

September 7, 2008

Rev. Anne M. Rosebrock

MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
IMAGINE MERIDIAN: ON YOUR MARK

1 Peter 1:13-16

Happy WHAM! It is good to see you! It has been a wonderful summer at Meridian Street with a variety of ministries and outreach projects, but there is nothing like the energy that comes with kicking off fall ministry. What's Happening at Meridian? God is in our midst and making us new! It is together, connected to God and to each other, that we will perceive God's moving us forward as God's people of faith!

Let us pray: Open our hearts and sharpen our senses to perceive your presence and your will. Connect us soul to soul to each other and to your most holy spirit in our midst. Amen.

Scripture: 1 Peter 1:13-16

Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: Be holy, because I am holy. Lev. 11:44, 45

We step into our future today hearing God's call to us to be holy. Forgiven, blessed and empowered we have a purpose, a plan and now ask God to breathe new life and energy into the ministries of this community of faith.

I stayed up far too late many a night to watch the Olympics this summer. Many of you were sporting dark circles under your eyes as well so I know that I was not alone. I especially enjoyed the swimming and the track and field events. In both sports there is a prescribed process for starting. Each of the athletes prepares for the competition as he or she awaits the words, "On Your Mark." With those words, the athletes prepare mind, body and spirit for the start of the race.

The sprinters on the track begin by placing a foot in the starting block and crouching down into the starting position. "On Your Mark" gives them a brief moment of preparation.

"Prepare your minds for action" from the reading in 1 Peter has a similar emphasis as the words "on your mark." Both phrases are a prelude to action.

The runners prepare to explode off the starting blocks and give their all running down the track. The author of 1 Peter was encouraging the mental preparation needed before taking specific, intentional action shaping a life of faith. Both are a call to intentional focus, shutting out all distractions and centering on the task of the moment. They are words that usher the future into the present.

Imagine all the training those athletes have endured, the sacrifices they had experienced, the challenges they have faced. The expectations of God for the people of God are high. The Hebrew Scriptures speak over and over again about God's dream for God's people. That dream includes intentional focus, daily practices, sacrifices and challenges. The shaping of our lives in Christ as individuals and even more importantly as a community of faith involves discipline and determination.

Living our faith does not come easily, but it brings with it life beyond our wildest dreams as we are shaped by God's grace and holiness.

Living out our faith is not a sport; it is a lifestyle. Faith is dynamic and ever changing. I began today's sermon in my epistle on Thursday. I quoted Kenneth Stokes in that epistle. Stokes encourages people of faith to stop considering faith as something static and inflexible, as a possession and declares that faith is not a noun but a verb, an action verb. Faithing is the practice of God's people, according to Stokes. Faithing is ever focused, ever challenging, and completely dynamic in nature. It is disciplined living focused on an eternal relationship with the Divine.

What's happening at Meridian Street? We are faithing our way into our future. The Imagine Meridian: A Plan for Change document is the framework that brings the future into the present. The document itself is fluid and dynamic as we begin to live into it. Our future will be determined not by a handful of leaders in this church, but by the entire congregation faithfully following the teachings and expectations of our leader Jesus Christ. This document is not finished and it is never going to be perfect, but it does identify the areas of ministry where we will place our attention as we strive to grow ever more devoted to God's vision for us. Together, we will continue the gradual journey of moving onto perfection. Will we perfectly execute this plan? No, but we will strive to faithfully live into this plan as we address our strengths and our weaknesses as a holy community.

Our ultimate mark, if you will, is the heart of God. Our transformation becomes reality as we grow obedient to the teachings of Christ and live out the love of God.

Through the love of God, Jesus Christ asks of his disciples to change the world, nothing more, but nothing less. Our challenge is enormous and at the same time utterly attainable through the power and presence of God in this Body of Christ, in this community of faith. It requires that our faithing is united as we minister together and devoted as we allow God to lead us.

God's prevenient grace prepares hearts and minds to begin the journey with God. God initiates! God prepares! God's prevenient grace is the "on the mark" experience; it prepares our minds and hearts for action, for an encounter with Christ. Imagine Meridian: A Plan for Change is our preparation for action. With the prayer and dedication of many, the plan lifts six initiatives for ministry that require our faithful attention. The plan provides us direction, but the heart and soul of the plan will come to life as we determine God's leading for us. This is a "we" plan, it is a plan dependent on this Body of Christ working together to bring our future to life as we partner with the Divine and with each other. The goals and objectives provide the first steps that begin to shape our future.

On Your Mark Meridian Street! Step one begins today: Prepare your minds and hearts for action. First and foremost we are called to pray. You and I are going pray over this plan. We are not just to say that we pray, but we are actually going to make time and space in our lives to pray for God's direction. We will allow scripture to shape our vision and pray that we will be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst. We will not sit back and say, "somebody will pick up that ministry," we will all participate in partnership with Christ in ministry. This plan gets its life and breath from the Holy Spirit and from your participation. We will pray in every committee meeting, in small groups and as a congregation concerning the ministries that will find life from this plan.

Step two: We will prioritize. We will not complete this plan quickly. Don't pray for a week and then consider that part of the process finished. Pray continuously as this process will take time. Together we will identify what will be our first priorities as well as finding a place for everyone to participate.

Step three: Explore ways in which you can participate. Prepare your minds for action. Dedicate yourself to living in new ways within the congregation.

Elevate your expectations for your relationship with God and with this community of faith. There is no greater relationship in your life or mine than our love relationship with God. There is no more important influence in our lives on this earth than this Body of Christ. Together, faithing will lead us toward extraordinary, abundant living! United we grow as disciples to live justly and generously, to provide hope and comfort, offer healing and risk taking all in the name of the radical Jesus Christ.

Step five: Imagine holy living; holy loving; holy hope! As we continue to root ourselves in God's holiness and as we grow obedient to the teachings of Christ we will continue to develop our willingness to walk in the ways of justice and peace.

On Your Mark Meridian Street! We see the horizon before us and pause in this moment to prepare this Body of Christ to align our ways with the ways of God. Read the Plan for Change. You will find the abbreviated plan at the entrances. Attend the Congregational Meetings where you can explore the plan in more detail. Find your place in ministry and allow the grace of God to draw you forward with obedience and holiness. The gifts of God have already been given to us, as Easter people may our faithing lead us toward God's holiness.

We are on our mark, ready and willing to step out as disciples of Christ to change this church and this community and the world. God asks no more of us, but God asks no less of us!

I read a story once about a church that was celebrating its 100th anniversary. There was a huge celebration. People came from all over the country to join in the celebration. The festivities included a banquet where many individuals were honored for their service. One remarkable feature of the celebration was the work of a church member who wrote down the names of the members of that church over the last one hundred years. The list contained 9,900 names. What strikes me is the lives of nearly 10,000 people had been impacted by the presence of that small community of faith. Their part of the world was indeed changed because of that Body of

Christ in that place. Nearly 10,000 people over the years living in community with God and one another as they practiced loving neighbor, as they shared communion together and rejoiced in baptisms, as they provided teaching of the scriptures and raised their children within the faith tradition, as they prayed together, as they rejoiced together and mourned together, as they shaped the lives of children through the grace of God, as they provided outreach to their community in the name of Jesus Christ, as they partnered with other people of faith to struggle with the issues that were presented to their community over time. Nearly 10,000 people who became members, not to mention the influence upon the constituents and guests, who encountered the love of God through that church at various times.

Meridian Street, imagine the lives that have been touched by this community of faith over the last 187 years. Our horizon is the will of God and we are called to be shaped by God's will not only as individuals but as a community. God is not done with us yet. God is doing a new thing within this community. It is time to forge the "we" of Meridian Street. That "we" is made up of the Spirit of God in our midst and everyone who walks into this sacred space. That "we" includes all those with whom we are in ministry in this neighborhood, this city, this country and around the world. That "we" is rooted in the kingdom of God that Jesus taught about each and every day of his ministry. A kingdom that he declared was near to us, a kingdom that is still being revealed before us, a kingdom that is our ultimate goal and home.

The Plan for Change comes to us as the framework, not the final product. It is a process that is not meant to be built and executed by a few, but rather is an invitation to the whole Body of Christ at Meridian Street to shape and participate in. Faithing does not invite us to sit back and watch, but to find ways to deploy the energy, spirit and gifts that God has given us to deepen our relationship with the Divine and with this community of faith. Look around, these are not just strangers in the pews, these are not just friends on the journey of life, these are the disciples of Christ at Meridian Street United Methodist Church; they are the very people who God has called to change this world, they are your partners in transformation, they are your community of grace, they are your hope and your support.

Our mark is the kingdom of God, our purpose to nurture our collective relationship with God and each other and our mission is to invite others into a love relationship with God. It is all driven by the love of God for humanity and we, this church, God's congregation at Meridian Street continues to develop as a place of grace, a community of justice and compassion, an extended family of hope and a people devoted to our partnership with God and one another as we truly live as God's holy and blessed children.