



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

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 9, 2020

Prelude:

Morning Has Broken

Gathering Thoughts:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, the church leadership wants to express our gratitude to each of you who took time out of your lives to join us this past Wednesday evening for the all church Zoom meeting. We hope that we have been able to address your concerns and have responded to your questions. We again kindly ask that you respect each others needs and especially their desire to keep themselves and their loved ones safe. This is a learning process for each of us and a time to recognize that changes can happen often with little or no advanced warning. Looking forward to the day when we can all gather together safely.

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

God our Provider, we tuned into church today needing you in different ways. Some of us need strength because we are facing a big challenge. Some of us need hope, because we feel like giving up. Some of us need love, because we are feeling alone. We trust that you will provide for us, whether through words or music, or in a quiet moment of reflection. You are here; you are with us.

Opening Hymn: “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty”

Praise to the Lord, the almighty the King of creation
O my soul praise him for he is thy health and salvation
All ye who hear, now to his temple draw near, join me in glad adoration.

Praise to the Lord, who o’er all things so wondrously reigneth.
Shielded thee under his wings, yea so gently sustaineth.
Hast thou not seen, How thy desires have been granted in what he ordaineth.

Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work and defend thee;
Surely his goodness and mercy here daily attend thee.
Ponder anew what the Almighty can do, who with his love doth befriend thee.

Praise to the Lord, O let all that is in me adore him.
All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before him!
Let the amen sound from his people again; gladly fore ever adore him.

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 Scriptures:

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-27 (NIV)

³⁷Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. ²This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. ³Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. ⁴But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

¹² Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. ¹³And Israel said to Joseph, 'Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.' He answered, 'Here I am.' ¹⁴So he said to him, 'Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me.' So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, ¹⁵and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, 'What are you seeking?' ¹⁶'I am seeking my brothers,' he said; 'tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.' ¹⁷The man said, 'They have gone away, for I heard them say, "Let us go to Dothan."' So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. ¹⁸They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. ¹⁹They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer. ²⁰Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.' ²¹But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, 'Let us not take his life.' ²²Reuben said to them, 'Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him'—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. ²³So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; ²⁴and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

25 Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. 26 Then Judah said to his brothers, ‘What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood?’ 27 Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.’ And his brothers agreed. 28 When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

Musical Interlude: The Lord is my Light Christopher Walker

The Message: “Time Travelers”

Time-travel movies are entertaining and a bit mind-bending. They ask the question of what would happen if you could go back in time and change history.

Back to the Future tells the story of Marty McFly, escaping to 1955 in a car-shaped time machine and entering the world of his parents when they were teenagers.

The Terminator is a classic piece of science fiction, in which Arnold Schwarzenegger plays a robot sent from the future to 1984 Los Angeles. His mission is to kill the mother of the man who would go on to be a hero.

Even the Harry Potter series dabbled in time travel. In Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Harry and Hermione use a “time turner” to try to save Hogwarts.

More recently, the superheroes of Avengers: Endgame use time travel to save the universe from a big, purple monster man.

Time-travel movies. They raise an intriguing question: If you could go back in time and change one thing, what would it be?

The Atlantic magazine (November 2019) recently asked this question of some university professors. Duke professor Sandy Darity says, “I wish that Radical Reconstruction had been made a reality after the end of the Civil War.” If this had happened, former slaves would have enjoyed full political participation, along with control over the schooling of their children, protection by the Union Army, and land grants of 40 acres for farming.

Marina Warner of the University of London wishes that Ferdinand and Isabella had torn up the Alhambra Decree, which drove all the Jews out of Spanish territories. “History would look very different,” she says, “if the coexistence of Jews, Muslims, and Christians had continued in 1492.”

Rutgers professor Samantha Kelly has a suggestion that will surprise you. She wishes that agriculture had never been invented. Yes, agriculture. There would be “far less environmental degradation and income inequality,” she says. “A world without industrial agriculture would pretty much be the Eden of the Bible.”

Kelly wants to go back in time: To the garden of Eden.

How about you? What change would you make? Would you prevent the assassination of Abraham Lincoln? Overthrow Adolf Hitler before the Second World War? Save Jesus from the agony of the cross?

In the book of Genesis, a man named Jacob settled in the land of Canaan. He had 12 sons, and one of them was named Joseph. Jacob “loved Joseph more than any other of his children,” says Genesis, “because he was the son of his old age; and [Jacob] made him a long robe with sleeves” — sometimes called “a coat of many colors” (Genesis 37:3). You can just imagine how his brothers responded to this: “they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him” (v. 4).

In addition, Joseph was a dreamer, and one of his dreams contained the message that his brothers would bow down to him. When they heard this, “they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words” (v. 8).

If you could go back in time and change history, you might say to Jacob the father: “Don’t play favorites with Joseph! His brothers hate him!”

At age 17, Joseph was shepherding the flock with his brothers, acting as a helper. Four of them were misbehaving in the field, so “Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father” (v. 2). Joseph ratted out Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher – threw them under the bus.

If you could travel back in time, you might say to Joseph: “Don’t be a snitch! Your brothers are going to terminate you!”

Sure enough, the situation went from bad to worse when Joseph was sent to check on his brothers as they pastured their father’s flock. Joseph went after them and found them at a place called Dothan. His brothers “saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him” (v. 18).

One clever definition of the word “siblings” is this: “people you either plan to murder or plan a murder with. There’s no middle ground.”

The brothers said to one another, ‘Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams’” (vv. 19-20).

If you could employ a Harry Potter “time turner,” you might say to the brothers: “Don’t do it! You’ll never get away with murder!”

Fortunately, the eldest brother Reuben talked some sense into his younger siblings. “Let us not take his life,” he said. “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him.” Reuben’s plan was to rescue Joseph later and return him to his father (vv. 21-22).

Give the eldest brother credit. He made a good decision, right in the middle of this tragic tale of favoritism, hatred, snitching and blood-lust.

When Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe and threw him in an empty pit. Feeling hungry after their exertions, they sat down to eat. But as they were eating, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, carrying precious cargo to Egypt.

Between bites, middle brother Judah said to his siblings, “What profit is

it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed. So they drew Joseph up and sold him to the Ishmaelites for 20 pieces of silver. And the traveling traders took Joseph to Egypt (vv. 23-28).

If you could be an Avenger and do time travel, you might say to the brothers: “Glad you didn’t kill him. But selling him into slavery? Is that a good Endgame?”

The story of Joseph and his brothers makes us want to go back in time and make changes. And why not? Most of us can think of positive choices that would have changed history and improved the world. Protecting Jews in 15th-century Spain. Saving Lincoln from assassination. Supporting Reconstruction after the Civil War. All would have been good for God’s people in some terribly tumultuous times.

But we should never forget that God is always working toward a surprising conclusion, even when humans are acting in horrible ways.

In the book of Genesis, Joseph was sold to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials (37:36). That’s bad.

Joseph found favor in Potiphar’s sight, and was put in charge of his house (39:4). That’s good.

Then Potiphar’s wife saw how handsome Joseph was, and she said, “Lie with me” (39:7). That’s bad.

Joseph refused (39:8). That’s good.

But Potiphar’s wife accused Joseph of misconduct, and he was thrown into prison (39:20). That’s bad.

Then God showed him love, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer (39:21). That’s good.

Bad, good, bad, good, bad, good. Clearly, God is always working toward a surprising conclusion, even when humans are misbehaving. If we were to go back in time and change history, we might disrupt the work that God is doing in the world.

While in prison, Joseph became an interpreter of dreams, and eventually he offered insight into the dreams of Pharaoh. He was released from prison and rose to power in Egypt, becoming second-in-command to Pharaoh himself. Eventually, famine struck the entire region, and people from many countries came to buy bread in Egypt.

Among the hungry people were Joseph’s brothers. At first, Joseph did not reveal his identity, and treated them harshly. But eventually, he agreed to help them and said, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people” (50:20). At the end of the story, Joseph forgave his brothers and provided for them, as God wanted him to do.

“You intended to do harm to me,” said Joseph, naming clearly that his brothers did a great evil to him. But knowing that God is always working

toward a surprising conclusion, he also said, “God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people.”

In every time and place and situation, God is working God’s purposes out. Sometimes we humans cooperate with these purposes, and sometimes we don’t. But nothing deters God in the work of saving people from destruction. Even the bad things that we would like to change — in world history and in our own personal histories — can be transformed into good.

God is not responsible for the evil that people do, but history shows that God can turn bad into good. God did it with Joseph and his brothers. God did it with Jesus on the cross. God did it with Paul, who moved from a persecutor of the church to an apostle to the Gentiles.

Nothing is wasted with God. When Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery, they set the stage for his rise in Egypt. When Jesus died and was buried, he was put in the right place for resurrection. The zeal of Saul the persecutor changed into the passion of Paul the apostle.

Each of us has committed sins, suffered defeats, made terrible mistakes and been treated terribly. We might want to jump in a time machine and change the past. But remember: God is always at work in your life, turning evil into good.

Since nothing is wasted with God, there is no point in trying to change history. Instead, trust God to transform your future.

Musical Interlude:

Be Still My Soul

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 Goguen

Linda Hurd

Mary Jackson

Tom Kazanjian
Sarah Kee
Bob and Doris Lane
Diane Lane Cormier
Jean LeClair
Linda Long
Lorraine Michaud
Audrey Painchaud
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

Gracious and loving Creator, Sometimes the words just are not there. God, you are so amazing that our words and thoughts of how best to praise you pale in comparison to the splendors of your name. You are the Almighty, you are the Redeemer, you are grace never ending and the embodiment of love itself. And when we come to you in prayer, sometimes words fail us in what to say. Yes, we lift up our concerns, and yet sometimes they seem so small in comparison to the tribulations encountered across your creation. How can our problems compare to disasters people face, or the fighting that surrounds people trying to escape, or the horrors that no child should ever experience? Lord God, sometimes when we come to you to pray, we are clueless as to what we should ask for. You know the thoughts in our minds and the desires of our hearts, and there are times when they conflict. Sometimes we want

what is not always the best for us, and there are times that we long to hold on to the things we should let go of. There are times when really the best thing we can do is just pray thy will be done. In these moments, dear God, we are so very thankful for the lessons of your Son Jesus Christ for teaching us the words to pray when our own are insufficient, for our tradition teaches that Jesus said to pray by 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.”

Closing Hymn: “Eternal Father! Strong to Save”

1 Eternal Father, strong to save, Whose arm does bind the restless wave,
Who bids the mighty ocean deep, Its own appointed limits keep;
O hear us when we cry to Thee , For those in peril on the sea.

2 O Savior, whose almighty word, The winds and waves submissive heard,
Who walked upon the foaming deep, And calm amid the rage did sleep;
O hear us when we cry to Thee, For those in peril on the sea.

3 O Holy Spirit, who did brood, Upon the waters dark and rude,
And bid their angry tumult cease, And give for wild confusion peace;
O hear us when we cry to Thee, For those in peril on the sea.

4 O Trinity of love and pow’r, Your children shield in danger’s hour;
From rock and tempest, fire, and foe, Protect them where-so-e’er they go;
Thus, evermore shall rise to Thee Glad hymns of praise from land and sea.

Benediction:

Now, let us go out from this place and witness to the next generation of believers through our humility before God, our trust in God, our disciplined life because of God, our attentiveness to God, and our steadfast faithfulness in God’s eternal grace and presence. Amen.

Postlude: We Walk by Faith and Not by Sight (Tune: St Botolph)