

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

1-Narrative – Summer – Sabbath – Week 3
1 Chronicles 16:23-31; John 4:21-24

25 August 2019

“The Vertical Dimension of Sabbath”

Why are you here to worship?

Take a few seconds to think about it and then turn to your neighbor and tell them why you're here....

So why are we here? ...

As I thought about that question this week,

I decided that the primary reason I'm here is because that's the reason I was created.

James Weldon Johnson, in his poem *The Creation*, explains it.

I won't read the whole poem, but hopefully a few phrases will get the idea across:

“And God stepped out on space, And he looked around and said: I'm lonely — I'll make me a world....”

Then God smiled, And the light broke,

And ...God rolled the light around in his hands Until he made the sun And...moon and stars....

And God walked and...His footsteps...bulged the mountains up....

God spat out the seven seas...And...The cooling waters came down....

Then God ... said: Bring forth! ... [and there were] Fishes and fowls And beasts and birds....

Then ... God looked around On all that he had made....And God said: I'm lonely still.

Then ...God thought and thought, Till he thought: I'll make me a man!

Up from the bed of the river God scooped the clay...Till he shaped it in his own image;

Then into it he blew the breath of life....”

God created, in order to have a relationship with creation.

God created human beings in order to have a relationship with them.

God created me to have a relationship with me.

God created you to have a relationship with you.

God wants a relationship with you.

Turn to the person beside you and say, “God wants a relationship with you!”

Now turn to the person on the other side and say, “God wants a relationship with you!”

Of course God created human beings to be smart enough to create their lives

quite apart from any kind of acknowledged relationship to God.

As Christians we understand that God wants a relationship with us, but relationships can take many forms.

Have you ever had someone that you really cared about?

Someone you encouraged and supported and provided for?

Someone you devoted time and energy to, went out of your way for, bent over backwards for?

And then when you need a listening ear or you wanted something from them or needed their help,
they were too busy?

Sometimes I'm afraid that's how many of us in the Mainline Protestant tradition treat God.

After all, we're smart, we're successful, we are for the most part self-sufficient,

so it doesn't seem as if we really need God's help on a daily basis.

Sure, there are times when something goes awry or a piece of our life skitters beyond our control
or we need simply need a bit of help, and then we can turn to God.

But God wants more than that.
God wants a much deeper relationship than that.

You and I are made in the image of God
and so we are designed to create our lives and to help create the world around us.
And because God wants to be in relationship with us, God wants to co-create our lives with us.

There are basically two ways of doing that:

we can pretty much create our lives on our own and just ask God for help when we need it –
calling God in as a consultant;
or, we can work with God, side by side, from beginning to end –
treating God as our partner, our senior partner.

I think that by-and-large Roman Catholics and Mainline Protestants have seen God as a consultant
while Evangelicals and Pentecostals have understood God's role to be more of a partner.

Now the advantage of calling God in as a consultant

is that it's our vision and our plan and we get to do things the way we want
with only help from God – not interference.

But the disadvantage is that then we are limited by what we can see & what we know & what we can imagine.
We are limited by the people we know and the resources of which we're aware, and the biases in our thinking.

Having been shaped and formed by the Mainline Protestant tradition

I have tended to use God as more of a consultant over the course of my life,
but in the past year I've come to understand how much that has limited and constrained my life & ministry.

I've said this before but not all of you have heard it so I think it bears repeating.

Five years ago I had a vision for Salem.

I thought we should sell the property and build a new green building in downtown Bridgeport,
working in partnership with the Council of Churches, United Congregational Church,
and the New Paradigm Theatre.

At the time we had the people and the money to make it happen,

but no one was interested in moving – and certainly not downtown Bridgeport!

And over the years resources have dwindled.

Last year it became evident that there was no way my vision was going to become reality,
so at that point I said, "God, obviously this isn't working. I need your help. I need more of your help".

And that's when things changed.

That's when I understood God wants more than a relationship: God wants a partnership.

And that's why I am here to worship.

God not only wants a relationship with us, God wants to be in partnership with us.

God not only wants a relationship with me, God wants to be in partnership with me.

God not only wants a relationship with you, God wants to be in partnership with you.

Tell the person next to you, "God wants a partnership with you!"

Now tell the person on the other side, "God wants a partnership with you!"

When I was working on my own vision,

there were particular people and organizations and resources that I saw as potentially helpful
and others that I dismissed as powerless and insignificant.

There were two in particular that I failed to notice that God has since brought to my attention. One was Jeanette Harris and her little Lutheran mission, Genesis.

I was happy to attend her events, encourage others to support them, & mentor her per Synod request, but how on earth could she help me or Genesis help Salem?

After all, we were the well-established, larger, wealthier congregation with a full time pastor and other staff, and they were just a tiny mission, with a part-time licensed lay minister.

I also dismissed Pastor Simmonds and his congregation, New Direction Ministries.

He was a black Jamaican Pentecostal pastor with a small congregation of poor immigrants.

How could they have anything to offer Salem other than a bit of rental income?

If anyone had ever suggested that I might look forward to going to a 2-hour worship service with people praying in tongues and clapping and jumping and dancing to very loud music and an hour long sermon by someone who never even went to seminary,

I would have said they were out of their mind!

And if anyone had ever predicted I'd be learning more in a Lutheran Pentecostal Bible study than I ever did in an all-Lutheran one, I would have pronounced them insane!

And yet, the 2 cabaret nights & film night that Salem, New Direction Ministries & Genesis Gospel Café sponsored were so exciting and successful and rewarding that we are leveraging these 3 events into a weekly Sunday evening event beginning this fall!

I could never have envisioned such a partnership because it was outside my range of experience and comfort. My vision is limited to what I can see and know and imagine.

My vision is limited to my past experience and present reality.

My vision is limited to the people and organizations and resources of which I'm aware.

But God's vision is not limited.

God doesn't just see my part of the picture or your part of the picture or our part of the picture;

God sees the entire picture.

And God can bring all the people and all the organizations and all the resources that are needed to meet the goal, fulfill the dream, make real the vision.

But in order for that to happen, God's gotta be there from the get-go!

The reason we come to worship is not only because God wants a relationship with us but because we need to be in partnership with God.

Let me end with a brief story.

Last month Tom Larson, Bill Winter, Jeanette Harris, and I went to tour the new church building of New Vision Ministries International.

Pentecostal Pastor Dexter Upshall, a 35-year-old African American Yale college alum, told us that the congregation's building had been perfectly adequate & they had not even thought of moving.

But one day he got a call from a commercial real estate agent

who said he had a building he thought that the church might be interested in.

Pastor Dexter replied that #1, they weren't looking, and #2, they had no money, but the agent said, "I think you should look at it".

So Pastor Dexter said, "OK – it doesn't hurt to look".

The building was in a residential area but was a commercial building

that housed some small businesses and light manufacturing companies on the first floor.

The entire second floor was empty and open, with few walls and only eight supporting columns.

As his leadership team looked at the huge and flexible space they got a vision of what could be.

They felt God was calling them to a new vision that would be housed in that building.

They could not imagine how it would ever work, but they trusted that God could.

Even though they had no money saved up, they bid on the building.
Even though it wasn't yet zoned for church use, they signed the sale documents.

The building will have a worship space for 700 people.
When I asked how many they currently had worshipping he said 200.
I thought he was mad,
But he said he expected the congregation to grow
and besides, the space wasn't just for worship, but could be used as a theater and for community events.
In addition to the worship space there's a children's space and classrooms.
There's a banquet hall seating 200, a commercial kitchen,
and along one interior brick wall that has 5 windows like in a train station,
there will be 5 restaurants with food court,
2 that have already been incubated by the congregation and 3 more that will be.
The restaurants currently just sell during coffee hour and church events
but eventually will be open to the public.
There's also going to be a fitness and wellness center, job training, and a social services referral agency.
All of the things that are currently being done by the Council of Churches – and more –
are being done by a single congregation
which 2 years ago did not have the people, the financial resources, or even the vision.
But in partnership with God, they are accomplishing far more than they ever even imagined.

God wants a relationship with each and every one of you.
God wants to work with you in co-creating your life.
God wants to be more than a consultant in that process;
God wants to be your full partner, working side-by-side with you, from beginning to end.
God wants to work in your life – and your life – and your life – and yours –
to help you not only reach *your* dreams, but the bigger, greater, more amazing dreams that God has for you.

God also has a vision in mind that is far greater than any one of the dreams God has for us as individuals.
God has called us together to do something that will have far more impact on the world
than anything any of us can do on our own.
If we try and come up with a vision on our own and only call God in when we need help reaching it,
it will, by definition, be limited to our past experience, our current reality, and our perceived future.
But if we bring God in from the get-go & commit to working in partnership, side by side, every step of the way,
what we will accomplish will be amazing, astounding, and utterly awesome.

We come to worship because God wants a relationship with us.
We come to worship because we want – and need – a partnership with God.

Tell the person beside you, "It's a partnership!"
Tell the person in the parking lot, "It's a partnership!"
Tell the lady in the apartment building, "It's a partnership!"

We are in partnership with the creator of all things, the God who is all-powerful and all-loving,
the God who wants nothing more than for us to find purpose and meaning and hope and joy/
and to share what we have with everyone we meet.
God has a plan for us that is bigger and greater and more exciting than anything any of us can yet imagine,
and God will give us everything we need to bring that plan to fruition.
As we worship today, may each of us and all of us commit ourselves – hearts, minds, souls and bodies –
to God, our Creator, our Redeemer, and the most amazing Partner we will ever have. **Amen**