

“Open the Door”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
For St. Andrew’s Day and Advent 1,
November 29, 2015.

Scripture Readings: Revelation 3:20-22

John 10:7-10

(by The Rev. Catherine Somerville and the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Happy St. Andrew’s Day.

Happy Advent.

As Bill and I were thinking about this service, we wanted to hold up both of those pieces. We wanted this service to celebrate the history and vision of this congregation, to celebrate who and what St. Andrew’s United Church is all about, just as we wanted to honour the beginning of this sacred season of preparation known as Advent. The image of an open door came to us as a way we might do just that.

After all, Advent is a time of looking for openings. As the world speeds up in its own preparations for Christmas, Christians pause to look and listen. Our preparations are different than the world outside these doors. Sure, we have parties. We decorate our space. We eat. But we also light candles and sing songs that aren’t traditional Christmas carols. It is the work of setting aside intentional time in order to make ourselves ready for the birth of something new in us. Our work is prayerful; it is about making spaces in our living; it is about centering and listening. It is joyful, anticipatory. As we make our way through Advent days, we seek out openings through which we might extend care for others and share the good news we know with a world in need. This is Advent- a time of making ready so that we are ready, so that new life may be borne in us.

A door can be many things. It can be opened in welcome. It can be shut for privacy or safety. It can be slammed in anger. It can be left ajar as an invitation.

Our lives can be like open doors. When I open the door of my heart to God, I do more than extend a smile of recognition or a nod of welcome. I open myself to grow and change in ways I may never dream likely. I risk being transformed, bettered by goodness. The pattern of this transformation parallels the physical movement of going through a doorway. First, I approach the door in order to move beyond where I am now. If the door is closed when I get to it, I open it. Sometimes the door is locked and a key is needed to allow access to the space that lies beyond. As I open the door and prepare to step forward, I move across

the threshold, the middle part of the doorway. I make a decision about the direction I want to go, either forward or backward across the threshold. With either direction, I eventually close the door behind me and move on.

The same process happens in me, when life situations and graced moments come as invitation. I may open the door and walk through. I may decide to add the intentions of Advent to my December life, or I may meet a closed door and decide not to go there.

This year, we invite you to open the door of your life to God.

In 1972, when St. Andrew's Place was opened, part of the dream for the construction, was to create doors that would make a statement. Artist Jordi Bonet was commissioned. Born in Spain, he spent his life in St. Hilaire, Quebec. His works have graced the John F. Kennedy airport and the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. Mr Bonet was in attendance when St. Andrew's place was opened. He died in 1979. We carry his legacy and artistic vision with us to this day. His art is an important part of our identity.

He created the flame sculpture which is over our main doors on Larch Street.



The peace chapel doors declare "peace" in twelve languages. The outer door is an invitation to all, that they may enter this place of peace. The inner panel depicts the hand of God, a reminder that we are held in God's hands, just as Psalm 91 suggests: "I will hold you in the palm of my hand."

The sanctuary doors contain six separate panels, and these doors each offer an invitational statement.



The words on the outside panels, as you enter the church, are taken from John's gospel, referencing the times Jesus said, "I am."

"I am the resurrection and the life." "I am the door." "I am the light of the world."

The inside panels speak of assurance and blessing to those who leave this space and move into the world.



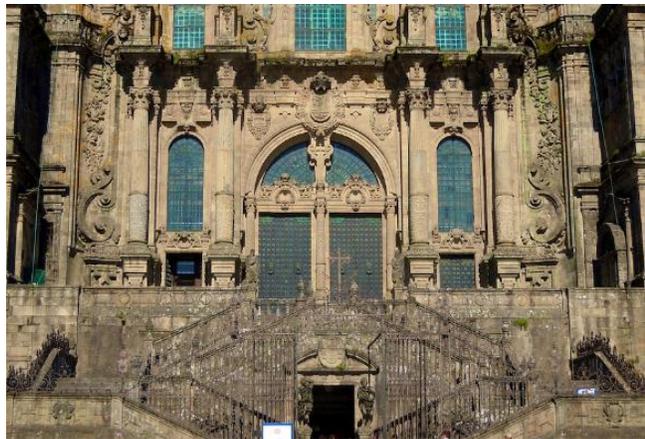
"God is my hope;" "Come Holy Spirit, Come. Come as the Fire and Burn. Come as the Wind and Cleanse. Come as the Light and Reveal. Convict, Convert, Consecrate, until we are Wholly Thine;" "Love"- reminding those who pass through that our mission is to be a people of love.

These doors are a visual reminder of our calling and our purpose - to respond to the invitation of the one who called himself the door, to follow the light of his

path, and discover life in him. When we leave, we move into the world with hope and love planted in us by the gift of God's spirit.

As Bill and I learned more about the St. Andrew's doors, we also tapped into our own door stories. We realized that each of us had a door story, something that added a piece of meaning to our lives.

Mine comes from my Camino experience, when I walked the western route up the coast of Spain from the Portuguese border to Santiago, the great cathedral that is the home to the remains of St. James. I told you the story of making that trip, of walking about 20 miles every day, and being rather underwhelmed when we reached the church as our destination, because today it is packed with tourists, and you had to line up for everything. It did not have a sacred feel at all. I was exhausted and covered with mud when I walked through the doors. At the time, we just wanted to get inside. But the next day, after we had taken off our hiking boots and rested our weary bones, I went back and took a closer look at those doors. They are called "Glory Doors," for good reason. (Look at them!)



What is most interesting, though, when you walk through those doors, the first thing you see is a huge stone pillar, which contains a worn away spot, about shoulder-height. The tradition is that when a pilgrim arrives at Santiago, the pilgrim is to place her hand on that spot, as a way of marking her arrival.



I marvelled at the knowledge that a thousand years of pilgrims have put their hands there... and I was one of them. Moments like that fill me with wonder and more than a fair dose of humility, for I begin to remember that I am part of a vast family of believers, who have carried a story in our hearts, and because of a deep planted love, we will attempt the craziest, scariest,

loveliest things, in order to better know God. Such moments place me in the company of Moses standing on holy ground, thinking we can't but being told that we can, and like Ruth, taking a deep breath and saying out loud, that we are willing to go where God needs us. We are like the disciples who leave the familiar and travel into newness. We do it because God nudges and gives us dreams.

And that is how we live, trusting when we do not know the ending of the story, but we believe that we are called to hold onto hope when there are no words left to say, and follow because we have heard an invitation. The door I have opened has led me to a place of wonder and awe.

Bill has a story to share with you now.... His story is about the gift of welcome and hospitality that a door can bring to one, and a gate that typifies welcome to a young child.

Early in my school life, a program was developed to make sure neighbourhoods had homes with welcoming signs in case children felt fearful or afraid when going to and from school. Several homes had such signs, but in many ways they were not needed, or helpful. We knew the safe places to go, the homes in which we would be welcomed. We did not expect to face harm or disaster going to and from school, but we certainly knew the places where caring people would be glad to see us if we did.

The need for safety sparked the formation of the Neighbourhood Watch program in 1970 in Detroit, as neighbourhoods sought people to band together to look out for one another as the crime rate grew exponentially, even in broad daylight. By 1982 the Neighbourhood Watch program, popular in major cities throughout the United States, started to become a major program within Canada.

We need to know that the doors of our life are safe and welcoming. That is where this painting comes in. It was purchased at the Open Door art show held here within the sanctuary of St. Andrew's United Church over 10 years ago.

The painter, John Keast, was one of the featured artists at that show. John and the co-featured artist, Doug Hook, held an annual sale in Bruce Mines (which still continues today even though John recently died) entitled "Four and Friends." Part of the planning of that art sale was to issue a scholarship to a young artist who won a juried competition, and that young artist also was among the "friends" who displayed samples of their work at the show.

And so as a memento of that "Open Door" sale I decided I would purchase one of John's paintings – a memento and a thanks for the time he and Doug spent on our behalf to make this event so successful.

I had my eye on two different paintings. I forget the scene of the second one, as the one I eventually purchased is before you. I asked John to tell me the story of the two paintings, and I knew the story would determine which one I was supposed to buy.

This one was from his childhood, entitled “Dreams from my Childhood.” I learned a few years later when I had a cousin of John’s in the congregation I served in Kitchener that he grew up in the Fergus area, outside of Guelph. This farm pictured was down the road from John’s childhood abode. You can see on close examination that the gate of the fence across the front yard is ajar. That is deliberate.



The woman who lived in that home was known by all of the children – she was a friendly, welcoming, caring person who had a large garden, and always ready to share produce from that garden. She lived alone, but the gate that is ajar in this picture symbolized the open heart of the person who lived there. And children cannot be tricked – they know when an open gate, or an open door, reflects a person’s open heart.

An open gate, that reminds a grown child of a woman with an open heart, and that helps to preserve the memory of an artist with an open heart to the world. That’s what true artists have – open hearts to the world around them. A healthy childhood creates dreams of openness to others. Advent reminds us of those dreams.

One final picture.... Perhaps the best known doorway of all. The message behind this familiar image comes from one of the lessons Gail read to us earlier. The invitation is from Jesus, standing at a door, holding a lantern, because he called himself “light”, and knocking at a door that has no handle on the outside. The trick in this picture is that the door must be opened from the inside. It is an image about our response to love’s beckoning.

These are the images we invite you to hold through your Advent days. Hold onto the clues they offer as together we make our way towards the manger. Remember the



invitation from the one who told us he would always be with us, the one known as "I am." Walk into the world with hope and carry love in your heart. Look for moments that will fill you with wonder. Make the intentional decision not to walk into Christmas with cynicism and fear. Rather, listen for whispers of angels and the hum of hallelujahs. And finally, be a place of welcome. Open your doors in hospitality and invitation.

Let us pray... Trusted and wise companion, bless me with reminders of all the ways you travel with me. Continue to guide me lovingly as I go on my way. Strengthen and renew my hope daily. I open the door of my heart to you. I open the door. **Amen.**