

**The Palisades Presbyterian Church
Palisades, New York**

Minister's Annual Report & Sunday Reflection
Ray Bagnuolo, Interim Minister
Sunday, January 28, 2007

1 st Readings	Jeremiah 1: 4 – 10; 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13
Anthem	<i>Simple Praise</i> by Craig Courtney
2 nd Reading	The Gospel of Luke 4: 21 - 30
Hymn #488	<i>The God of Abraham Praise</i>
Hymn#426	<i>Lord, Speak to Me That I May Speak</i>
Hymn #382	<i>Somebody's Knockin' at Your Door</i>

Reflection

"God doesn't call the qualified, God qualifies the called."
- Unknown

*Fanning the Fire
with a Few Words from Jack London*

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"So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."
(Isaiah 55:11)

Good Morning!

And thank you Ivan for the dramatic and stirring readings of this morning's Scriptures. When I checked the lectionary readings for today, I discovered that it was impossible to choose just two readings. I tried and felt like some cosmic restriction refused to let me remove any of them from the service. And, then I remembered Ivan would be reading, and I knew I had to hear all three!

I did decide, though, that I would make up the difference in the additional time this might take by combining my regular comments and the annual minister's report – all rolled into one. So, in a little while, when we gather for our congregational meeting, you will find these words in the docket, as my report.

It is remarkable how this morning's Scriptures align themselves with the timing for our Congregational Meeting and this report. In many ways, these stirring

narratives and words from long ago lay out the framework of our spiritual community in the extended congregation of The Palisades Presbyterian Church. I say extended, because there is no way to think of the life of this community as contained or limited in any way. The way the Spirit gathers in your lives and in this place knows no limits.

And Jeremiah tells us this about the Spirit, as well. Here is Jeremiah, as a boy, and the Lord comes to him, reaches out, and touches him with a fire (the coal) and tells him from now on my words will be your words. The Old Testament has great drama, doesn't it?

And isn't that the same real life drama that has happened and continues to happen here at the Palisades Presbyterian Church? Haven't the experiences that have led us here touched us as a fire, a heat in some burning passionate way?

I think of the life we have shared over the last twelve months and the fifteen months since I accepted the call as your interim minister. The passion that is evident here in every life, every committee, and every loving detail that goes into our mission – this is not something that happens by accident. And, we know better than to think of it as coincidence, which many of us believe to be God's way of being anonymous, anyway. So, so much for coincidence.

We bring the fire with us, an edge on how we see things, a yearning for the love and peace and justice that God has placed in our hearts, and more that we cannot name. I see it and feel it among you all the time.

The ancient scribe and the modern Christian are not that far apart. For we and the many in between have heard and felt this call with unmistakable certainty. As difficult as it is to grasp, as uncomfortable as it may sometimes be, and as eternally unwilling it is to be constrained or defined (tough stuff for us "A" type personalities) - it is a sign by which this congregation is absolutely known. Ask just about anyone who knows us and they will tell you something like this: there is something in that church and congregation that just makes you feel different.

I think that is because there's not many places in the world where we get to touch the eternal energy that is deeply in us all. This sacred space is one of those places. Struggles and all...

And talk about someone who struggled with the call to faithfulness: probably no disciple was more clear about his difficulties and confusions than Paul, who says in this morning's text, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly," or as another translation says it: "For now we see through a glass, darkly." How wonderful it is for Paul to be so blunt and, in some ways, rather conflicted – how absolutely and marvelously human! And, on top of that, for St. Paul to find his way through travails, not by eliminating doubt, frustration, desire, or the other aspects of the

human condition – but by turning to love to help guide him through the incredible mission upon which he was called...

I have to tell you, I just want to shout, “Yes! Yes! Yes! Thank you, Jesus! And Thank you, Paul!” Because that’s it. That’s what we do here. How many times have we found ourselves in the midst of confusion, disagreement, even outright conflict about the direction of this congregation or some goings-on? How many times we have – to some degree or another – gone home mumbling in frustration, “Gr-r-r-r...” gnashing and grinding teeth.

And what is it that almost always brings us back to our center, our work, our sanctuary of heart and this sanctuary? It’s the love of God, the love of one another, a love undefined, irascible – and unyielding. And in it we discover over and over again, permission to be human and the ultimate forgiveness and willingness to be forgiven by each other – recognizing that we are not God and remembering that if God can forgive us and our missteps – then we can certainly forgive one another and together rise to the focus on the mission and the work to which we have been called.

None of us is perfect, but I have seen us do this graceful spiritual dance time and again, right from my very beginning here to this very day. We are alive, real, called, thinking, passionate, and Spirit-filled people: and at times we intersect in interesting ways: and from what I have been able to tell, we are darn good at working it out...and getting back to loving each other.

“Love never ends, says Paul.” With unending love there is always hope. Somehow, we seem to know that at some deep level in the Palisades Presbyterian Church. And, we help each other to keep learning this better. Honestly, more often than once have I been grateful for you, individually and collectively – for reminding me in any number of ways that patience, forbearance, and love would see us through. I don’t really think this should be surprising, since, as someone reminded me the other day, the announcement page does say “Minister --- All the People.” We minister, always – to each other. It is the way of this church.

And then there is Jesus. Ahh, there is always Jesus. Can you see him in that synagogue, reading the passage from Isaiah,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And then rolling up the scroll, sitting down to preach, and looking at the assembled saying, “And today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

“Whaaat?! What did you say? Aren’t you that, that son of Joseph and Mary? We’ve heard about your questionable birth, but hey, we didn’t stop you from coming here and learning and even letting you read and speak. But, you?! You as the fulfillment of Scripture?! You have to be kidding!

And, as the Scripture said, “...they drove him out!”

Well, more in common for us and Jesus, for we are a community that knows what it means to be driven out in one way or another – and then to welcome the disenfranchised with open arms. Yes, as with Jesus, the Scripture is fulfilled in us -- and we in it. And we don’t hide it either!

We’re here! Bells and cars lining the streets, pot-luck dinners, picture shows, concerts, wreath-making, and poetry readings and more! We are you neighbor’s and your friends. We are intelligent, thoughtful, sometimes-of-different-minds people, and yes we are part of the long tradition of Christianity, and may even see ourselves as children of God, as we practice living as disciples – following the teachings of Jesus and others who help us to learn from the Scriptures and God’s active participation in the world today! And it is a real world we live in, without denial or distance. The life of this church is at the intersection of the cross, the oppressor’s tool changed into a divine symbol of overcoming this world, of being here but not being of this world.

And in the midst of a broken and sometimes hazardous world, we love and welcome all to join us however they may, to join us as we seek to find our way into what God has in store for us.

This is just some of the “wonderful and faithful” I have found us to be. We are not a shy community by any means and we speak our minds and take actions, understanding the risks we invite as we do such things. We “get it” that to be a Christian is to take part in a revolution that begins at baptism; an action and a statement that clearly identifies allegiance and our commitment -- in whatever ways we are able to be one with the Spirit.

In being Christians or faithful or seeking, however it is we may define ourselves, and by gathering at the Palisades Presbyterian Church as members and friends and guests – we are directly connecting ourselves to a power so loving and mysterious – that we cannot understand it or justify it in terms of events and goodness, or any other measure. We try so hard to reach an understanding, and we always fall short, but when we do fall – here, at least, in this place – we fall back into the arms of one another, with only a short distance to go since everyone else is reaching out, as well. It’s the assurance we are growing into that tells us that we need to be more than ourselves to truly be the community we hope to become. I see us becoming more than we are – all the time!

As an interim minister in the long succession of those who have served this church over the last 244 years, I report to you that the Palisades Presbyterian Church is a loving and generous place; that it is alive here, and probably on one of those heavenly maps and charts – listed as a “hot spot!”

Our committee reports later today will demonstrate clearly just how well we are doing, and in the time ahead our hearts and calls will continue to remind us of how much we have yet to do. All the while the Spirit, in the abundance that surrounds us – will always be close at hand, just as it is today.

Oh, and as for Jack London. There a certain short verse that has been attributed to him that seems to describe you and me in this place and time we share. It's about the fire and the passion. See if it resonates with you:

“I would rather be ashes than dust! I would rather that my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze than it should be stifled by dry-rot. I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet. The function of human is to live, not to exist. I shall not waste my days trying to prolong them. I shall use my time.”

And so, again the Scriptures are once more are being fulfilled among us:

“So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”
(Isaiah 55:11)

Such is the ongoing work of the Palisades Presbyterian Church: a radically loving and welcoming place, filled with the Spirit.

I am happy to report to you that the evidence speaks for itself!

Amen.

Respectfully submitted,

The Rev. Raymond J. Bagnuolo
Interim Minister
January 28, 2007