

“The Never-Ending Story”
Zechariah 7:8-10, I Corinthians 4:11-13, Mark 14:7a
August 25, 2019

At a certain spot on the rugged coast of New Zealand back in the days when it was still a colony of the U.K., the new settlers decided that they really needed a lighthouse. There was a fine bay for mooring ships, but the surrounding waters were quite treacherous, and one false lurch of a ship could spell disaster for passengers, cargo and crew.

Work on the lighthouse proceeded fairly quickly, and soon the new structure was complete. While it did not have all the bells and whistles of the day - New Zealand was a fairly remote colony, after all - it was a fairly modern structure for the 19th century, with foghorns and a rotating light, high-powered reflectors and decent quarters for the Keeper. As the day approached to put the new device into operation, the settlers made sure there would be bands, parades, the colonial governor - everything to turn the day into quite a celebration.

Observing all the construction and attendant hoopla were a group of Maori tribesmen, the native inhabitants of New Zealand. By and large the Maori got along with the British colonists, and there was no reason to be overly concerned that these men might be maliciously observing all that was going on every single day at the construction site. And so when the time of celebrating the new lighthouse approached, the colonists made sure to invite these tribesmen as guests.

Of course, the Maori accepted. It was all rather impressive to them. They had heard the foghorn tested - they had had to plug their ears. They had seen the bright light at the top of the tower shine brilliantly - they had had to shield their eyes. The rotation of the beacon fascinated them. And on a tour of the Keeper's quarters, they were amazed at what, to them, seemed to be a rather luxurious apartment.

On the day of the parades, as fate would have it, the fog rolled in - as it often does in that part of the world on that particular bit of shoreline. And so the Maoris got a

chance to see a bit of the lighthouse's magic, first-hand. Yes, the foghorn blew. The light flashed on. It began to rotate round and round. But the tribesmen walked away, disappointed. To them, the lighthouse had failed in its mission.

Apparently someone had forgotten to tell them exactly what a lighthouse was for. The tribesmen thought that the light and the horn and everything else would keep the fog away. But as we all know, there's no stopping the fog. The only thing anyone can do is to prepare for it.

And that is the role of the people of God, is it not? A lot of the world looks at the church, the synagogue, the mosque, the temple, and think that they have all failed in their mission. Our various religious institutions assure that the Word is preached - if there is anyone with ears to hear. People of faith, of the covenant, of the Book, teach their children in the ways of their forebears. Countless faith-based institutions reach out to the needy, to the lonely, and to the distressed. But as Someone reminded us long ago, "The poor we will always have with us." In other words: There is no stopping the fog. We cannot prevent some bad things from happening. But we can prepare for them, so that when the fogs and the storms of life come upon us and those around us, the light of scripture is ready to illuminate our path, God's voice is clearly heard, and our hand of outreach to the whole of creation is confident.

As all lighthouses are the same and yet different, so it is with our various houses of worship. Some have all the latest bells and whistles, with towers and sound systems and even a Starbucks inside. Some are more basic, just a bare room on an upper floor in a building that couldn't really be mistaken for a house of prayer by any outsider. Some are new and streamlined, with comfortable seating and plush carpeting, while others have a weather-beaten look about them. Some are very large and are placed prominently, others are smaller and seem out-of-the-way. Some are architecturally beautiful, while others are non-descript. But they all have the same basic task - to warn others when bad

times loom ahead, and to offer safety and security on a well-chosen path that leads homeward.

And that task is never done.

Just looking at our Fellowship of churches brings us to the realization that each one of our congregations has had sunny days, while others have had to endure a bit more fog than most. But this is not just a Christian problem.

As a reader of the occasional Doctor of Ministry project for the seminary in Hartford, I learned about a particular mosque in central Connecticut that was riven by all sorts of divisions related to ethnicity, social class, and economic status. As if that had not been enough, the fog of Extremism threatened to overwhelm the youth of that particular Islamic community. However, light in the form of a program of religious instruction, and the sound of God speaking through scripture, resulted not only in tempering unhealthy and destructive views that might have led to terrorism, but also in melding the people of that mosque with a stronger bond of unity, resulting in greater vitality and self-understanding.

In Christianity our problems are not due so much to Extremism, but observers have noted with increasing alarm the desertion of the faith by men, so much so that many churches on any given Sunday have more than 90% women in their pews. And so in a church in the northeast corner of our state, two programs to decrease a sense of marginalization among men in the life of the congregation led to a growing inclusiveness - not only with respect to the men who were increasingly inactive members of that congregation, but also with respect to the men in town who felt entirely estranged from some traditional forms of Christianity. Light, in the form of creating community, and the sound of God speaking not only to traditional families but also to those who have been subjected to phobias of various descriptions, replaced the fogs of prejudice masquerading as religiosity.

I would like us to consider what steps we in Colebrook can take as I approach the beginning of my third year occupying this pulpit. Twice these past two years we have considered trying to figure out what congregational activities from our past we can engage in once again, activities that we no longer undertake but which may be worthwhile to revive. And, we have tried to brainstorm a bit about new initiatives which we have never been involved with before, but could very well be worth our time and our efforts, while realizing that some of what we used to do has been abandoned for very good reasons.

All of this, of course, takes commitment. It takes time. And, it never seems to come to an end. There will always be illnesses that have to be responded to, hungry minds that seek to be fed on the ways of God, there will be times when a pep-talk will be necessary to remind us that not everything is difficult, and that we can do - and have done - a good job responding in faithfulness to the call of God. Still, there will always be those in our society who feel left out, there will always be the dispossessed, the widows, the orphans, the strangers within and outside our gates. Indeed, the poor - the poor in spirit as well as the poor in resources - we will always have with us. And for that, there will always be a need for places like Colebrook Congregational Church, which gives light and safety amidst the fogs of our world. May we rise to the occasion, and to the opportunity, to become more Christ-like so that others may live life more abundantly.

Let us pray: