

“Sanctuary Through the Ages”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

October 15, 2023

The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

On the first day of candidate week back in May of 2015, when you as a congregation were deciding whether you wanted to call me as your minister, I sat in the Fireplace Room with our middle school and high school youth groups and their advisors and mentors. Earlier in the year in one of their meetings, the high school youth group had spent some time talking about their vision for the church 100 years from now.

Given that I was sitting with teenagers growing up in the 21st century, digital natives as they are called, I imagined that this vision might include all manner of virtual gatherings or glasses that you could wear that would show you the text of hymns instead of reading from a hymnal or perhaps a robotic minister that would never need to be replaced!

One of the youth went into the vestry to fetch the poster-sized drawing they had made of their vision. In 100 years, the Unitarian Church of Montpelier would be...a hover-church.

The drawing depicted this very same building, stairs and steeple and all, hovering about 20 or 30 feet above the ground.

If you're having trouble imagining this, think Back to the Future Part II and Marty McFly escaping on a levitating skateboard.

The space between the hover church and the ground could be used for all manner of things, the group told me. Parking, religious education space.

Hover church.

Now, what really struck me at the time was that the vision that this group of young people came up with, this group of human beings that lived and breathed Facebook and Twitter (now X) and Snapchat...still imagined that in 100 years this building would be the central gathering place for our community.

Looking back on it now, their vision implies a whole other purpose. How might a church that hovers above the ground have fared in this past summer's historic and devastating flood?

I wonder what our young people would come up with today as their vision for this church in 100 years.

We return today to this building as inheritors.

We have been passed down a religious heritage of a freethinking, non-creedal faith and this building as the congregation's spiritual home. I'm sure that our church founders would be thrilled to know that young people of today's generation still imagined a future tied to this place.

Our congregation was born out of several ultimately unsuccessful attempts in the early 19th century to create a liberal Christian church with Universalist theology. These local attempts were followed by the arrival of a recently graduated seminarian and Unitarian preacher, Charles Allen, who came down from Stowe and captivated the hearts and imaginations of those in town who were seeking an unorthodox Christian message. This included many of the same people who had attempted to start a Universalist church in Montpelier.

This time, the congregation's attempts to solidify into a covenanted community stuck.

They started as a dozen people or so and then grew in number. Our early church ancestors first met in what was then called the Village Hall. Shortly afterward, they moved to the Court House and held meetings there for more than a year. During this time, they started a Sunday School for the religious education of children.

In December of 1864, they formed a society under the name "The Montpelier Independent Meeting House Society." The following March they began building the structure in which we are now gathered on the northwest corner of Main and School Streets. This place was dedicated on January 25, 1866 under the name "The Church of the Messiah." The cost of the land, the building, and the organ at the time was about \$20,000.

Today, we will likely spend close to ten times that amount to repair the building after this past July's flood and to replace what was lost.

Clearly, much has changed since the 1860s.

Throughout this congregation's and this building's close to one hundred and sixty year history, this church has experienced much change, some of it forced upon us.

Natural disaster has been one of these unwelcome yet repeated sources of crisis and change.

The church and the wider community have not been strangers to flooding over the last two centuries. Local historian, Paul Heller, describes this history at great length in a Times Argus article shortly after the July flood.¹

In 1810, twenty-three years after the first Europeans began clearing land and building permanent structures at the confluence of the Winooski and North Branch rivers, water overflowed the banks and submerged all the lower parts of Main and State Streets. In the Great Flood of 1828, water rose so high that it swept away two bridges and a barn on the North Branch. Winter flooding due to ice jams was also a common occurrence in the newly settled town. Flooding continued into the next century.

We might wonder about those who came before us as caretakers of this place. I have wondered, though have not yet discovered any clear answers, why this particular site was chosen. Apparently, this is where the old Union House, a hotel and tavern, was located before it was destroyed by fire. As late as 1864, the year when ground was broken for the building of this church, this corner was considered an eyesore.

Even though downtown Montpelier flooded repeatedly in the years after settlement by Europeans, the people persisted in developing this place as a site of economic activity and to build homes and places of worship. Those who came before us here proceeded with the belief that this land was theirs to master and control. That human hands and ingenuity could solve any problem.

There were some who questioned the wisdom of building in an area so prone to flooding and instead set their sites on higher ground. Some, like Rev. William Nichols, who served this church in the 1920s, bemoaned the changes to the natural landscape that resulted from human efforts to manage the waters. In the years that followed the Great Flood of 1927 and the building of the

¹ Paul Heller, "An old story: High water in Montpelier," The Times Argus, July 21, 2023, https://www.timesargus.com/211/an-old-story-high-water-in-montpelier/article_e9155afd-d495-5da1-ae70-83546072132d.html

Wrightsville Dam, he wrote of his concern that all the new development and roads would invite even more visitors and “despoilers” of Vermont. Change is not always welcome.

We might also wonder how our church ancestors faced such critical moments that emerged as they went about trying to live our their covenant and endeavored to be a church community.

In the wake of the Great Flood of 1927, which was truly catastrophic for the city, Rev. Nichols, shared a message with members of congregations in the area. He called upon them to, of course, rebuild their homes, rebuild their businesses, and also to turn their attention to the rebuilding of their spiritual lives. Not just their places of worship, but to the intangible parts of their spiritual community.

He said: “We have certainly had it brought home to us very closely in these days that it is the spiritual values which are indestructible and enduring. The prompt lending of hands, the opening of homes, the willing offering of volunteer work, the cheerful greetings, the sympathetic inquiries, the outpouring of gifts near and far...all of these are the fruiting of the spiritual tree nurtured in bygone days, and now blessing us in this hour of our need...When I say re-establish your churches, I am thinking not merely of the temple made with hands. I am referring much more to the deep spiritual structure which depends upon the loyalty and devotion of your hearts and minds...If in the next decade...you can correspondingly increase your spiritual life, then... whole future generations will benefit and point back to these days as heroic times.”²

Now, nearly one hundred years later, we are one of those future generations who Rev. Nichols spoke of. Indeed, we have benefited from the devotion of those members of this congregation who worked to re-establish this church in the wake of that disaster and who tended to the deep spiritual structure at the core.

One hundred years after that Great Flood and nearly one hundred and sixty years after this church’s founding, this building and this community are still here - alive, vital, purposeful.

In this generation, we have witnessed and participated in the fruiting of our spiritual tree in the wake of this latest crisis. In the days following the July flood, our community and people beyond promptly lent helping hands and willingly offered their volunteer efforts. You passed buckets of mud from hand to hand, mopped floors, made meals for those whose homes were so painfully

² From “After the Flood: A Sermon in time of disaster,” printed in *The Christian Register*, February 9, 1928.

destroyed. Some of you have offered your gifts of discernment and decision-making in coordinating the extraordinary effort it has taken to get to this point.

People and organizations near and far, including our Unitarian Universalist Association Disaster Relief Fund, have gifted us with funds to support us in the necessary repairs to reopen this home for our spirits and vital community gathering place.

The roots of this love and generosity have been nurtured by generations before us and now are nurtured in the present day.

And, just like in 1927, we are now confronted with our own crossroads.

Yet again, our congregation is presented with a moment in which we choose together how we emerge from a time of crisis.

We decide through our action and inaction, through our words and through our silence, whether and how we carry forward the spiritual legacy we have been handed by previous generations.

Sean Neil-Barron writes: “The history of the church is the history of human enterprise, evolving in its sights and sounds, yet revolving always around its core...The history of your church is the launch pad from which you spring—into action or disarray. Each day your church is born.”

And so, what if today is the day this church is born?

What will we claim as our future from this day forward?

The Governing Board has set a priority for engaging the whole congregation in conversations of discernment around our future in this building as we recognize the need for climate resilience and adaptation.

There will likely be differences in opinion as this process unfolds. Many of you have witnessed, and are a part of, a similar, lively conversation that has engaged many voices and many perspectives in our broader community as our whole city and beyond discerns a path forward in our climate-changed world. And, we too, as a church community are on this path of discernment. We will talk to one another, ponder the possibilities, and build on and create a legacy with our decisions and actions.

One hundred years from now, when future generations look back, what will they say they have inherited from us, their religious ancestors?

Will they be perched high above the water-soaked ground in their hover church?

Will they be meeting in a new home in which to grow their spirits, nurture their children, mourn the dead, and care for one another?

We don't have the luxury of another one hundred years to respond to this moment of crisis. We need to act and respond now without the clarity or assurance of whether we are indeed taking the best course of action.

Yet, we do so guided by the values of our faith. Guided by the centrality of Love, the knowledge of our interdependence, the inclusion of all people, the embrace of transformation towards greater justice, wholeness, and peace.

When the Rev. Frederic Frothingham delivered the sermon at the dedication of this church in 1866, he spoke of the "holy work" that the founders of this church began.

Despite all that is uncertain, we can have faith in our holy work - our purpose as a community - and in this community of people covenanted to carry out that work together: to be a welcoming and peaceful refuge for all people, to strive together in love, to be open to life's questions and to search for truth and meaning, to serve the needs of others, and to live on this earth as if we are part of an interdependent web of existence.

As we carry on the heritage we have been given, let us also think of those who will inherit this faith and this community from us. May they look back on us and see a reflection of themselves. May they see our faithful stewardship and our dedication to the holy work that transforms ourselves and our world.

So may it be.