

**Aug. 26, 2007: "Stowaways and New Beginnings" (Rev. Martha Hodges)**

*N.B. The sermon refers to the following poem, which was read immediately before:*

"Unwise Purchases" by George Bilgere

They sit around the house  
not doing much of anything: the boxed set  
of the complete works of Verdi, unopened.  
The complete Proust, unread:

The French-cut silk shirts  
which hang like expensive ghosts in the closet  
and make me look exactly  
like the kind of middle-aged man  
who would wear a French-cut silk shirt:

The reflector telescope I thought would unlock  
the mysteries of the heavens  
but which I only used once or twice  
to try to find something heavenly  
in the windows of the high-rise down the road,  
and which now stares disconsolately at the ceiling  
when it could be examining the Crab Nebula:

The 30-day course in Spanish  
whose text I never opened,  
whose dozen cassette tapes remain unplayed,

save for Tape One, where I never learned  
whether the suave American  
conversing with a sultry-sounding desk clerk  
at a Madrid hotel about the possibility  
of obtaining a room  
actually managed to check in.

I like to think

that one thing led to another between them  
and that by Tape Six or so  
they're happily married  
and raising a bilingual child in Seville or Terra Haute.

But I'll never know.

Suddenly I realize

I have constructed the perfect home  
for a sexy, Spanish-speaking astronomer  
who reads Proust while listening to Italian arias,

and I wonder if somewhere in this teeming city  
there lives a woman with, say,  
a fencing foil gathering dust in the corner  
near her unused easel, a rainbow of oil paints  
drying in their tubes

on the table where the violin  
she bought on a whim  
lies entombed in the permanent darkness  
of its locked case  
next to the abandoned chess set,

a woman who has always dreamed of becoming  
the kind of woman the man I've always dreamed of becoming  
has always dreamed of meeting.

And while the two of them discuss star clusters  
and Cézanne, while they fence delicately  
in Castilian Spanish to the strains of Rigoletto,

she and I will stand in the steamy kitchen,  
fixing up a little risotto,  
enjoying a modest cabernet,  
while talking over a day so ordinary  
as to seem miraculous.

## Sermon

Does this sound like anyone you know? Have you ever dreamed of reinventing yourself? Of creating a new life for yourself that is more fascinating and infinitely richer than your old one? One in which you are clearly defined by your accomplishments, no longer colorless, no longer indistinguishable from all the other poor schmucks around you?

I have. I've wondered if it might not be a good idea to get into the federal witness protection program. I'd get to move to a brand new place, assume a new identity around people who knew nothing of my story. I'd get to start over from scratch. As a teenager, in particular, I dreamed of having the freedom to be someone else – anyone I chose – when I grew up. In the meantime, I'd try on new identities – like the man in the poem, taking up Spanish one day, opera or fencing the next.

And here I am – in a brand new place. Same name, same story, same me – but another chance to begin again – to do everything right this time. Well, that's not going to happen...

And here **we** are – with a brand new chapter in the life of this congregation. A brand new chance to be whatever we choose to be. Or, rather, another chance to **become** what we want to **become**. Because we can't just decide to be something. It's a process of becoming that person, or that church, and it takes a lot of trial and error, some differences of opinion along the way, a lot of mistakes and compromises and time.

I remember standing looking out the kitchen door when I was about seven, thinking to myself, "Starting today, I'm going to love animals." On another day, it was, "Starting now, I'm going to be really good and help Mommy all the time without her

asking.” I need hardly tell you that neither of those resolutions survived more than a few hours. Reality got in the way in the form of the real me.

Because we never start over – not really – not in the sense of creating new selves from scratch. In the process of living, there’s no such thing as scratch – no such thing as a clean blank slate, attractive as that idea may be. We travel to a new place – we arrive at a new moment in our lives, which is, after all, **every** moment -- and we bring plenty of baggage with us – baggage that we’re familiar with, maybe even fond of. This is hardly news.

But we also bring along a lot of **stuff** we didn’t even realize we had. Maybe some stuff that we thought we’d discarded long ago. Our bags are full of stowaway ghosts, uninvited, waiting to pop out at us when we open up that suitcase – like the spider that my friend found she’d brought back to Ohio from California in her luggage – an inadvertent souvenir.

So what’s waiting to pop out of my ministerial suitcase, you may be wondering? Did I bring any spiders with me? And are they friendly ones, like Charlotte, or big scary ones? As you get to know me, you’ll no doubt become acquainted with some of my spiders – or some of my stowaway ghosts, to use a more inviting metaphor. And as I get to know you, I’ll become acquainted with yours. With a little luck and good will, my ghosts and your ghosts will become **our** ghosts.

Some of these stowaways are memories, traditions, preferences -- personal and collective ones. As I get to know your story, I’ll learn to identify some parts of that story that may continue to haunt you. The voices that you may hear, saying, “No, we can’t do it that way. We tried that and it didn’t work.” Or the ghosts may be the silent types. They

may make themselves known surreptitiously in the form of a certain reluctance or discomfort that it's hard to put your finger on, or an eagerness to engage others in a certain way, to adopt a certain role – an urge to repeat or recreate the familiar or successful or comfortable habits of relating that have brought you so far.

In my own case, for instance, there are some parts of the liturgy – the Sunday service – that I'm particularly fond of, particularly comfortable with, and other parts I've never really cared for. It's not hard for me to trace these preferences back to my earliest experiences of church. The trick is then to uncover the meaning of these preferences, not just their origin. How do those elements of the liturgy make me feel? How do they fit with my idea of why I am in church?

Over the next months, I will try to discover the meanings behind the preferences of this congregation. Not just liturgical preferences, but the ways that things get done here: who makes decisions, and how. Why some people are more comfortable with a decisive and outspoken style of leadership, while others are loathe to take direction from their leaders, including the minister.

The challenge, as in any new ministry, will be to find common ground between your traditions and wishes and hopes and fears – and my own. To find where our ghosts can meet in a common dance, to discover where our respective stories can stretch and merge, without sacrificing their unique authenticity.

How will we do this? Well, I plan to listen to your stories about this community. To look for patterns, and then to seek the beliefs about yourselves and your purpose that underlie those patterns. The values revealed by your individual and collective stories – and to bring them out of hiding, if they be hiding. I hope we will all take a loving and

hopeful look at some of the ghosts that may emerge as we get to know one another.

Where did **that** hope for this church come from? What is the meaning of the vision that it reveals? What is the authentic reality of this congregation that is hinted at by your story, and by how you tell that story?

What can our respective attitudes about money, about growth, about our role in the community, tell us about who we are? Then comes the hard part: Is who we really are the same as who we really want to be? What if there's a disconnect here? What do we do then?

Well, then we need to take a hard look at that question we started out with – the question of self-invention, which is really the question of how people and institutions change. Can we direct that change or are we simply borne along by the times – present and past – that have set us on our course?

Not too long ago, soon after I arrived here in Sacramento, I was driving along on one of my usual unintended tours of the outlying areas– one of my limitations that I'll freely admit to is that if it's possible to get lost, I will. I was driving along some unfamiliar road when I saw a banner posted on an overpass that read, "If you can dream it, you can do it." "What a load of bunk," I thought. This is an example of the kind of inspirational message that civic leaders like to inflict on us, especially those of us living in depressed neighborhoods such as this one clearly was. This is the great American myth, after all. The story we grow up hearing, often the story we tell ourselves, that anyone can grow up to be president, the myth of the self-made man (or, less often, woman.)

This is the story of California and of New York, in particular, my new home and my old home. The immigrant crosses the ocean to seek his or her fortune on the streets of

New York; the pioneer, the forty-niner, the Dust Bowl refugee, the illegal alien, comes to California for a new life. Of course, the American Dream comes **true** often enough to keep it alive and well – it's just not guaranteed and, more often than not, the seeker meets bitter disappointment. If you can dream it, you can do it? I don't think so.

On the other hand... if you **don't** dream it, you **can't** do it. That's true, too. Some of us really **do** read Proust, learn to play the violin, or paint, or play chess. It's not even all that uncommon. And each of those people had to have the idea, the dream, before they took the steps to make it real. Dreaming it may not be sufficient, but it certainly is essential. That part of the myth is true. Then, through the right convergence of luck, talent and determination, we just may become that person, or that community, that we envision.

Is it true that people can re-invent themselves? Or churches? Or nations? I don't think so. The stowaways in the personal and collective baggage will out, one way or another. But these stowaways, these uninvited companions, may be neutralized – or even converted into allies – if we acknowledge them, name them, and learn from them. They will shape our present and our future with or without our permission, so we may as well put them to good use.

Here's another story from my driving adventures. The night before last, I was on my way here to church for the 4<sup>th</sup> Friday dinner. I was almost here when I encountered an accident – a horrible accident on Mack Rd. that some of you may have seen. So I had to take a detour. Not a good idea for someone with no map and, as I said, no sense of direction. To make a long and ridiculous story short, I ended up driving in circles for two hours. I was so sure that if I took Calvine, I'd end up near the church. What I didn't

know is that there is a little Calvine Road to the south and west of the real Calvine – the big one. The little one goes through some residential area and then out into the country and then ends abruptly.

As one of you reminded me the other day, the definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing and expect the results to be different. I was so **sure** that this Calvine would intersect with Power Inn and then Stockton, that I drove that circuit at least four times. I saw the same moving van parked in a driveway; the same woman sitting in a lawn chair on the sidewalk, over and over again. And yet I told myself that **this** time the road would take me somewhere else, to where I wanted to be. I was lost in the Twilight Zone.

You might expect that your new minister would be bright enough to realize that if she keeps taking the same streets, she'll keep coming back to the same place. But such is the power of faith. Eventually, of course, my faith wore thin and I ventured off the tried and untrue – branched off in a totally new direction, in fact. And eventually, I saw some familiar landmarks and, though of course I headed away from here instead of the way I meant to go, at least I was getting **somewhere**.

Sometimes, it feels safer to keep taking the same wrong turns, to perpetuate old shortcomings, to obey the biddings of old ghosts, even if they keep defeating us. This is when it's helpful not to be alone – to be in community. Someone else may be able to point out where we went wrong, to suggest a better route to our hoped-for destination. Someone else may encourage us to be more adventurous, may support us when we do something brave or new or healthful.

We can **do** that for each other – We can recognize and name the neglected ghost that is demanding our attention and presenting us with unwelcome surprises when we continue to ignore it. A companion can point out to us that that violin gathering dust in the corner doesn't really seem to be our instrument. If we're fortunate in our friends, they may help us see why we thought it might be. What was the vision of who we wanted to be that prompted us to buy that violin in the first place – that fencing foil, that complete set of Verdi operas? What was the unmet need that we hoped to answer by becoming this imaginary new and improved version of ourselves? When we name these old dreams and fears, we can take a good look at them. Are they really part of who we are now? Or are they holdovers, stowaways, from our past? And if they **are** still valid and authentic, what other ways might we try to realize them?

The search for the authentic self and the fulfilled life is a spiritual mission. We long to discover who we may yet become if we listen to our deepest selves. For a congregation, this is equally true. Our shared quest will be to look at the ways we are together and, together, ask the questions about whether this is who and what we want to become. Whether our ways of doing things, the values we espouse, the vision we claim, are authentic, are working toward the fulfillment of our true purpose. If not, we will learn from them – these old shades of who we used to be. We will learn to tell the difference between hopes and convictions that are musty and outgrown – the ghosts that haunt us -- and the hopes and convictions – new **or** old visions -- that shine with truth, that beckon us toward the best, most beloved, authentic and life-giving community we can dream of becoming. This is my hope and my pledge to you.

May it be so.