

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Christmas II, January 3, 2010, dedicated to the men and women of our Armed Services stationed around the world, especially to those with ties to First Congregational Church, and always to the glory of God!

“In the Beginning Was the Word”

Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:1-18

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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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It all started with a question: *“Will you do my eulogy?”* Eight years later, author and journalist Mitch Albom, stood in the pulpit of his hometown synagogue before the casket of his beloved rabbi and a sanctuary full of people. For more than 60 years, Rabbi Albert Lewis had ascended these steps to deliver sermons, sing songs and teach the faith from this high and holy place. Now Mitch was preaching Rabbi Lewis’ eulogy. On that day, he said, *“Without you (Rabbi Lewis), this pulpit seems as empty as a desert.”*

Mitch believed himself to be a very strange choice for the final words offered on the rabbi’s life. He had been un-religious and unfaithful much longer than he had been religious and faithful. In fact, Mitch remembered spending much of his childhood in the great biblical tradition of “running away.” Like Adam hiding in the Garden of Eden, or Moses trying to replace himself with Joshua as Israel’s

leader, or Jonah jumping overboard to swim away from God (before being swallowed by the Big Fish), Mitch Album had hidden from God and Rabbi Lewis throughout his childhood. Although Rabbi Lewis was not God, he was as close to God as Mitch ever cared to get. So, naturally Mitch ran away from him. When he came down the hallway, Mitch ran away. When passing his study, he ran. He avoided him “religiously.” Then as an adult, Mitch simply drifted away and wandered off from God and the practice of his Jewish faith. But over the years, it was *apathy* that proved the greatest driver of a life abandoning faith. Sad but true.

“*Will you do my eulogy?*” That one question changed Mitch Album’s life of faith. With it, Mitch could no longer run or hide. He believed he could not say “no” to the only rabbi he had ever known. So he agreed to speak on the condition that he would get to know Albert Lewis as a person.

For the next eight years, Mitch Album grew close to Albert Lewis. In the eulogy, he mentioned that, at the time, it seemed like a clever rabbi trick to lure him back to adult education. But in his newest book, *Have a Little Faith: A True Story*, the author of *Tuesdays With Morrie* chronicles this journey of faith. The story is actually a remarkable tale about three men – Rabbi Lewis, Mitch Album and a Detroit pastor named Henry Covington, who worships in a church for the homeless poor in Detroit with a hole in the ceiling of the sanctuary. How their lives intersect is the stuff of this little book.

In *Have a Little Faith*, Album reflects on faith and trust, war and peace, good and evil, forgiveness and reconciliation, life and death, among other things. In the beginning, there is one question about a eulogy. In the end, there is a eulogy. In his eulogy, Mitch offers many thoughts on the man who built the synagogue and school in his hometown, a man who only ever served one community of faith.

Of Rabbi Albert Lewis, Mitch said:

This is your house Reb. You are in the rafters, the

floorboards, the walls, the lights. You are in every echo through every hallway. We hear you now.

I hear you still.

How can I - how can any of us - let you go? You are woven through us from birth to death. You educated us, married us, comforted us. You stood at our mileposts, our weddings, our funerals. You gave us courage when tragedy struck, and when we howled at God, you stirred the embers of our faith and reminded us, as a respected man once said, that the only whole heart is a broken heart.

. . . To imagine a world without you in it is to imagine a world with a little less God in it, and yet, because God is not a diminishing resource, I cannot believe that.

Instead, I have to believe that you have melted back into his glory, your soul is like a returned favor, you are a star in His sky and a warm feeling in our hearts. We believe that you are with your forefathers, with your daughter, with your past, and at peace.

May God keep you, may he sing to you, and you to Him.

Where do we look for you now, Reb?

We look - where you have been trying - good sweet Man of God - to get us to look all along.

We look up.

(Mitch Album, *Have a Little Faith*, Hyperion, New York, June 2009, pp. 240-242).

One question begins a faith journey for Mitch Album. In the end, he finds himself looking up to God and in love with hope.

Is there something (or someone) in your life you are running away from? Are you hiding from yourself or someone else this New

Year's weekend? Is there a question calling you into a deeper relationship with God or another of God's children? Is there a question calling you to a deeper walk with God? Maybe you have been trying to dodge or avoid God's tug on your life. What is it that is keeping you from prayer, from action, from a deeper, more faithful walk with God?

As we have said goodbye to 2009 and hello to 2010, it is important to remember some transitional truths. In our endings, our partings, our farewells and our transitions, we discover who we really are. In our "goodbyes" we find the seeds for our next "hellos." It is this paradox of finding our beginnings in our endings that fuels our lives and our faith. In a new day, a new year, a new project, a new life we often discover who we really are and what our deepest values are.

We begin the second decade of our new millennium this week. God knows that we need new beginnings and a fresh start in many ways. In this transition, we discover new hope as well. How better to embody newness of life and hope than in the words of John 1:1ff, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God and the Word was with God.*"

Do you recognize these words of new beginnings?

Each year on this Sunday, this Gospel text meets us and greets us and calls us to remember Christ as the light, glory, and love of our lives. We are called to remember who we are and to whom we belong. Before the world had shape and form (we are told) God was the Logos, the "Word." God's spirit moved over the waters of the deep and created – in the beginning. These opening words in John's Gospel are central throughout our life in Christian faith. We heard these words only two weeks ago in this room as the final lesson in our Lessons and Carols Service. We will hear them again this year.

Each Holy Week, on the edge of Easter, we hear John's words as the last words spoken at our Tenebrae Service on Maundy Thursday. When I stand alone at the communion table in a thoroughly darkened

sanctuary, in the moment just before we acknowledge crucifying death of Christ, just before I extinguish the Christ candle, just before silence and stillness surround Good Friday and Holy Saturday, we are called to remember that *"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God."* The light and glory of God are never to be extinguished in our lives, even as we pass from this world to the next.

Each of you has entered a new year and a new decade of your life on earth. You have been given another chance to walk in the light of God. What an awesome opportunity! I pray you listen very carefully to the questions being asked of you. Don't assume that questions of service above self, stewardship of resources, giving time, talent, and treasure are all for someone else. I can tell you this – plainly and truly – ultimately, you cannot run and hide from the call of Christ in your life. You may be able to run and hide from me because my office is beautifully situated on the second floor of the Parish House. But you cannot run and hide from God. The light and glory of God will find you.

A few weeks ago, I shared blessed time with a new friend who told me how God had saved his life. In the shadow of death, he was held and loved by God and given a new lease on life. He has used that gift from God to tell God's story of love and salvation. He is a changed man who is changing the hearts of others with God's good news.

We have all sorts of things that excite us and thrill us. In the aftermath of winning the Rose Bowl or in the joy of turning the calendar to a new year, I know many of you are excited. But, I ask you to place God at the center of your life. Remember God. Everything else is window dressing. If you place God at the center of your life, then the questions that come your way will take on new meaning.

I opened today with Mitch Albom's words. I close with them today as well. Albom ends his book with these words: *"In the beginning there was a question. In the end, the question gets answered. God*

sings, we hum along, and there are many melodies but it is all one song - one same, wonderful, human song. I am in love with hope” (Ibid, p. 249).

May God bless you as begin this new year in God’s love, light, and glory. And may you be in love with hope. Amen.

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