

A saga of faith

Isaiah 9:2; Psalm 27: 1, 4; I Corinthians 1: 10-11; Matthew 4: 12-23

[Augsburg College Chapel, 25 January 2008]

- The Augsburg Board of Regents are with us this morning as they commence their winter meetings over the next day, and among the many items of discussion and deliberation they will explore is a theme that has been chosen as part of a series of topics for their meetings this year. Similar to the AGES themes we considered last year as a community – abundance, generosity, engagement and service – this year’s themes form an acronym, CUSP, as on the cusp of something, a fitting way to describe Augsburg’s promising position. At their September meeting, we explored the “C” of cusp, our connections to the Lutheran church. At this meeting, we are linking the second and third themes – our urban setting and our saga (or story) as a college. In May, we will consider the final theme, our place, especially fitting given conversations about the campus master plan and the new signature academic building which will occupy our time.
- For this morning, though, I want to spend some time exploring the idea of saga, especially as it pertains to our unfolding saga of faith.
- What is a saga? My understanding of the concept of saga comes from research done by Burton Clark on what it is that creates a distinctive character and identity for colleges and universities. It is more than a story – all of us have stories. A saga is more of a mythology – a sense of history and purpose and direction that is told in vocabulary and narrative that accounts for a college’s DNA, its essence even – it abides in the sort of people, programs and values that define an institution.
- Clark contends that not every institution has a saga – sometimes that is a function of not being true to founding values, at other times it can be occasioned by a change of location or core mission, still other institutions have not found a way to link their pasts, presents and futures in a coherent narrative. I believe deeply that Augsburg has a saga, and it runs deep in the culture and meaning of our work here together. Our recent work on a DVD recounting Augsburg’s history surfaced several themes that are central to our saga – I think you will recognize them: immigrant sensibility, freedom, access to quality education for all, serving the neighbor. Perhaps the central part of our saga, though, is imbedded in our Christian faith tradition.
- Our scripture readings for this morning, assigned for the 3rd Sunday in Epiphany, offer this remarkable span of salvation history (I felt the need to include portions of all four texts assigned for Sunday because they help tell God’s story so well) – this is the saga in which God’s faithful people must understand their own sagas...it is in the intersection of Augsburg’s life with this saga of salvation that we find our true and abiding foundation
- Allow me to lift up three themes from God’s word that seem relevant for our understanding of Augsburg’s saga of faith:
- *Inquiry in the temple* (Psalm 27: 4) – This, in the end, must be our most remarkable commitment – to believe that we are called to serve our neighbor, and that this bold vision begins with our core work linked to our deep faith – inquiry in the temple. Douglas John Hall, who visited our campus in fall 2006 to deliver the Christensen lectures remarked that he believed the church would look very different in 40 years from what it looks like now because faithful people would need to be much more reflective than they have been about why they are part of the Christian community. Hall thought the church would look more like a synagogue, a place in which study

and worship intersect and gain from each other. Inquiry in the temple – learning that is informed by faith (even by other faiths), that considers questions and issues of faith, that seeks to honor and celebrate the ways in which faith and learning together provide a basis for responsible and faithful lives in the world – is the legacy of Augsburg College, a legacy that is central to our saga and that sets us apart from many other sister institutions, including some of those who share our faith tradition!

- *The challenge of unity* (1 Corinthians 1: 10-11) – I think that Paul's words to the faithful at Corinth are loaded with the promise of unity in the midst of the reality of disunity and fragmentation. The real world is full of fragmentation, neighbor from neighbor, country from country, religion from religion – and in our disunity the ways of scarcity and fear win out. Paul knew this as he addressed the Corinthians – and he urged them to be of one mind in Christ, even as they celebrated their diverse gifts. I tend to think that the Corinthians don't have much on us (or our ancestors!) – we aspire to be one college and yet our divisions are manifold. I'm certainly not naïve to think that just because we say we are one college that we will not be without division and fragmentation in our lives together. That tension between unity and disunity is found throughout our history – it was in the early Norwegian-American community in our region (why do you think there are so many Lutheran churches and colleges in our region – it wasn't necessarily because of need, it was because we didn't agree). And yet today our lives are full of tensions – paradoxes even – between the liberal arts and professional studies, between day and weekend student populations, between access and excellence. We live in those tensions but we also live with the promise of unity. And like Paul – realist that he may have been – we are called not to give in to our divisions, but to celebrate the promise of unity that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord. At once both sinful and saved – that great Lutheran doctrine – we are freed to live in the tensions, to learn from each other, to celebrate our various gifts, and then to go forward as a college as our ancestors did before us.

- *Light in the midst of darkness* – In both Isaiah and Matthew, we read these wonderful words about the people who walked in darkness and now have seen a great light. Ours is a legacy and saga of light in the midst of darkness – the light of knowledge and truth, the light of service, the light of faith, a light in the city. One of the leaders of the Faith in the City partnership of which we are a part said that he loves our partnership with our Lutheran colleagues because it was our common ancestors who came to this place and who, over the course of a century and more, built institutions to serve the people – hospitals, seminaries, colleges, social service agencies, homes for seniors, businesses and so on – and now we have the special obligation as their successors to ensure that these neighborhoods where we are planted have all the best that we can give so that we might pay back and forward the gifts of our ancestors. That is why our saga includes all of our neighbors here in Cedar-Riverside and nearby because these have always been our neighbors (though their identities and concerns have changed over the years), and our saga includes serving them so that they might know the light that is our gift. This is why Campus Kitchens and our partnership with Trinity to do after-school programs for the Somali youth and our efforts with the Native peoples who live nearby are all so essential to our identity and purpose. We are a light in the darkness. This is our continuing saga.

- The power of this intersection of our institutional saga with God's salvation history is that finally, as the Psalmist proclaims, we navigate our lives trusting in the fact that we already have been saved, and though we don't know exactly what treacherous and

unsure fate awaits us – and whether or not we will always know for sure that God is with us – we believe, that is the gift of our baptism, and therefore our saga of faith goes on...

- During this Epiphany season, we know that our saga of faith goes on because of our common baptisms. One last story, a baptism story. Our youngest, Maya, was surrounded by family and friends at her baptism, including her older brother, Thomas. As my dad baptized her in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, spilling the ceremonial water over her head, Maya let out a great cry, and her brother, always quick to get a word in, shouted out for the entire congregation to hear, “Maya, shake it off like a dog.” As much as we might like to shake off the role of faith in our lives – to deny the power of our saga: inquiry in the temple, the promise of unity even when it seems so hard, and the claim to be the light in the darkness – it is, of course, impossible to do – thanks be to God! Amen.