

“Redigging Old Wells”

By Howell Lind, Senior Interim Minister

March 25, 2007

SERMON:

The service for this Sunday has its origins with the plaque in the entryway by the offices. The plaque shows the rendition of the three buildings that this congregation has occupied since 1841. Our appreciation is extended to Bonnie Anderson for her work on this project and to David Mayhall for creating the walnut base for the plaque.

When the plaque was hung, the realization surfaced for the need to select relevant items for inclusion in the time capsule that is to be housed in the wall in the new addition downstairs. Some of the articles from the church's archives that are to be a part of that time capsule are on display on the tables in the Narthex. The time capsule's seal – with its familiar Rehnberg Window insignia – also represents this church's heritage. After the service and the special congregational meeting today, I would encourage everyone to take a few moments and peruse the materials to be included in capturing a moment in time . . . as well as to take a good look at the plaque by the entryway to the offices.

Thinking about this process of lifting up the rich heritage of the Rockford congregation, I remembered the Old Testament story of Abraham and his son, Isaac.

The story involving Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah, is found in the Book of Genesis. When Isaac was born, Abraham was 99 and Sarah was 90 – certainly these parents were of an age beyond which a child might be expected, yet Sarah gave birth to Isaac as a sign of the faithfulness of Yahweh to the promise which had been made between Abraham and his god that out of the generations of Abraham would come a savior.

Abraham had been a wanderer – a nomad of the desert – and whenever Abraham would stop at a place for a period of time, he would dig a well.

Abraham would shovel aside the sand, breaking through the crust of the earth and finally, as the water table was uncovered, water – which, in the desert, is the substance of life – would seep in and fill the hole and there would always be enough water for the entire tribe, for sojourners and travelers, and enough water for the herds of goats and sheep and camels.

Abraham dug the wells in the desert out of necessity. In digging the wells, Abraham always gave thanks to his god for the water which was provided, acknowledging that humanity could dig as deep as it wanted to, yet it was a greater power which provided this sustenance of life.

Abraham gave the wells he dug special names: one of them he called *Lahairoi* which, in Hebrew, translates as “the well of the One who lives and who sees me.” This well, said Abraham, is an expression of gratitude to the One who inhabits my life, who sees me every day, every hour, who holds me in the hollow of His hand.

A second well that he dug, Abraham called *Beersheba* which means “the well of the oath” or “the well of the covenant.” Yahweh had made a promise to Abraham and Abraham had made a promise to Yahweh. In thanks and celebration of that mutual covenant, Abraham had dug a well.

The Genesis account relates that when Abraham died, his enemies, the Philistines, went out into the desert and filled up the wells that Abraham had dug. They took rock and sand and poured them into well holes and the water was no more and the land was barren and uninhabitable, as it was before Abraham the Wanderer established settlements and made the desert bloom.

Then, from the Genesis account, we read these words: “So Isaac departed from there and encamped in the Valley of Gerar and dwelt there. And Isaac dug again the wells of water which had been dug in the days of Abraham his father; for the Philistines had stopped them after the death of Abraham; and Isaac gave the wells he had redug the names which his father had given them.”

. . . I find this a beautiful story – “And Isaac dug again the wells of water which had been dug in the days of Abraham his father.”

This is an account of an individual – Isaac – in touch with his gratitude for his heritage, his lineage, his family and his history – in touch with the promised hope and covenant of his inherited religious faith.

Isaac acknowledged his appreciation for the faith that he had inherited and that thanks took on a concrete form: the water once more began to flow, the desert bloomed, turning lush and green – the barrenness received life.

. . . This morning, the rewarding heritage of this remarkable congregation, through a focus on the church’s buildings, has been recounted in anecdotal and historical record.

As I mentioned earlier, selected glimpses of this church’s past and present are to be placed in a “time capsule” into the wall of the downstairs’ addition – sealed with a deep sense of appreciation to all who have helped grow and maintain this church through the years.

In a sense, we – like Isaac – have redug the old wells. We have summoned forth with a grateful remembrance for the guardians at the well head – the well tenders – the protectors – the transmitters – and the responders of this church’s rich heritage – those who have imbued this congregation with a sense of basic trust, of promise and with the precepts and purposes for which the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockford now stands.

It is appropriate to recall with gratitude the efforts of Unitarian Thatcher Blake and of Universalist Daniel Haight who, in settling on the west and east banks of the Rock River, provided the roots for our liberal religious faith’s growth in this region.

It is appropriate to remember with appreciation the conviction and trust of those committed men and women who, in 1841, signed on as chartering members of the Rockford Unitarian Society and of those who individuals who were the founding members of the Universalist Church in that same year.

It is appropriate to summon forth with fondness the memory of the Well Tenders – of Universalist Seth Barnes, Unitarian Augustus Conant, of Thomas Kerr and Charles Parker Connolly, of Alan Deale and David Weissbard – to highlight just a few of the Guardians and Transmitters of the vitality and the promise of religious liberalism in the Rockford area.

It is appropriate to recall and recapture the fervent zeal and enthusiasm of all those who, through active commitment and participation in the life of this church, have carried the empowering message of Unitarian Universalism to the larger community.

This particular religious community has enjoyed a rich tradition of community participation and involvement, of social consciousness and individual conviction, of stimulating thought and prophetic vision.

It is appropriate to recall with fondness, appreciation and gratitude what has been bequeathed to your care as the current Well Tenders.

And it is appropriate to keep faith with the promise held by our forebears through the years – individuals who saw the need and the value for a liberal religious faith in this region.

For, indeed, that same need and value for a faith like ours still exists – not only in this northwest corner of Illinois but there is a waiting world out there – a world of people anxiously waiting for a sustaining and refreshing message of hope and challenging promise that is Unitarian Universalism.

My friends, may we continually redig the old wells of covenant and hope and promise.

May we, with appreciation, remember that now, in this day and age, it is we who are the Well Tenders and Guardians at the Well Head. It is our responsibility and privilege to see that the refreshing water of our faith in action continues to flow freely, quenching the dry and parched landscape around us.

And So May It Always Be.

Amen.

Howell K. Lind
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