

“Becoming Beacons”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

It was a confrontation
with the promise of catastrophic consequences.

The transcript of a tense radio conversation
between two officers, who were posted at different stations,
tells the story of what happened on the night of October 10, 1995:

Station No. 1: Please divert your course 15 degrees to the north to
avoid a collision.

Station No. 2: Recommend you divert your course 15 degrees to the
south to avoid a collision.

Station No. 1: This is the captain of a U.S. Navy ship.
I say again, divert YOUR course.

Station No. 2: No, I say, again, you divert YOUR course.

Station No. 1:
THIS IS THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER ENTERPRISE.
WE ARE A LARGE WARSHIP OF THE US NAVY.
DIVERT YOUR COURSE NOW!

Station No. 2: This is the Puget Sound lighthouse. It's your call. . .

There's something to be said for knowing who and what you are.
For standing your ground.

And there's something to be said
for knowing when it's time to adjust course.

Here, today, with part of us looking back to the past
and another part looking forward to the future,
we're confronted with questions about who and what we are.

It's a natural time to consider making course adjustments,
to give thought to what we want to change in the year ahead,
to make commitments to how things—how we—
could be different going forward.

You've already had some time this morning to sit with these questions.

So, I'm now going to invite you to think
not so much about what needs to change in your life,
but about what needs to stay the same.

About what needs to hold steady.
What needs to stay put.
What needs to endure.
What needs to shine.

To be sure, there is indisputable value
in being flexible, in being adaptable,
in being adept in the face of change,
and in the face of whatever is truly unchanging—
like the hard, stubborn facts of life,
like the cold realities that our days on this earth
sometimes set before us.

Being able to navigate through such choppy waters, come what may,
is an important skill to have.

Already in this service, we've offered up to the chalice flame

our regrets and resolutions that reflect our intentions
for facing what may come.

In this, we're opening ourselves to the new, to what is emerging,
knowing that some essential part of us must be born afresh
with the dawning of a new year, and with the break of each day.

This speaks to each of us being the captain of our little ship,
out riding the sometimes churning waves of life,
doing what we can to go with the flow
and travel safely through uncertain seas.

But, as important as all of that is,
this morning, I also want to invite you
to see yourself as the lighthouse.

There on the shore, planted firmly in place.
With a big, bright light from within, shining forth for all to see.

Each light is a little different, of course.
We, after all, burn in a variety of ways.

In some you can feel the warmth of compassion.
In others the glow of love.
In more than a few you can spot the fire of commitment.
And in many, you can see the light of truth.

But whatever our particular tint or hue,
that light, and the need to keep it burning,
is central to what it means for us to be human.

For we are called with our lives to be beacons,
bearers of light,
signals of hope and peace,
sources of compassion, equity, and justice.

We are called to shine.

This doesn't mean we're perfect at it.
It doesn't mean that we've got our act together,
at least not all the time.

It simply means, as often as we can,
lifting up the little light within us,
holding out the unique spark of our being,
returning our light to the universe
in gratitude for the brief and wondrous gift that it is.

And in doing this, we serve life.

The purpose of a lighthouse, the reason behind beacons,
is to show the way, to shine a light on the path,
to help others steer clear of “dangers, toils, and snares.”

There's a variation on the classic song, “This Little Light of Mine,”
that says:

Gonna let my little light shine, shine, shine.
May be someone down in the valley, tryin' to get home.

We shine, with whatever life has given us to use as fuel,
that we might help others find their way.

We may never know who our little light helps.

But when we shine—
with love, compassion, commitment, and truth—
we help others find their way home.

To become a beacon,
we need only build upon the foundations of who we already are.

Whatever life has put in front of you,
no matter the regrets you carry or the fears you face,
life also presents you each day with a choice
of whether to shine the little light you have.

Now you may believe
that the hardships and struggles you've faced disqualify you,
that they've caused the light to dim, or even to go out.

But so much of what we've been through
can become fuel for the fire.

So much of what we've been through can burn,
and in burning, can give out a mighty light.

So much of what we've been through can be transformed to serve life,
and to light up even the darkest night.

So let us burn as bright as we possibly can.

Because someone may be down in the valley,
or lost in the storm, or out at sea,
needing your precious, particular light to help them make it home.

Let us now sing of our little light, like we mean it.

Amen.