



Rollstone Congregational Church

United Church of Christ

199 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA

Pastor: Rev. David B. Hanks 978-821-9571

Moderator: Paul Stansel 978-337-1608

Church Organist and Musician: Gavin Klein

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

July 12, 2020

Prelude:

Psalm 119

Peterson

Gathering Thoughts:

Dear Brothers and Sisters as all things continue to improve and we become more anxious, we yearn to be together as we have in days gone by. Those days are coming, with the grace and patience given by God we will endure this storm. We continue to work on developing a plan that will allow us to worship God while holding in concern the people to whom the church is called to serve. May you continue to be well as our hearts and soul begin to look towards September when we are together once again (provided that we aren't in a second wave of the pandemic.) The leadership misses each of you and pray that you will continue to be well. Until then enjoy the summer warmth and the warmth of God's love for each of you.

Please continue to keep the faith and we will see you soon.

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

Come awake! The light of God is breaking through the darkness.
We bless the light, an unyielding sign of hope in times of trouble.
Do not fear! The love of Christ opens up a space of respite and peace for us.
We bless this place, a sanctuary of rest.
Delight in the gifts of the Spirit, who sets a table of welcome for all.
Surely goodness and mercy have found us here,
in the house of our Lord, the God of abounding love.

Opening Hymn: “O Word of God Incarnate”

William W. How

O Word of God incarnate, O Wisdom from on high,
O Truth unchanged, unchanging, O Light of our dark sky:
We praise you for the radiance, that from the hallowed page,
A Lantern to our footsteps, shines on from age to age.

The Church from you, our Savior, received the gift divine,
And still that light is lifted, o'er all the earth to shine.
It is the sacred vessel where gems of truth are stored;
It is the heaven-drawn picture of Christ, the living Word

The Scripture is a banner before God's host unfurled;
It is a shining beacon above the darkling world.

It is the chart and compass that o'er life's surging tide,
Mid mists and rocks and quicksands, to you, O Christ, will guide.

O make your church, dear Savior, a lamp of purest gold,
To bear before the nations your true light as of old.
O teach your wandering pilgrims by this their path to trace,
Till, clouds and darkness ended, they see you face to face.

A Time of Prayer:

Gracious and always loving God, who has satisfied the hungry and quenched the thirst of longing people, grant us now the gift of attentiveness that our eyes may see the favor of your love. Grant us quickness of imagination that we may see the signals of your promise. Grant us warmth of heart that companionship may bind all within this house in peace and love so we may enjoy your wonder and grace. Grant us strength of wisdom so we may bring answers to the hurting world in which we now live. For the sake of Christ, we pray, and for the sake of all humankind. Amen.

A Reading from the Scriptures:

Psalm 119: 105-112 (NIV)

105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.
106 I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to observe your righteous ordinances.
107 I am severely afflicted; give me life, O Lord, according to your word.
108 Accept my offerings of praise, O Lord, and teach me your ordinances.
109 I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law.
110 The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts.
111 Your decrees are my heritage for ever; they are the joy of my heart.
112 I incline my heart to perform your statutes for ever, to the end.

Musical Interlude

No.2 from 20 Petites Pieces en tons #

Albert Alain

The Message: "Walking in Darkness"

Erik Weihenmayer is an amazing athlete and adventurer. He's kayaked all 277 miles of the Colorado River and through the Grand Canyon, which, according to one source, is "considered one of the most formidable whitewater venues in the world." He has climbed the "seven summits" of the world, that is, the highest mountain peak on all seven continents.

He has climbed the face of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park.

He has biked from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City.

He has climbed Mount Everest. And after accomplishing this feat, he was featured on the cover of TIME magazine.

Erik Weihenmayer is blind. Unseeing. Can't see.

He's been this way since he was a kid. When he was only 15 months old, he was diagnosed with juvenile retinoschisis. Doctors said he would be totally blind by age 13. And he was.

In 2001, a pastoral resource magazine, *Homiletics*, interviewed him in his Golden, Colorado, home in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. He told us the story of a descent off the face of El Capitan. He was with several other climbers. They had already spent at least one night in a sling-enhanced bivouac on the face, and were now trying to get off the mountain before nightfall.

They failed. Night descended on them before they were able to finish their descent. They were all in the dark. So they turned to the one man who had the most experience climbing in the dark: Erik. He led them down and out on the last pitch.

The blind leading the sighted.

Think of the psalmist as a less-talented Erik Weihenmayer.

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path," he writes in verse 105.

Today's Psalm reading seems to be a series of moralistic quotations about the overriding importance of the word of God. Each verse sort of stands alone. But the psalmist says in verse 10 that "the wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts." He is once again on the "path" he mentions in verse 105.

So, this verse gives us the theme: How to walk in the dark.

Sometimes it happens — we're in the dark. We're clueless. In uncharted territory without lights, signal markers, hints, landmarks, white roadside stripes, a flashlight, a smartphone or infrared night-vision goggles.

Such times in our lives can be terrifying. They often immobilize a person. Life comes to a standstill.

Yet, the psalmist does not feel this way. He, like us, is on a metaphorical path. The image of verse 105 is of a path obscured by darkness. It is an unknown path.

If the way were a well-known path, a light might not be needed. Sometimes, the light of the moon will be sufficient to guide someone who's traveling via a common, if narrow, pathway. This text suggests that the traveler is both in the dark and walking an unknown path.

This is why the wayfarer is so glad to have a lamp or a light. It illuminates where the feet are stepping, and it shows the path ahead. These are two important considerations. You don't want to put your foot on a rock or root upon which you might sprain your ankle or over which you might trip and fall.

And, second, we want to have some advance notice of the terrain ahead,

perhaps to avoid stepping headlong into a ditch, or worse, an abyss. And, we want to have a sense of where we're going.

Let's explore the two basic types of lighting that we are familiar with in life.

First, when we're walking in the dark, we want to have some light on what is immediately before and below us. What does the Bible say about things that trip us and cause us to stumble? We want light on this path to make sure we can avoid a tree root, a jutting rock or a rotting log.

Imagine we're traveling in the family SUV at night on a narrow, two-lane road. We're returning from a long day in the big city, where one of the kids was in a swim meet. We're tired, the road is unfamiliar, and it's raining lightly. You are driving and you frequently opt to use your low beams rather than the high beams. You want to have a clear view of the immediate road ahead. You don't like surprises. You want clarity. You want a nice, wide view.

So it is in life. We need the flashlight, the torch, the low beams to illuminate the real estate immediately before us.

We want to know if dangers, hazards or problems lie imminently before us.

To walk in God's path of right living means that we need to "see" or be aware of these hazards.

So what are they?

Here are just a few of the many hazards that we might encounter in life.

- a lust for money and material toys;
- electronic devices (tablets, smartphones, etc.);
- gaming;
- online porn;
- bad relationships (this can include toxic friendships);
- bad habits;
- desire for a person who is not our spouse; and
- job-related stress.

The psalmist says that the word of God casts light on these obstacles to wholesome living. Like navigating any highway, some things you've just got to go around and avoid. Other problems are like potholes that need to be filled with solid material and paved over. Some issues, like a tree across a road, need to be sawed up and emphatically removed.

Life can put obstacles in places that we least expect and as a result can keep use from God. The Bible has plenty to say about the love of money. About smartphones, not so much. But in this case, the issue is one problem of disproportionate time as well as manners and courtesy. The Bible says plenty about our use of time, and about manners. Ditto for gaming. Online porn and extramarital affairs. Scripture also provides plenty of guidance here. No need to pray about whether you should be in an affair. You shouldn't. No need for you to be another country music cliché.

Second, when we're walking in the dark or driving down a dark road, we want to have some idea of what's ahead. So what does the Bible say about the path itself? Where are we going?

Go back to the same road on which you're traveling after the kid's swim meet. Sometimes (especially after using low beams), you are satisfied that you're aware of the nature of the immediate road before you. Your view of the immediate stretch of highway tells you that nothing presents a danger to you and the occupants traveling with you.

So you switch to high beams. Now, the road far ahead of you is in the light. You can see the curve to the left that's coming. Instantly, you can determine whether a long stretch of straight road is before you, or whether the road twists and turns. You now know what you need to prepare for. Is the road predictable, or is it wild and uncertain?

God's word certainly is not a crystal ball that gives us a glimpse into our future. But it does cast light on best practices that are most likely to result in a life well-lived, a life without the extreme curves, dips and valleys.

- The high beams of God's word show us that a well-lived life is one that is given in service to others;
- in which words are used to encourage;
- in which self-denial is a good thing;
- in which we are outrageously kind and generous;
- in which we try to make life less difficult for others;
- in which we practice religious/spiritual piety; and
- in which we are grateful for the smallest of blessings.

No doubt more thoughts could be listed here because a life lived in what the Bible calls a "worthy" manner (Ephesians 4:1) is a life that has many aspects — which is why such a life is "grown," not built overnight. It grows or matures. This life is, itself, the journey, and God's word helps us along the way.

These benefits of the light and lamp accrue to the traveler on one and only one condition: The light must be trained upon the path. If you shine your light on the bushes, hedges and trees to the right or the left to see if there might be dangers lurking there, you will surely stumble and hurt yourself.

If you're walking in the dark, keep the light trained on the path!

The value of Scripture is that it teaches and instructs us: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

If we use Scripture for any other purpose, we're going to have all sorts of difficulties. If we try to use the Bible to prove some sociological, political or economic ideal, we're just inviting trouble. God's word is given to us to guide our feet along our daily and sometimes treacherous path.

Erik Weihenmayer continues to challenge himself. He is the author

of Touch the Top of the World, The Adversity Advantage and, most recently, No Barriers. This latter book is also the name of a movement. The “No Barriers” mission “is to help people with challenges — and all of us to some extent — to turn into the storm of life, face barriers head on, embrace a pioneering and innovative spirit, and team up with great people to live rich in meaning and purpose.”

The motto of No Barriers? “What’s Within You is Stronger Than What’s in Your Way.”

This is good stuff.

But, let’s remember that it is not only what is in us that is stronger than what’s in our way, but Who is in us that is stronger than what’s in our way.

Scripture reminds us that, “You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

As followers of Jesus, we are “No Barriers” people.

When we’re walking in the dark, we have the light of the word of God to guide us, as well as a sort of internal guidance system that helps us follow the path.

Staying true to this word, and the inner voice of the Spirit of God will empower us to live, as the No Barriers mission statement puts it, a life that is “rich in meaning and purpose.”

Musical Interlude:

No.8 from 20 Petites Pieces en tons #

Albert Alain

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

Amy Belli

Carolyn Barney

Jack Brigham

Becky Colwell

Diana Escarbie

Cathy Fontaine

Chuck Funk

Bob and Pat Guoguen

Linda Hurd

Mary Jackson
Tom Kazanjian
Sarah Kee
Bob and Doris Lane
Diane Lane Cormier
Linda Long
Lorraine Michaud
Audrey Painchaud
Cathie Perra
Maria Piazza
Chris Pollice
Melanie Pouliot
Jackie Reiss
Martha Quinn
Del Sampson
Elwin Shepard
Ron Smith
Carole Ann Sumner and Henry
Donna Thorne
Daniel Tousignant
Marilyn Wales
Mary Wayman

All who are experiencing difficult times and situations

All who are lonely or depressed

All who are personally dealing with the affects of the COVID-19 Virus

All medical personnel – doctors, nurses, testing staff, first responders

Our Church and all of its members and friends

**All members of our armed forces who have committed themselves
to the protection of liberty**

All who paid the ultimate sacrifice in serving our nation

Loving God, we do not spend as much time in prayer as we should. Although you have extended an open invitation to seek your face, to call upon you in our hour of need, we sit in turmoil instead, filled with questions and in a quandary about which direction our lives should take. We go around and around and get lost. We spin in circles and know not the way to turn. Help us to stop and remember that when there is seemingly no way out, prayer provides the pathway.

We pray for those with concerns in this congregation. We pray for all those whom we hold in prayer and for each individual we lift up in our own hearts.

We offer our thanks, O God, for the beauty of this day and all that we have to celebrate. We thank you for our family gathered here and for the strength of our church that reaches beyond these walls.

Slow us down to listen. Slow us down so that we can hear where you would have us go and what you would have us do. Slow us down so that we can act according to what we believe.

Nurture in us our sense of wonder. Strengthen our bonds of family at home and at church. Let our lives be a prayer, manifesting the love of God that we might be true disciples of Jesus the Christ who taught us to say when we pray “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.”

Closing Hymn:

“Thy Word Is a Lamp”

Amy Grant / Michael W. Smith

Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.
Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

When I feel afraid, Think I’ve lost my way,
Still you’re there right beside me.
And nothing will I fear as long as you are near.
Please be near me to the end.

Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.
Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

I will not forget, Your love for me and yet,
My heart forever is wandering.
Jesus be my guide, and hold me to your side
I will love you to the end.

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path
Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path

Nothing will I fear
As long as you are near
Please be near me to the end

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.
Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.
And a light unto my path, You're the light unto my path.

Benediction:

Let your lives witness to Christ's love.
Let your words bring reconciliation.
Let your thoughts be of peace.
Let your touch bring healing.
Let your actions count for justice.
Be a sign of hope and a beacon of joy.
Go and may God's blessing go with you.

Postlude: I Sing the Mighty Power of God- Tune: Ellacombe

May God bless you with anger

At injustice, oppression,
And exploitation of people,
So that you may work for
Justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears,

To shed for those who suffer pain,
Rejection, hunger and war,
So that you may reach out your hand
To comfort them and
To turn their pain to joy

And may God bless you with enough foolishness

To believe that you can
Make a difference in the world,
So that you can do
What others claim cannot be done
To bring justice and kindness
To all our children and the poor.

a franciscan blessing

Amen