

A sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church
The Rev. Lucy LaRocca
January 28, 2024
texts: Deut 18:15-20, Psalm 111

Towards the end of his life, Moses sought to console the people who were worried about what would happen to them after he was gone. He had led them for forty years through the wilderness, but he did not do so alone. After receiving the 10 commandments on Mt Sinai, Moses chose 70 faithful elders to share in the leadership of the community.

Within sight of the Promised Land, God told Moses that he would not be among those to enter it. New leaders would take the Hebrews across the Jordan River into the next chapter of the life of God's people. God reassured Moses -that leaders who listened for the voice of God would continue to be raised up from among the people.

This passage from the book of Exodus that we heard this morning reminds me of a portion of Eucharistic Prayer C which we have been praying for the past few weeks. Just before the Sanctus we say to God, "And therefore we praise you, joining with the heavenly chorus, with prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and with all those in every generation who have looked to you in hope, to proclaim with them your glory, in their unending hymn."

In every generation, God has raised up faithful leaders to lead worship, to study scripture, to interpret God's word for a new day, and to reach out in love to serve the wider world. From our most ancient spiritual ancestors to those we will vote for today at our Annual Meeting, God has raised up leaders to respond to the circumstances of their times.

The stories from the Zion community over the centuries bear witness to a strong faith in God. Started by 20 families in 1812, the Episcopal Society of North Branford has known difficult times. This building was put on hold for 28 years due to a lack of funds, and in the meantime, the people of Zion continued to gather in homes to worship God together.

In 1903, Rev. McDougal, who occasionally served Zion, had this to say about the tiny congregation of just 10 families; "on account of the loyalty of the members, there is hope for the future." For several decades, Zion was under constant threat of closure, especially during the 12 years of the Great Depression. And still, they gathered regularly to worship God, to teach their children the faith, and to support one another.

From 1940 to 1980, following an influx of business and a housing boom in North Branford, Zion also blossomed. The church building was moved to its current location and the parish hall built. Christian education was moved out of the galley and the famous Saturday night Chicken suppers began. For the first time, women were invited into leadership positions, both lay and ordained.

The times in which we now live contain their own unique challenges and blessings. And still, God continues to raise up leaders who listen for God's direction for Zion. We are in a period of

dramatic social change. According to the PEW research foundation in 2023, just 28% percent of Americans now go to church regularly; that is, more than once per month. In New England, the least religious part of the country, the average is less than that.

With the abolishment of blue laws and hard financial times, many are compelled to work on Sunday mornings. Churches of every denomination have experienced dwindling attendance. Zion has been no different. And yet, by God's grace we are still here. Not just surviving, but alive with God's spirit! Each week we gather for joyful worship. We continue to offer Christian formation experiences for all ages; provide quality early education in our nursery school; and are active in our efforts to alleviate the effects of hunger and poverty in this town and region.

I am so thankful for Zion's leadership. For those who have served for many years and those who are beginning to take on responsibilities in this community. Zion's vestry gathers each month to prayerfully review the month past and to plan for Zion's future. Each meeting begins and ends in prayer and devotes 20 minutes to Bible Study or theological conversation.

We review the goal we developed for Zion: to empower disciples of Jesus to use our gifts and resources to participate in God's mission of reconciliation and restoration. We use this goal as a guide to our decision making and planning.

This year, we have been blessed to take part in the Lily Foundation and Yale Divinity School's initiative, Re-Imagining Church. With the leadership of our facilitator, Jonathan Mareska, our working group is considering new initiatives for Zion.

We do not know what the future will bring, but we continue to listen for the prompting of the Holy Spirit with the assurance that God will equip us to serve Christ in each new circumstance. Today we will vote for a new slate of vestry members and celebrate those who are cycling off after three years of service. We will have the opportunity to ask questions and engage in conversation around Zion's mission and ministries.

What we do here in this sacred space today and every time we gather connects us to all those who came before us, those who loved God and sought to serve Christ in all people. Times have changed. But God does not change. God continues to call us deeper into relationship with God and with one another. God continues to love us and encourage us to grow into that love in order that we might serve God for the good of all creation. And so in the words of the psalmist, I pray, "Hallelujah! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation." Thanks be to God for this congregation and for God's steadfast love and care for us. Amen.