

Fourth Sunday of Epiphany/January 28, 2018

I Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20;

Rev. Joel M. Krueger

"The Time is Fulfilled"

In 1769, a man, Mr. James Miller, and his wife, two sons and a daughter, departed Haverhill, Massachusetts with two other families and arrived on the shores of Penobscot Bay, at what is now called Belfast. The forest was so thick and unwelcoming, that even before stepping off the boat, the other families determined not to stay. However, the Millers did set foot upon that shore and began an adventure into the great unknown. They unloaded their belongings and with sawn boards that they brought with them. They put a roof to the log cabin that Miller had built the year before, and though stable enough, it leaked so badly, that the children hid under the tables any time it rained. And though they couldn't have known what the future would hold, with faith and trust that God had brought them to this time, they persevered and survived in that wilderness.

The following year, the Miller family was joined by others who would settle this territory. They were all Scotch-Irish, who had come to Londonderry, New Hampshire, settled 50 years before. These also cleared the land, built cabins and prepared the soil for farming. These first settlers came here with hope, with determination, and strong constitutions, willing to endure the hardships of life in the New England wilderness. And while they may have had some vision as to what their community might become in their lifetimes, they could have no idea of what would be fulfilled in the distant future. They enjoyed plentiful harvests and a true community spirit. And in 1773, they sought incorporation as a town, intending to name it Londonderry from whence they'd come, but in honor of one of the earliest settlers, possibly Miller himself, they named it after his home in northern Ireland, Belfast.

While all seemed to be going well, the settlement would soon be abandoned during the time of the Revolutionary War, as the British presence forced them, some 60 people in all, to flee in 1779. But by the time peace was finally declared 4 years later, most of the inhabitants had returned, remaining true to that call that had brought them there.

These first settlers were Presbyterians who had known the hardships of keeping their faith under persecution and they were firm in adhering to the practices of their Calvinistic beliefs. And from the beginning, they were conscious of the need for their spiritual wellbeing and set aside one of the parcels of land (lot #26 on the east side of the river) for a minister. It took many years before one would be acquired. On occasion, a Rev. John Murray from Boothbay would come to Belfast to give a "Sunday", to preach and lead singing at the home or in the barn of Mr. Miller. And from the early years of the town, a number of times votes were taken to build a meeting house, but not until the summer of 1792 were any established and then two were built, one on each side of the river. On the east side, on lot #26, a two-story structure, 40'x50' was built. On the west side, a single-story Meeting House, 40'x40' was constructed at the head of where the grave yard was then, on the north side of High Street, near Pearl Street. So, even without a pastor to lead them, they responded to that desire to have a place of worship.

In 1796, it seemed the time was right for another milestone in our church's history. The first settled pastor, Rev. Ebenezer Price was hired, and the First Parish was established with 7 members, including Mr. Price. It was his first church and he was thus ordained. He was only 25

years old and the pictures we have of him in the parlor are of a much older man and must have been taken at a later date. Rev. Price built a house on lot #26 which still stands on the Old Searsport Rd.. While pastorates were normally lifetime agreements, some of the inhabitants were unsatisfied with this Congregational minister, and his tenure here was only 6 years in duration. He was followed by Rev. Alfred Johnson of Freeport, who served the parish for 8 years. There would be no settled pastor at the First Church until 1819, when the Rev. William Frothingham was hired, and interest in and attendance to services of worship began to increase, to a point that the people began to contemplate the building of a new church.

Then, almost 200 years ago to this day, on February 2, 1818, the parish, hearing the Spirit's call and trusting that the time was right, voted to build a new Meeting House. A committee was formed to develop a plan and find a location for the church. The group decided to construct a church like that of the Rev. Tappen in Augusta, based on plans by Asher Benjamin, to be 67'x50' with 64 pews, at a cost of \$6,000 and would hire Samuel French as master builder. They acquired obligatory subscriptions for 61 of the pews, at \$90 each, amounting to \$5,490, \$510 short of their goal. They began with a deficit budget but moved forward anyway anyway. The frame would be raised that same year, on July 13, 1818.

The property that was chosen sat on the outskirts of the town at that time. It was pasture land owned by a Mr. Robert Miller. It had been deforested and was strewn with stumps and knolls and sat on a rocky hillside, a place where cows grazed and in this time of year would have been covered with snow and ice. No one would have ever thought of that land as being a place for a church, a place where members of this little community would come to worship. No one would have ever thought that a beautiful Federal style structure would grace this lonely place. But it seems that the time was ripe and for the next 200 years, this little lot of land has known countless hours of worship, ministry and outreach to those in need, impassioned discussion and commitment to the issues of the day, spiritual blessings to the thousands who have walked through its doors, times of harmony and concord and times of conflict and controversy.

From the beginning it would endure a division, a splitting of its people into factions, one Congregational and Trinitarian, and another Unitarian. Its congregations would be known as the First Parish Unitarian Church, the First Congregational Church of Belfast, and when they came back together, the First Church Federated in Belfast, and eventually, The First Church in Belfast, United Church of Christ.

In our gospel reading from Mark, we hear Jesus saying, "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.*" His message was one of *immediacy*, that God's realm was near, close at hand, something that one could reach out and grasp. People saw in him, not just the past, nor something to come in the future, but a culmination of both that allowed them to experience life fully in the *present*. And when he called his disciples, Mark tells us that they responded "*immediately*" and fully. This was the nature of the faith and ministry to which he called them. A way of being that knew and experienced God in the here and now, and required them to trust him to guide them into whatever future lay ahead.

Our First Church forebears knew this kind of faith. Certainly there were some who would fall away, who would give up. But there were always those who through trust and faith in God, recognized when the time was right, when things seemed to be fulfilled and something new was being ushered into their lives.

Now it is our time, and we are the heirs, the recipients of this faith. Like the first disciples of Jesus, we must recognize that presence of God that is with us in the here and now, and our response to God's call must be as *immediate* as was theirs. It is a call that requires our faith and trust and the commitment of our full selves.

And as we here at The First Church in Belfast prepare to celebrate a year honoring the history and people and place in which we are fortunate enough to call our home, our place of worship, a place that for 200 years has seen faithful people endure hardships and struggle, form bonds of friendship and love, create ministries of grace and compassion, and carry on the work set before them, we too must have faith and trust in God.

And as we also embark on a new church structure, recognizing like those in the past did so many times, that though we may not know the future, that we cannot know the outcome of all our plans and hopes and dreams, ours is a faith in a God that holds past and future together. A God who holds us together through the times of uncertainty and doubt, optimism and hope, and brings us to rejoicing as we reach the shores of that new land, that new place to where God is calling us. This is the faith of our forebears. This is our faith. This is our time. May we be as brave and true as those who have gone before us, as we engage in answering Christ's call.

Amen.

(Historical information taken from: *Early Histories of Belfast, Maine, Sketches of the Early History of Belfast* by John Lymburner Locke, p. 195-210; and *The History of the City of Belfast* by Joseph Williamson, p. 222-260)