAT IS WHAT LEARNING IS ABOUT, THAT IS WHAT SERVING IS ABOUT.

ONE OF THESE DAYS FOR SURE, OUR LORD JESUS IS GOING TO SAY TO WESTCENTER CHURCH LAUNCH OUT INTO THE DEEP AND LET DOWN YOUR NETS FOR FISH TOO NUMEROUS TO COUNT.

 WHEN HE DOES, I AM SURE SOME WILL WANT TO ARGUE ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED WHEN WE TRIED THAT BACK THEN. BUT A FEW FORWARD THINKERS ARE GOING TO SAY,” WE’VE TRIED THAT BEFORE AND IT DIDN’T WORK TOO WELL. BUT NEVERTHELESS, AT THY WORD AND OUR FAITH WE WILL LET DOWN THE NET.” SO THAT EVERYONE CAN BE WITNESS TO OUR LORD DOING A GREAT WORK!

SO MY BELOVED, WE MIGHT ASK OURSELVES, WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN OUR LIVES? THE INVITATION TO PUT OUT INTO THE DEEP FOR A CATCH PROVIDES A SHARP CONTRAST TO OUR PENCHANTS FOR THE PREDICTABLE AND ROUTINE. THIS IS AN IVITATION TO VENTURE INTO NEW GROUND AND MAYBE NEW DEPTHS, BUT IT ALSO POINTS TO NEW CHALLENGES IN MISSION AND MINISTRY FOR THE CHURCH .

INTO, PERHAPS, UNCHARTED TERRITORY IS WHERE WE MUST GO. BUT NOT WITHOUT FAITH, NOT WITHOUT THE LIFE ALTERING POWER OF GOD’S WORD – SPOKEN, HEARD, AND HEEDED. GLORY BE TO THE FATHER AND TO THE SON. AMEN