

John Sampson
"The Windows of Heaven"
Text: Malachi 3:10b - 12
Preached at KVCC
July 28, 2019

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

OK. Let's be honest with one another.

During worship, perhaps even during the sermon, have you ever realized that you really haven't been paying attention to what the pastor is saying, and that your mind has wandered? Perhaps you've come back to yourself and you've realized that instead of focusing with all of your faculties on the intricate depths and nuances of a finely crafted sermon or prayer, that you've actually been looking out the window, at whatever's going on outside of the church.

I know I have.

I can remember attending worship in a big congregational church in New Hampshire, which my grandparents attended. It was a warm summer morning, and the windows, which are just like our windows, were open. I was sitting to the side of the sanctuary in the seat right next to the window, and it was wonderful. There was a nice breeze blowing over me. I could smell the recently cut grass. And the light was warm and golden. I found myself watching someone doing yard work across the road.

I have no idea what happened in that worship service, nor what the sermon was about, but I remember the peace I felt as I looked out that window. I also remember that moment being the beginning of my understanding of what a theology of windows, of church windows, of windows like these church windows – clear and transparent – could be.

When we imagine what windows in a church look like our thoughts might go to the great tradition of stained glass windows that adorn the mighty cathedrals of Europe, and of our nation. We might see within our mind's eye the amazing rose windows that image the moment of Creation. Or perhaps the various Bible stories come to life in deep red and blue and green panes of glass. We might remember the patriarchs of the Torah standing in lines across the windows, their faces very serious and dour.

It's easy to imagine a theology of windows when we think of the stained glass windows that are such an inspiring part of many churches, large and small, in Christian communities all

around the world. It's easy to imagine that the theology of these windows is found in the stories and figures represented in the colored glass.

What do we believe God has invited us to do with our lives? We need only look up to a stained glass window and see Jesus feeding the 5,000 to understand a theology of giving. We only have to raise our eyes to the circular windows that stand above the entrance doors of a cathedral to understand a theology of Creation, which imagines God at the center of all being.

But then we come to windows like these, products of a history of Reformation that has come down to us from the early English colonies of New England. Here there is no stained glass. No images of Jesus, or the patriarchs, of examples of giving, or of the Creation. Here we have simple transparent glass that allows the light, and the happenings of our world to come into this space, this sacred place, unmodified.

These windows are the kind of windows that let your mind wander, and your thoughts fall away from a sermon just like this one to engage with someone mowing the grass, or a wave of motorcyclists rumbling by.

But these windows, in all of their stark barrenness, in all of their beautiful minimalism, still have such a deep theology to them.

They say to us that there is only the slightest difference between what happens out there, what happens out in the world, and in our lives, and what happens here in this sacred place. Unlike stained glass windows that keep out the happenings of the world and create a dimmer womblike environment of contemplation and worship, here the world comes flooding in. Here the world isn't kept outside of worship. Instead it is invited in to be a part of our worship, even if its entrance can sometimes be disturbing and disruptive to our prayers and meditations.

Sitting in this space, with these windows, we can be praying and see the green tinged light coming through the leaves of the birch trees growing right outside this window, and be reminded of the Creation. And perhaps this light will motivate us to add Creation to our prayers.

Sitting in this space, I can look out the window while I am giving a reflection, just like this one, and see all of the people geared up in their hiking clothes. And I am reminded that the words and example of Jesus, which are so nourishing to our community, are not the only valid religious paths available to us. Being in the forests and the mountains of this region can be just as spiritually nourishing as attending worship here on a Sunday morning.

Looking out of these windows I remember seeing a member of our community walking up and down the street holding a sign that read, "Resist." Through windows like these we can see the struggles of our lives, and of our nation, and these are not things to be kept outside, but rather welcomed into this space, and allowed to profoundly impact how we understand

what worship is, what God calls us to be as a people, and what it means to really love each other as ourselves.

These windows, and their deep theological meaning, are so central to our experience of who we are as a community that they've become part of how we introduce ourselves to those around us.

If you open your programs to the first page you are met with an image of the circular window sitting above the front door to this church. The committee that met to create our new brand chose this window as an easily recognizable architectural element of our church. The hope was that when people see this image out and about in our community it would quickly bring to mind this building, and more importantly, this community of spiritual seekers.

But we also chose the window as a symbol of the interpenetration of the outside and the inside, of light pouring in, but also of light shining out. This image of our window expresses the coming together of the challenges of our world, and the spiritual questioning and engagement that define who we are as a community. This interpenetration of the outer and the inner is as much a hallmark of who God has called us to be, as any architectural feature of our building.

Sitting in this sacred space, surrounded by these windows, with the light of the world pouring in over us, with the challenges and the joys of life not kept outside, but invited right into our worship as the very elements of worship itself, can we not hear the words of the prophet Malachi a little bit differently.

Put me to the test says the Lord, and I will open the windows of heaven for you.

Put me to the test and I will wipe away the images of the stained glass windows that block out the light of the world from coming into worship.

Put me to the test and I will open the windows and allow the light of the world to pour in over you.

These clear windows are the windows of heaven, because they show you heaven, and it looks just like this world. Heaven isn't an image of a Bible story. It is the story unfolding right here on Route 73.

And this is my blessing to you: this world, this heaven, this place.

This is my blessing to you. I won't separate you from the world by windows covered with stories, and images of tradition. I will open these windows to you, and show you that I want you to be part of the world, not alienated from it. That it is yours, and you are responsible for it.

This is my blessing to you. These windows show you that you are already home.

And this is your blessing back to the world: don't shrink from the nations, from this land, from the horror and the joy of what it means to be human. Let all of it come into this place, let all of it come in through these clear glass windows of heaven, and let it be transformed. By God's presence, and by the spiritual truths of our lives.

It is this transfigured light, which is the image of the world reimagined in the presence of God's spirit, of her Love for all of humanity, of her desire for justice and for the reality of redemption, which God asks us then to shine back out through these windows. And it is this light of transformation pouring out into the world that will become the delight of the nations, even our divided and fearful nation.

So, if you come to Sunday worship here in this church and you want to listen to the sermons and reflections I share with you, wonderful. But if you find yourself sitting in a pew, staring out of one of these windows, and being profoundly drawn into what is going on in God's world, that actually might even be better. Because that's exactly why God has opened her windows of heaven.

Amen.