

# **Congregational Church of the Messiah**

Second Sunday after Christmas

January 4, 2009

## **The Prize of the Upward Call**

Philippians 3:7-14

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Each New Year gives us the opportunity to reflect on the past and look toward the future. Paul's past included being a high profile, eager persecutor of Jews who believed in Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah.

At one time, Paul brought judgment upon those early Christian believers. Then one day, Paul had a personal experience of Jesus Christ. It came in a light so penetrating it blinded his eyes while opening his mind and heart. Paul met the Risen Jesus Christ and received understanding, forgiveness, acceptance and a completely new direction for his energies and abilities.

With this new experience of Christ, Paul's past achievements no longer had the place of honor in his life. It was as though he was saying, "I have more reason to brag than anyone else, yet I count it as nothing compared to having Christ." (from Philippians 3:4) In the Light of Christ, Paul considered all his former achievements as not worth even talking about. For Paul, everything from that day forward was directly related to sharing the amazing Good News of God coming into the world in Christ, not to condemn the world, but to save it.

The Good News we carry into the New Year is that we do not earn our way into heaven by doing good works but rather by our belief in Christ. This emphasis on not looking backward, of setting aside things in our past that would hold us from following Christ is a recurring theme in Paul's letters to the churches. Paul found that setting aside the past to be the only way to really know Christ and to experience the mighty power of His Resurrection.

Living by faith leads Paul to learn truly what it means to suffer and to be like Christ. Whatever it takes, Paul wanted to be one who lives in the fresh newness of life of those who are alive with Christ. And so, Paul was off and running straight toward the goal of the prize which is God's Upward Call to the life which He offers to all who believe through Christ Jesus. Paul knew the price of faith, which still leads us to The Prize of the Upward Call in Christ. Believing in what God did in Christ and is able to do in us opens us to receiving the love and power God gives to those who have faith in Him.

## **The Prize of the Upward Call**

This past week I watched one of the current, popular, animated movies. There is a clear thread through the entire film that is so positive. Perhaps some of you already have had the enjoyment of seeing *Kung Fu Panda*.

Most of the action centers around trying to get a large, usually laughing, unpretentious, innocent, pot-bellied panda to believe that he can save the village from a powerful, well trained kung fu snow leopard that has turned evil and must be stopped before he obtains the sacred scroll that contains the secret of all power.

When the sacred scroll is finally possessed, the secret is revealed to Po, the panda, who has the eyes to see and understand. The secret is not recognized by the evil white leopard, a kung fu expert, who believes the scroll is empty, totally blank, devoid of any power.

What was written in the scroll was not the key to ultimate power. You will enjoy watching this particular story and hearing the message for yourself.

Change does not wait for the calendar. The New Year gives us another opportunity to change negatives into positives, to learn more about how God works in the world today.

A few years ago, I took my eldest granddaughter, Morgan, then two and a half, down to the beach where she played in the sand and chased the pigeons and seagulls. We wrote her name in big letters in the sand by the surf. She was delighted. However, soon a large wave washed over the letters, and they were gone. She experienced that things change, and that was all right. We wrote her name again and celebrated the temporary, then moved on to hunt for shells and rocks.

The Upward Call from God often calls us to take new steps, to try new ways of using the freedom God gives us. What kind of music plays in your heart when you learn that part of loving is knowing when to allow another person his or her freedom? When the person is free to choose, the person may stay or walk away. Is this freedom of choosing to stay or to go a parallel to what God does for each of us? God gives us the ability to choose to follow Him or to turn and walk our own way.

God sends His Upward Call to urge us forward with faith toward a destiny worth desiring, a life within as well as beyond this earth filled with blessings rather than despair. God's Upward Call helps us look up instead of becoming mired down with negative attitudes convincing us that we can't accomplish what we set out to do so why should we even try to reach our goal.

God's Upward Call never diminishes a person but always calls us forward toward fulfilling the potential God has placed within us. In fact, more than just giving us opportunity, God actively participates by helping us keep our eyes on His upward way.

## The Prize of the Upward Call

God gives us vision to keep looking up not down.

God gives us strength to keep on even when the day is long  
and the sun is hot.

God provides the courage for us to keep going when nothing seems to be improving  
no matter how hard we try.

The price is sometimes high. It can mean hard work, being persistent and not giving up when unable to achieve the goal on the first try. It may take years of practice, hours spent in concentrated effort to perfect a skill or to develop a plan.

In each of our lives, there will be unasked for circumstances, which have made demands on us and shaped us in the past but which no longer exist. We may still feel bound by them and therefore not free to try new things and venture in new ways of expressing our faith and confidence in God.

Paul tells us, as he told the Philippians, first, let the past be gone. Second, build on the positive. God may be trying to give us a new heart, but we need to be ready to listen and hear so that we can have that new heart. Sometimes God sends other persons to help show by example how to walk His Upward Way.

In Madeleine L'Engle's book, *Walking on Water*, she gives us reason to think carefully about how we evidence our decision to follow Christ. She writes: "During the difficult period in which I was struggling through my clouds not knowing how to return to the Church and to Christ, the largest thing which deterred me was that I saw so little clear light coming from those Christians who sought to bring me back into the fold.

"But I'm back now, and grateful to be back, because, through God's loving grace, I have met enough people who showed me that light of love, which the darkness cannot extinguish.

"One of the things that I learned on the road back is that I do not have to be right all the time. I have to try and do what is right, but when it turns out, as happens with all of us, to be wrong, then I am free to accept that it was wrong, to apologize and to try to make reparations when that is possible.

"I have to accept the fact that I am, after all, human as well as a bit of the divine within me. I can be unwise as well as wise, obnoxious as well as thoughtful, loving as well as unloving.

"As followers of Christ, we are not meant to be less human than other people but more fully human, just as Jesus of Nazareth was more human."<sup>1</sup>

God's Upward Call for each of us is to live in freshness and fullness of new life.

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<sup>1</sup> L'Engle, Madeleine. *Walking on Water*. Nashville: Bantam Books, 1983, page 59.

## The Prize of the Upward Call

The floats in the Rose Parade each year demonstrate an amazing variety of flowers, leaves, and seeds—all from nature. The way of using just simple things seems endless as year after year new designs appear in such magnificent color and intricate arrangements. There always seems freshness to the floats because of the way natural things are used.

I wonder if our lives in God’s creative hands might be something like the flowers of the Rose Parade. Jesus said: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid.” (Matthew 5:14) “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father Who is in Haven.” (Matthew 5:16)

This is the Upward Call—to let the light of God in us be seen in our good works so people give God the glory for our being alive. The Upward Call comes from the faithfulness of God. It is for all seasons as the hymn says:

“Summer and winter and springtime and harvest, sun, moon, and stars in their courses above join with all nature in manifold witness to Thy great faithfulness...

“Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth, thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide; strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow...”<sup>2</sup>

Those are marks of new life for those who follow the Upward Call in Christ Jesus our Lord in the New Year 2009.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship*, #140. Fifth Printing, 1990. Nashville, TN.