

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany 4, January 27, 2008, dedicated to our church staff: Barb C., Barb, J-T, Charlie K., Pat R., Denny M., Tim S., Sharon L., Stan P., Katherine B., Roger S., Mark W., Marty W. & our night and weekend custodians, Sunday nursery staff, and Otto E., our security officer & always to the glory of God!

## ***“Teach, Proclaim, Cure”***

***Isaiah 9:1-4, Matthew 4:12-23***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Only meteorologists fully appreciate the perfection of a “perfect storm.” Such a storm hit Ohio 30 years ago on January 25 and 26, 1978. With 17 inches of snow already on the ground, January 25, temperatures rose into the 40s and it began to rain. Early on January 26, two storms - a Gulf low bringing warm, moist air from the south and an Alberta Clipper bringing cold air from the north collided over Ohio causing blizzard conditions. The rain turned to snow and temperatures dropped 30 degrees in two hours. Winds of 50-70 mph, with gusts up to 100 mph, made the chill factor 80 degrees below zero. Snowdrifts were as high as 15 feet.

Known now as the Blizzard of ‘78, this deadliest winter storm in Ohio history claimed 51 lives - 22 walking from stranded vehicles, 13 in their vehicles, 13 in unheated homes, 2 in collapsed buildings and one unspecified. Five thousand Ohio National Guard & 600 Army troops were called into duty saving 6,000 motorists & assisting with 175,000 homes left without power. The Blizzard of ‘78 was a perfect storm.

Perfect storms are rare and always deadly. They leave victims

in their wake. They leave people wondering what could have been done in advance. What disasters could have been averted? What lives could have been saved? In the midst of such storms, different people respond different ways. Some head into the storm to help. Others lock themselves away to care for themselves.

Perfect storms can be more than meteorological events. In the last few months, some of you have heard me use the image of the “Perfect Storm” when referring to 2007 at First Church. From November 2006 through January 2008, we lost 43½ years of experience on our staff in education (13), pastoral care (6 ½), office management (11) and building and grounds management (13). Most significantly, we lost a friend and colleague with the death of Dorinda White in April. Then on October 28, Reformation and Stewardship Sunday, Rev. Botts taped a letter of resignation to my office door, which I found after I had returned from teaching confirmation around 2:30 p.m. that afternoon.

The search for, hiring, training, and integration of new staff members has taken a significant investment of time and energy. Although ALL are now making excellent contributions to our life together, we have also discovered our need for better office technology - including an updated phone system and a better computer system (for example our Communication Coordinator who publishes the newsletter, Barb Jenks-Triffon doesn't have spell-check in her system operation - problem). And all this staff transition happened while we were searching for and calling our newest staff member - Rev. Lori Tisher - who was called January 6 of this year and begins on February 15.

In addition, we lost 21 members to death in 2007 - an average of one death every 17 days. All 21 were people active in our church's life, in our worshiping community and many of them were leaders in areas of stewardship, finance, mission, education, deaconal work, music ministry and service to the congregation. In addition, when

you lose people you often lose intangibles. For example, when Ruth Anderson died, I lost the one person who consistently brought me obituaries and articles about members and former members. With their deaths last year, we also lost hundreds of years of membership and commitment to Christ's presence in our city in the arts, in mission, in care for disabled and disadvantaged youth and adults and so much more!

In addition to the 21, while praying for each of you and all our members just before Christmas, I counted more than 40 members (that I knew of) in our congregation who had lost a mother, father, a child, spouse or partner to death in 2007 - some after long and difficult illnesses and some quickly and tragically.

In '07 we also lost four active, involved, and strongly pledging families who moved to other states. During the year, Sunday worship attendance dropped, slightly fewer new members joined and slightly fewer newborns meant fewer baptisms. In our reorganization of staff, we lost opportunities for our ministry of marriage.

Our stewardship giving for pledges dropped in 2007 to its lowest levels in ages with only 91.8% of giving - down from a 10-year average around 95%. In addition to this, our 2008 pledges came in 11% lower than the year before! I have never experienced a year in my 23½ years of ordained ministry where my congregation saw loses in pledges paid - not to mention **any drop** in pledges made for the coming year. I have lost much sleep over the causes & effects of this.

When people called, emailed, and wrote to members - person after person told stories of lost jobs, fewer hours of work, underemployment, and struggles with finances, which they had never encountered before. Stocks and securities had dropped. Home values declined. And other challenges of costs overrunning the

family income had trapped folks financially.

In 2007, a “perfect storm” hit this congregation. In his journal from Valley Forge in December 17, 1777, General George Washington wrote, *“You can tell where my army has been. There are tracks of blood in the snow from White Marsh to Valley Forge. I pray that God will deliver us through this winter.”* As we marched out of December and into the new year, I could relate to both the tracks behind us and the prayer for God to deliver us.

In the midst of any “perfect storm” something else happens. “Some people head into the storm to help.” People step up and think less of their condition than the needs of their neighbors. People reach out and take hold of others. I saw this so clearly in 2007 as well. I saw lay people reaching out to touch those in need - most noticeably through our amazing caring Card Ministry. I saw the Deacons here for every funeral and memorial service - often giving up their own work hours to provide help to the congregation and families in need. In the stormy season of finances and the transitions on the staff, most households returning 2008 pledges increased their pledges for 2008 - following the Stewardship Committee’s invitation to “Step Up Stewardship!” So, our losses were found in households who did not pledge while faced with extraordinary hardship.

God bless all of you who reached out to me, to our staff and to one another in the storm. God bless you for asking how we were doing. God bless all of you who joined our church during the storms of 2007. You saw us as beautiful and sought to come among us! God bless you for your eyes which beheld splendor during trying times! You have been like angels of the Lord sent to bring us good news of great joy in the midst of the storm! And God bless all of you who are stepping up and planning to join us in this upcoming class!

Something else happened in the storms of 2007! In the midst of the perfect storm - our God was present! Our God persevered and prevailed in the midst of the storm. Our God - who is the Great Deliverer; Our God - who is over and above all storms; Our God - who stills the storms and quiets the discontented; Our God had the audacity to hope so much that - our God - Sent his Son to us! In this act of extravagant love, Our God demonstrated that our God is not finished with us yet!

In Matthew's Gospel, we see Jesus calmly withdrawing to the Sea of Galilee while John the Baptist is under siege and arrest. In Galilee Jesus begins to teach, preach and cure people of their pain in the storms of their lives. He calls for the people to "*repent for the kingdom of heaven right here!*" His arrival is part of God's saving plan for a people caught in darkness. He is the light shining in their days of despair. For Jesus (unlike John), repentance in this context means more of a change of direction, gaining a new set of values, and getting ready for life lived in the aftermath of their storms. How appropriate for us today! Like the people of Galilee, we need to walk in the light of God, set our feet on lofty places and head in new directions. Like the people of old, we need to get our values reset and refocused for the days ahead. We need to live life after the storm.

To embody these new values and this new path, Jesus picks two sets of brothers Simon and Andrew and James and John to carry the story forward. Whether they knew him before he showed up at the seaside, we don't know. We do know that when he called, they followed. Absolute obedience is the fruit of the spirit in the reign of God. Discipleship is demanding like this. We Congregationalists would do well to follow this example. When called upon to follow, we don't drop our nets and follow. We drop questions and stay put. We say, "*Who's leading? Why should I follow him? What's in it for me?*"

When called to discipleship, we too often resist declaring that we are thinking people. We confuse headstrong with faithless too often. We would do well to reset our values, refocus our direction and join in making strategic plans. We need to listen to, trust and follow pastors and leaders whom we have elected and whose vision for our congregation is one which will help us succeed and rise to new heights of ministry and mission.

Skeptics, by definition, are *“those who instinctively and habitually doubt, question, disagree with assertions and generally accepted conclusions.”* Faithful people, by definition, are *“those who are dutiful, loyal, believing and steadfast in their cause.”* Skeptics stay put. Faithful people move forward.

It is said in the Midrash of Judaism that when Moses led the people of Israel out of Slavery in Egypt, God did not part the waters of the Red Sea until the people started walking into the crashing waves along the shore. They provided the faith. God provided the liberation and the miracles!

Jesus must have known this. Once the brothers of Galilee faithfully follow and join his cause his mission explodes! We find him preaching the gospel, teaching to thousands of people and healing all sorts of diseases and sickness. His powerful, redemptive activity in the fourth chapter of Matthew sets the stage for the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5 - 7. The authority that moves followers to break with their past and embrace future hope, is none other than the power of God alive and at work in the community of faith. The Holy Spirit is the fuel source of the redemptive work of God.

In a few minutes, we will be engaged in our annual congregational meeting. I ask you to step up in 2008 and offer your time and talent to propel our congregation forward. I believe when you offer your time and talent, the treasure you share will flow out of a heart of

love and devotion. Step up and be faithful in following and leading in the aftermath of last year's perfect storm. Step up and trust your Senior Minister and Pastors Barb Cunningham and Lori Tisher, our staff and lay leaders - trust and respond to our calls for a mission and ministry - centered in the preaching of the Gospel, teaching of the faith and healing of people in pain.

**“Teach, Proclaim, Cure.”**

*God IS With US! No matter what storms prevail, our God is Good!  
Our God will deliver us! Amen.*