# Never Stop Believing in Hope Because Miracles Happen Everyday.

## Rollstone Congregational Church

United Church of Christ 199 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA

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### Fourth Sunday in Lent March 22, 2020

#### **Gathering Thoughts:**

Dear Brothers and Sisters we are in a time that is unprecidented in our lives because we are a community of believers unable to gather with our faith community to worship and pray as a family. Your church leadership will continue to explore avenues that will keep us connected in spirit and purpose. I have shared from a collegue this sentiment. "With church doors shutting across America, it is time for us to show that the church has never been about the building. WE are the church!" Please feel free to share this service with others who may not have the same opportunity to worship

#### The Gathering:

One of our prescribed scriptures for this Fourth Week in Advent is the 23rd Psalm.

- 23 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;
- 2 he makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters;

3 he restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

- 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
  - I fear no evil; for thou art with me;
- thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
- 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
- thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.
- 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

#### A Time of Prayer:

Gentle God, you shepherd us in times of trouble. When the way seems dark, you guide us safely through. When we cannot bear to slow down, you show us the wisdom of Sabbath rest. In your presence there is life, overflowing, abundant and free.

As we rest in your goodness, teach us, O Lord, to see with your heart. Open our eyes to the world beyond our neighborhoods, and to your beloved children both near to us and far. Open our hearts to the blessed fierceness of your creation, which sustains us and yet is more powerful than we can imagine.

Anoint us with your spirit of blessing, that we might be as Christ to one another, in our welcome, compassion and care. Amen.

#### A Reading from the Old Testament Scriptures:

#### 1 Samuel 16:1-13

16 The Lord said to Samuel, 'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.' 2 Samuel said, 'How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.' And the Lord said, 'Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the Lord." 3 Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.' 4 Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, 'Do you come peaceably?' 5 He said, 'Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.' And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

6 When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord,' 7 But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.' 8 Then Jesse called Abinadab. and made him pass before Samuel. He said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' 9 Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' 10 Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, 'The Lord has not chosen any of these.' 11Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your sons here?' And he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.' And Samuel said to Jesse, 'Send and bring him: for we will not sit down until he comes here.' 12 He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, 'Rise and anoint him: for this is the one.' 13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

#### A Message of Hope during a difficult time.

#### Profiles in Courage

Have you ever heard the phrase, "Grace under pressure."?

That's the definition of courage, according to Ernest Hemingway. Although, to be accurate, he never actually said the word "courage." A profile in The New Yorker says that he was asked, "Exactly what do you mean by 'guts'?"

"I mean," Hemingway said, "grace under pressure."

Some books mistakenly quote him as saying, "Courage is grace under pressure." But guts or courage — what's the difference, really? The line was

part of a conversation about courage, and it became famous after it appeared in The New Yorker.

Later, Sen. John F. Kennedy used the line in the first chapter of his book, Profiles in Courage. The book contains the stories of eight United States senators and the ways in which they responded gracefully to pressure — sometimes risking their popularity and their careers.

All showed courage: Grace under pressure.

We have many examples of people who have responded to that notion.

Consider Witold Pilecki, a Polish soldier who, in 1940, volunteered to join a German roundup so he could report on what was going on inside a new concentration camp called Auschwitz.

Then there's Jeremiah Denton, an American prisoner-of-war in Vietnam, who signaled the abuse that POWs were suffering by blinking, in a propaganda video, the message T-O-R-T-U-R-E in Morse code.

Let's not forget Harriet Tubman, who escaped slavery via the Underground Railroad and then risked re-enslavement and death. She returned to the South on at least 19 trips to guide as many as 300 enslaved Americans to freedom.

All faced tremendous pressure, and they responded with grace. That is, they showed fitness and goodness in difficult situations. Their excellence and personal power seemed to come straight from God.

Those are examples of profiles in courage.

There is another story of grace under pressure comes from 1 Samuel. The prophet Samuel was active during the reign of King Saul, and he was not impressed by the leadership of the king.

As chapter 16 begins, the Lord says to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel" (v. 1). God instructs Samuel to fill his horn with oil and take a trip to see a man named Jesse in Bethlehem. The Lord tells Samuel that he has identified a new king from among the sons of Jesse.

But Samuel asks, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." (v. 2). Samuel knows that King Saul is powerful and ruthless. He will not hesitate to "remove" those who oppose him.

God comes up with a cover for Samuel, saying, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you" (vv. 2-3). Then Samuel, believing that God is with him, takes a leap of faith and hits the road for Bethlehem.

When have you taken a similar leap, trusting that God is with you?

- Perhaps you've been the new kid in school, walking into homeroom for the first time and sensing everyone's eyes are on you.
- Or, you were the new employee at a big firm, hired right out of college.
- Or perhaps you were a member of a wedding couple, making marriage vows in front of family members and friends.
- Or a police officer going out on a night patrol.
- Or a member of the military on deployment in a war zone.
- Maybe you've been a friend who is challenged to speak the truth in love, and to hold another friend accountable.

All require leaps of faith, trusting that God is with you.

All require grace under pressure.

The good news from 1 Samuel is that God provides a way. God does not simply say to Samuel, "Go anoint a new king. Lotsa luck." No, the Lord gives Samuel a path to walk, one that will not arouse the suspicions of King Saul.

When we face challenging situations, the Lord will be with us, too. Our Christian faith gives us outstanding guidance about how to behave as students, employees, marriage partners, police officers, soldiers and friends. By speaking and acting in ways consistent with our faith, we can walk in hope and love, and show real grace under pressure. We can face uncertainty and danger with confidence, knowing that the Lord will give us the excellence and the power we need.

With the help of God, each of us can be a profile in courage.

Samuel discovers this to be true when he walks into Bethlehem. The elders of the city are trembling when they come to meet him, and they say, "Do you come peaceably?" (v. 4). They know that there is conflict in the land, and that Saul has been rejected as king. Israel is as divided as we are as a country, with Red State citizens not wanting to deal with Blue State citizens, and vice versa. The elders worry that the prophet Samuel will enflame tensions in the little town of Bethlehem.

But Samuel says, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he invites Jesse and his sons to the sacrifice as well (v. 5). You could say that Samuel is a non-anxious presence among the people of Bethlehem. He doesn't come to stir up trouble, but to perform an important ritual in the lives of the people.

We can do the same whenever we practice our faith today. Our challenge as Christians in a polarized society is to "sacrifice to the Lord," as Samuel did, and to sanctify ourselves — to become ever more holy servants of God. When we gather for worship, we should confess our sins, hear God's word, pray for ourselves and others and celebrate the sacraments. Our gatherings should always be done peaceably, with respect for our brothers and sisters

across the political spectrum.

Yes, it is true that our Christian faith has political implications. We must address moral issues that shape the choices we make as individuals, as well as the decisions of our elected leaders. Like activist Malala Yousafzai, we can stand up for the education rights of girls and women. Like chef José Andrés, we can work to make sure that victims of natural disasters get the food they need to survive.

But there is no room for partisan politics in the life of the church. Like Samuel, we should focus on sanctifying ourselves and making sacrifices to the Lord. Coming together peaceably, whenever we gather as a church, is another way that we show grace under pressure.

Then Samuel takes a look at each of the sons of Jesse, and he listens carefully to what God is saying to him. At first, Eliab looks like the one, but God says to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (vv. 6-7).

It takes courage to look beyond outward appearance, because the world tends to favor people who are tall and good-looking and experienced. But the Lord looks on the heart.

Then Jesse calls Abinadab. Samuel says no.

Shammah, No.

Nethaneel. No.

Ozem. No.

Raddai, No.

Then Samuel asks Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" Jesses says that only the youngest is left, and he is keeping the sheep. So Samuel orders him to summon the boy, and when he arrives, God says, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one" (vv. 11-12).

Samuel anoints David as king in the presence of his brothers, and the Spirit of the Lord comes mightily upon David "from that day forward" (v. 13).

If we are going to see people as God sees them, some courage is required. We have to look beyond outward appearances to the qualities that are important to God: fruits of the Spirit such as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

In the Presbyterian Church, nominating committees work each year to identify candidates to serve as elders of the church. The job is often difficult, because many potential candidates are so stressed and busy that they decline the invitation to serve. Nominating committees often have to invite numerous

candidates before they have a full slate of elder nominees.

One year, a committee at a Virginia church had worked its way through its list, from its top candidates to the bottom. They were almost out of people. But near the bottom of the list was a woman who had never been asked to serve. When she was invited, she accepted enthusiastically, and she became one of the finest elders that the church had ever had.

Many potential candidates had to say no before the nominating committee got to her. That is because the Lord does not see as mortals see.

Grace under pressure is shown when people show fitness and goodness in difficult situations, when they take a leap of faith, believe that God will provide a way, and listen carefully to what God is saying.

Such people prove that God is always at work, developing new profiles in courage.

A Time of Prayer – let us remember all of our brothers and sisters on the prayer list, especially those who are having a difficult time during this period of social distancing. Please share your prayer concerns so that they may be added to the prayer list by emailing your concern to Pastor Dave at dbhanks92@comcast.net or by calling him direct at 978-821-9571. He is available every evening and on weekends. During this time we suggest that you create a prayer partner with whom you can pair up until we are able to worship together at the church.

#### PRAYER LIST

Jack Brigham
Becky Colwell
Cathy Fontaine
Chuck Funk
Sarah Kee
Kyle, a.k.a, Kippy
Bob and Doris Lane
Linda Long
Lorraine Michaud
Cathie Perra
Maria Piazza
Melanie Pouliot
Alex Robinson
Del Sampson
Elwin Shepard

## Ron Smith Carole Ann Sumner and Henry Donna Thorne Patty Westerman All who are lonely

All who are personally dealing with the affects of the COVID-19 Virus All medical personnel – doctors, nurses, testing staff, first responders Those whose livelihoods have been impacted through lost jobs or reduced financial stability

Our government – that they may make timely and wise decisions Our Church and all of its members

Let us pray .....God of glory, we praise you for your presence in our lives and for all goodness that you shower upon us in Jesus Christ. Especially we praise and thank you for promises kept and hope for tomorrow, the enjoyment of friends, the joy of families, the wonders of your creation, those who have gone before us, love from our parents, sisters and brothers, love from our families and children, our faith and the church.

God of grace, remind us that we are all your children for we are brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. We offer our prayers for whom you love. Especially we pray for those we too often forget, people who have lost hope, those who mourn this day, those who suffer because of war, those who are lonely or sick, those who go hungry, and those isolated because of this pandemic.

God of healing, come now to us with new strength to renew our grieving spirits. Help us to look into the future with confidence and assurance in Christ's comforting love. Amen.

God of strength and comfort these are our prayers and now we recall the words that Jesus taught us to pray to you in saying.....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 debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

#### Benediction

Arise with the hope of new beginnings.

Arise with the trust of God's redeeming love.

Arise with courage and live in the promise of eternal life.

Arise to blossom and flourish in the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Amen.