

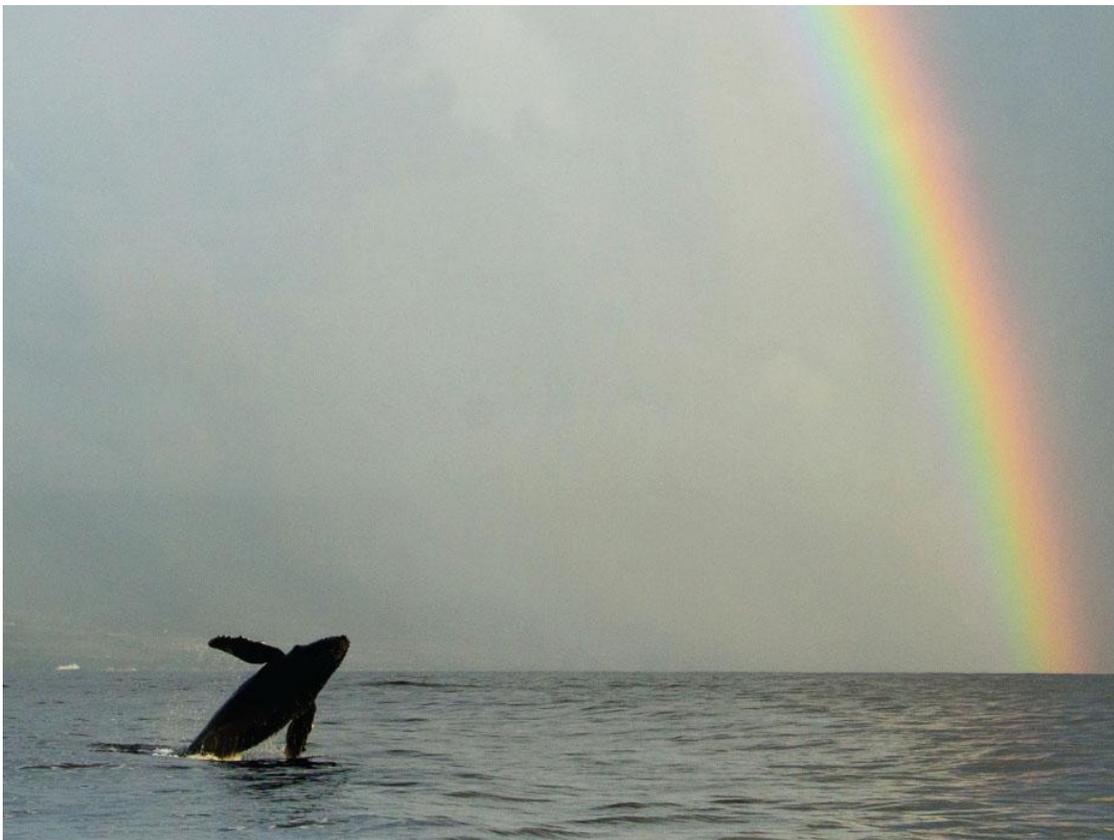


Welcome!

First Congregational Church
of Webster Groves
United Church of Christ

Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

FEBRUARY 21, 2021
FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT



*We respond to God's call by welcoming everyone
regardless of ability, age, ethnicity, race, gender identity,
sexual orientation or socio-economic background.*

*To proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ,
we affirm that all may share in the full life, ministry, fellowship,
responsibilities and blessing of our congregation.*

*No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey,
you are welcome here.*

Order of Worship

PRELUDE

Lift Every Voice and Sing

J. Ros. Johnson
arr. Roland Carter

WELCOME

Roger Barnes, *Announcer*

TOLLING OF THE BELL

LIGHTING OF THE CANDLES

RAISING THE COVENANT

Covenant of 1977

We who are called of God into this Christian community covenant together: to seek to know the will of God, to experience the joy and struggle of discipleship, to proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, and to work for peace and justice among all people. We trust God's promise of grace and forgiveness and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our trials and rejoicing.

HYMN

God of the Sparrow

Jaroslav Vajda

God of the sparrow, God of the whale,
God of the swirling stars,
How does the creature say Awe?
How does the creature say Praise?

God of the earthquake, God of the storm,
God of the trumpet blast,
How does the creature cry Woe?
How does the creature cry Save?

God of the rainbow, God of the cross,
God of the empty grave,
How does the creature say Grace?
How does the creature say Thanks?

God of the ages, God near at hand,
God of the loving heart,
How do your children say Joy?
How do your children say Home?

RITUAL OF APPROACH (Unison)

Invitation to Confession (Responsive – Leader; **People**)

During the six weeks of Lent, as we prepare our hearts for the festival of Easter, we begin our worship not with our usual Prayer of Approach but with a ritual of approach, including words of confession and assurance. I invite you to join me now, responsively, in our morning's ritual:

Jesus, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof,

But only say the word, and your servant will be healed.

Let us confess our sins.

Confession (Responsive)

Psalm 25:1-7, adapted

To you, holy ONE, we lift up our souls.

O God, in you we trust; do not let us be put to shame.

Do not let us who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly

treacherous.

Make us to know your ways, holy ONE; teach us your paths. Lead us in your truth, and teach us, for you are the God of our salvation.

Be mindful of your mercy, holy ONE, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.

Do not remember our sins or our transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember us, for your goodness' sake, holy ONE!

Silence for Personal Confession

Words of Assurance (Responsive)

Psalm 25:8-10

Good and upright is the holy ONE; therefore are sinners instructed in the way.

God leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble the proper way.

All the paths of the holy ONE are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep God's covenant and decrees.

Amen.

NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY

Halley Kim, *Pastoral Assistant*

THE WORD SHARED

From the Law

Genesis 9:8-17

Elston McCowan, *Student Pastor*

God said to Noah and to his [family] with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you – the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth."

God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

From the Epistles

1 Peter 3:18-22

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Pastor*

A reading from the first letter attributed to the apostle Peter, the third chapter. The passage we are reading begins with the words of an ancient hymn; its poetry is lost in most English translations. But we've tried to recapture it here, in the opening lines:

For also Christ once suffered for sinfulness,
the righteous for the unrighteous,
so that you might be guided unto God:
put to death (indeed!) in the flesh
but being made alive in the Spirit!

who traveled to imprisoned spirits, then proclaimed...

In the past, these spirits were disobedient—as when God patiently waited during the time of Noah. Noah built an ark in which a few (that is, eight) lives were rescued through water.

Baptism is like that. It saves you—not because it removes dirt from your body but

because it is the mark of a good conscience toward God—through the resurrection of Jesus the Anointed, who went into heaven and is right at God’s side, ruling over all angels, authorities, and powers.

Pause.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

Thanks be to God.

MESSAGE OF THE DAY

“At Sea”

Rev. Denoon

A boat on the water filled with animals and eight people. You’ve certainly heard a lot about it, and I haven’t very much to add. In fact, I may only have something to remind you. And that is this...

We are all – everyone, every person on the planet and every living and non-living thing – here and only here. There may be someday when we can put human beings on Mars the way that the Perseverance lander just set down, and the two orbiters from China and the United Arab Emirates. But the limits of time, space, and even relativity will prevent us from escaping this solar system in anything that looks like a future we can imagine.

We are here and only here. And we’re at sea. There is no beyond, this side of the grave, that doesn’t spell destruction. There is no escaping our embodiment, except wishfully and imaginatively.

Everyone is at sea like that precious little craft in that frightening epic story. And furthermore, for everyone but the religious, our situation either has to be faced with a stiff upper lip or a sense of such surrender that I am not sure my old heart could bear it. Indeed, the religious life has all the same doubts and fears as the secular life, hasn’t it. Our only possible advantage may be seen in our operating understanding that living this life makes sense in a cosmic and ultimate way.

Some of us believe that enduring will grant us a reward in the long term. God will gaze upon us with gratitude and say either, “You did your best, given your situation,” or “Well done, thou good and faithful servant,” and pass us into the life of God.

For others our endurance has more of a reward in the present (and I count myself in this camp). Despite all the hardship, absurdity, and heartbreak, we are privileged to exist at once with a loving God who has come to understand our ways of finding meaning and purpose, even in our suffering, and with a growingly beloved community in people and, surely, a world with whom and with which we share an intimate and abiding Holy Spirit. You have me, I have you, and we all have God. And in time and beyond time, that relationship shall never end. Thus, we may be at sea, but we are at sea with God.

By all appearances, however, the religious and the secular both are experiencing the same thing – that business of all of us being at sea. Therefore, I think, more and more people are choosing to skip the extra activities of the religious life except in ways that make our Way seem trivial, interesting but ultimately insignificant. Most people, secular as well as religious, consider themselves spiritual. And some will even do things individually, like yoga or meditation, that bear a semblance of spirituality, but which they do, for the most part, disconnected from their religious roots. It’s too bad, because these essentially religious acts are not designed solely to benefit the individual, even though that may be the way that they are often promoted. Meditative practices were all originally designed to affirm the basic human desire to come into contact with the Source and Origin of their being in the first place. They were designed in order to enhance, not supplant or replace, the religious life.

We religious got have gotten things wrong, too, along the way. We have either sought so much to vilify secularists and religious who weren’t the same as we are, or we have dismissed and denigrated the valid insights and observations those others have had which appeared to contradict our traditions and established patterns. We have insisted on our own way and, as a result, have alienated some of those very same whom we had hoped to reach with our message. We have damaged our credibility and have ended up looking less like a vital community for the present day and more like a society for the creative anachronism – sweet but ultimately trivial.

People tend lately to find it better to go alone without religion than to try to integrate it into their daily lives, because it can seem so outmoded, outdated, or irrelevant.

That point must not be missed when we consider up and coming generations. If there is something I want my daughter and her children to know about a life of faith, it is that we do not keep it well alone. But communicating that can be challenging when the rituals and traditions that we practice stand only by contrast with the values and developments she experiences in society and among her friends, everyday.

I have so many friends, *clergy friends*, but also friends simply practicing religion, whose children do not feel validated in their communities or who have become so bored by the rituals that they declare themselves agnostics just to escape the drudgery of worship! Some of these young people and middle aged were told so often, I'm afraid, by well-intentioned teachers and parents that other faiths or Christian traditions are equally as valid that they have quite easily walked away from this one that bored them or dismissed them. Why not? Why not go somewhere else?

I am afraid that by upholding the dignity and genuineness of other faith traditions we have also devalued or even invalidated our own. By accepting the brilliance of the discoveries made outside of the realm of belief – advances in science and human relations, we have pretty effectively indicated at the same time that our belief system is unimportant or insignificant.

We have built this wonderful ark, but somehow many of us have concluded that it would be better to swim alone or just sort of hold onto one of the boards for buoyancy than to actually climb in and live with us and all the animals on deck and in the hold.

How can we help others, even our most beloved, to understand that they can be with us, that they *ought to be with us..?* I mean, how can we do that without telling or implying that without us they are bound for hell..?

None of us believe that, anyway. We may recognize that their lives won't be as complete without their religious tradition, but we hardly think that they will burn for eternity. Do we even have a doctrine of hell anymore, in the UCC? I don't think so. So, we can't threaten them aboard.

No, we have the hard work before us of demonstrating that life in common, at sea but with one another and with God, has more to offer than their lives treading water. (And religious life bears with it all the same doubts and fears as the secular life, so this won't be easy. And infusing our tradition and rituals and practices and music, that they have found boring or meaningless, with currency, vitality, and relevance... that's going to be a challenge.)

Maybe it's possible.

First, this needs to happen for us in daily life. As Noah lived on a vessel of God, and as we all live on our "blue boat home," this vessel of God, so each of us must come to emulate the place we live. We must be vessels of God – of harmony and peace and holiness. Our loving may become our invitation aboard.

Second, we must come to understand the advantages – even just the basic advantages – of having a faith and a tradition on which to abide. If people have concluded that their connectedness, which we experience in the church, is satisfied in family life, we need to learn to ask, "What do you do in times when that family itself is in crisis? Or when you decide to marry, or have a child, or a loved one dies, or something about you breaks – your heart, your career, your marriage?" No one should have to endure such things alone, or even feeling alone.

We need each other, and our existence on this planet indicates just how much we cannot afford to be without one another. We are each of us as vulnerable as that man was on that cross, as our God was in that manger and again at the time of death, ultimately and genuinely in the hands of others. In dying God endured utter isolation so that we might learn the lesson, and make that suffering once and for all.

And we can bear that good news.

Each of us can be for others that invitation to identify with one another and to live and love together upon that vessel of God, as vessels of God at sea, underway with one another and God.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

We Lift Our Joys and Concerns to God

Elston McCowan

- ❖ Our prayers of concern are for our residents in assisted living and skilled care
- ❖ All people who are living with dementia, their families and their caregivers
- ❖ People we love who are living with cancer
- ❖ All those the world regards as disabled
- ❖ People with mental illness, as well as their family, friends, caregivers, and roommates
- ❖ People who are lonely or alone
- ❖ Those whose employment and businesses are at risk
- ❖ COVID-19 patients
- ❖ Front line workers and their loved ones; with a special prayer for medical personnel who are working with COVID patients
- ❖ For our governmental leaders, and for healing for our country and all its people
- ❖ The people of Texas enduring great hardship in the cold, this past week
- ❖ Peace with justice

Prayer of the Day

Rev. Denoon

(Transcript unavailable)

Prayer of Our Savior

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

WE SHARE OUR BLESSINGS WITH OTHERS Roger Barnes

We travel this Lenten journey, and indeed all our lives, with all our siblings in this world. Combining gifts of substance and ability, we are able to be of service and support to one another. We encourage to consider what your gifts shall be. While the health crisis continues, until it is safe again to pass plates or collect in person, we'll be receiving offerings only by mail or online. If you are able financially, and you would like to support First Church with a monetary donation, please either send a check to

First Congregational Church
10 West Lockwood Avenue
Webster Groves, Missouri 63119

or go to our website – FirstChurchWG.org – and to our “Donate” page. Thank you.

Prayer of Dedication (Unison)

God of all bounty and blessing, receive our lives and our gifts to be bounty and blessings to you, our church, and the world. Let them empower ourselves and others to greater service and life in your Spirit, in Christ's name. Amen.

HYMN

Blue Boat Home

Peter Mayer

Though below me I feel no motion
standing on these mountains and plains,
Far away from the rolling ocean
still my dry land heart can say:
I've been sailing all my life now,
never harbor or port have I known.
The wide universe is the ocean I travel,
and the earth is my blue boat home.

Sun my sail and moon my rudder
as I ply the starry sea,
Leaning over the edge in wonder,
casting questions into the deep.
Drifting here with my ship's companions,
all we kindred pilgrim souls,
Making our way by the lights of the heavens
in our beautiful blue boat home.

I give thanks to the waves upholding me,
hail the great winds urging me on,
Greet the infinite sea before me,
sing the sky my sailor's song:
I was born upon the fathoms,
never harbor or port have I known.
The wide universe is the ocean I travel,
and the earth is my blue boat home.

BENEDICTION

“Peace be upon you!”

Rev. Denoon

POSTLUDE

The Planets: Jupiter (excerpt)
arr. Sarah Eithun

Gustav Holst

DISMISSAL

Roger Barnes

That's our worship for this week at First Church. We're glad you could worship with us. Please, join us for our Virtual Coffee Fellowship, Sunday at 11am on Zoom. The Virtual Coffee Fellowship link is on the homepage of our website.

Please, also plan to be with us this Wednesday at 7 o'clock in the evening, when we gather for the first installment in our weekly Lenten series, "First Church and African America." This Wednesday, we meet the ten founders of our church and their neighbors and family, mere months after the ending of the Civil War, as they consider whether to form this congregation of opponents to slavery. (Also, if you would like to be one of the voices in a re-enactment of that discussion, please let the Pastor know as soon as possible.)

Our worship next Sunday will be in observance of Seminary and Church Vocations Sunday. Pastor Elston McCowan will be preaching. Please plan to be with us.

As for today...

Our worship has ended. Let our service begin.



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