



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

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

November 8, 2020

Prelude:

Elevation

Theodore Dubois

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

God gives us one day at a time:

Long enough for laughter to follow any tears;

Deep enough for prayer and silence to dance together;

Time enough to help someone in need;

Plenty of time to notice beauty and praise the Maker;

Sufficient time to build a bridge for forgiveness or tear down a wall
of resentment;

The right time to embrace friends, smile at strangers, play with children,
sing praise to God.

Praise God for this day we are given.

Opening Hymn:

“O God, Our Help in Ages Past”

O God, our help in ages past, Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast, And our eternal home:

Beneath the shadow of thy throne, Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is thine arm alone, And our defense is sure.

Before the hills in order stood, Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting thou art God, To endless years the same.

A thousand ages in thy sight, Are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night, Before the rising sun.

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:

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (NIV)

13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. 15For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. 16For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever. 18Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Musical Interlude:

Nun Lob, Mein Seid, Den Herren

JS Bach

The Message:

“Walking on Sunshine”

One of the cruelties of the Covid-19 pandemic has been that a significant number of patients hospitalized with the disease died without loved ones present. It wasn't that family and friends didn't want to be there, but that many hospitals kept visitors away — including family members and spouses — to fight the spread of the virus. Even priests and pastors had no choice but to administer last rites and prayers over the telephone. One doctor called the isolation “the medical version of solitary confinement.” In some cases, medical personnel kept a vigil with the dying, but that, of course, is not the same as having people in attendance who have been important in the dying person's life.

Sad as that is, we have no way of knowing what the experience of dying alone is like for the one going through it, although some pastors, chaplains and hospice workers say being alone at that time may matter less to the one dying than to those left behind. Former hospice chaplain Kerry Egan says that in a sense, we all die alone, even if we are surrounded by people we love. Often, as we die, our bodies are breaking down and our minds are elsewhere. The conscious experience of death is, by nature, solitary. As Egan puts it, “Many people are not responsive at the end. Their bodies are busy doing something else.”

That may be true, but it's not much comfort to the surviving loved ones. The forced absence during their family member's last moments can feel

like a lack of closure, or even a betrayal on their part. The survivors may be racked with guilt, even though their absence at the dying person's bedside was not their fault. Psychologists suggest that their feelings may be further complicated by a fear that they, too, will one day die alone.

And it may go deeper, with the survivors feeling that they have lost the departed forever.

Some of this helps us understand today's reading from 1 Thessalonians. This passage from Paul is often read as a blow-by-blow description of how Jesus' return will take place — first this will happen and then that, etc. — as if God had given the apostle an advance copy of that day's order of events. But to read it that way misses Paul's real concern, which he states in the first verse of the passage: "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."

After Jesus' ascension, angels had told those who witnessed the event that he would return (Acts 1:11), and most of his then disciples assumed that meant Jesus was coming back soon. But as decades passed and some believing brothers and sisters died, the surviving believers worried that the deceased would be excluded from the benefits of their Lord's return. Some may even have had survivor's guilt about that, as well as the worry that they, too, would die before Christ came back and be likewise excluded from eternity with Jesus.

But as Paul here writes, they shouldn't "grieve as others do who have no hope." He wants all who are followers of Jesus to know that God's provision for deceased believers in the future is an assurance of God's care for all believers in the present. Thus, resurrection hope — the confident expectation that what God has promised for the future will come to pass — enables us who follow Jesus to have a different attitude about death than those who don't follow him. We'll still grieve when a loved one dies, and we'll still feel gutted when a loved one must die alone, but we are not without hope, for them or for ourselves.

To further this point, Paul reminds his readers "that Jesus died and rose again," and thus they can count on the fact that when Jesus returns, "God will bring with him those who have died." In other words, as God had done for Jesus, so he will do for those who die in Christ.

Paul is writing out of pastoral concern for his readers. He wants them to remain confident that both they and their friends and loved ones who had been "in Christ" (v. 16) when they died would be reunited with Jesus when he returned.

Hope, as commonly used in everyday parlance, means a wish, and is rooted in human desire. Biblical hope, by contrast, is rooted in God's love for us, which is quite different. Biblical hope presents us with a view of life beyond the end of this one. While we can't see that ourselves, we trust that God can, and thus we base our hope on that eternal perspective. That view enables us to count on the kingdom of God eventually coming in all its fullness, and our having a place in it. Hope says to us, "This is how you will

understand it when this life is over and the new one has begun.” This view is of supreme importance to a life of faith because without it, we have nothing to look forward to beyond whatever we ourselves can make of this life before it ends.

It’s not possible for us today to know how literally Paul intended the details he gives of Christ’s return to be taken. At a minimum, Paul likely meant the rendezvous in the sky as an image to help his readers conceptualize Jesus returning and bringing the now-resurrected dead in Christ with him. Paul almost certainly had in mind the entry (Greek *parousia*) of a victorious king into a city, coupled with some Jewish apocalyptic motifs, including “clouds,” which Paul identifies as the place where Jesus’ living followers and the dead in Christ come together to meet their Lord.

Paul did not designate clouds as the rendezvous location simply because they are phenomenon of the sky, but rather because clouds had long been used in Hebrew Scriptures to signify the presence of God, as in these examples:

- Exodus: “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after’” (19:9).
- Psalm: “Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne” (97:2).
- Ezekiel: “Then the glory of the Lord rose up ...; the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of the glory of the Lord” (10:4).
- Nahum: “The Lord is slow to anger but great in power ... and the clouds are the dust of his feet” (1:3).

The book of Daniel also pictures the Messiah coming in a cloud: “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven” (7:13, NIV), a verse that Jesus himself quotes twice in Matthew (24:30 and 26:64).

In the New Testament, a cloud serves to signify the presence of God at the transfiguration, where God speaks out of a “bright cloud” to call Jesus the “Beloved” and to tell the disciples to listen to him (Matthew 17:5). At Jesus’ ascension, it was a cloud that took Jesus “out of their sight” (Acts 1:9).

Thus, when Paul tells his readers that they will meet Christ in the clouds, he is saying that they will be in the presence of God the Father as well.

That said, if Paul were writing to us today about our grief over our dead, he’d probably look for some other image besides clouds to denote the presence of God. We have adopted “clouds” as shorthand for troubles and worries, so much so that we sometimes speak of looking for silver linings behind the darkest clouds — some kind of compensation for having to exist under clouds of trouble.

So today, if Paul wanted to keep his up-in-the-sky image but make it convey the same assurance and hope it did for the first-century Thessalonians, he might try to reorient our thinking about clouds the way the 18th-century

poet William Cowper did in his hymn, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” with its stanza:

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Or, Paul might choose some other sky-related phenomenon instead of clouds — maybe “sunshine,” which is a modern metaphor for release from or absence of troubles. And surely an end-of-time meeting with Jesus for those who are in Christ would be a release from and absence of troubles. So to borrow the title of a pop song, when Christ comes, we’ll be “walking on sunshine”!

With that in mind, here’s how The Message paraphrases our passage: “And regarding the question, friends, that has come up about what happens to those already dead and buried, we don’t want you in the dark any longer. First off, you must not carry on over them like people who have nothing to look forward to, as if the grave were the last word. Since Jesus died and broke loose from the grave, God will most certainly bring back to life those who died in Jesus.

“And then this: We can tell you with complete confidence — we have the Master’s word on it — that when the Master comes again to get us, those of us who are still alive will not get a jump on the dead and leave them behind. In actual fact, they’ll be ahead of us. The Master himself will give the command. Archangel thunder! God’s trumpet blast! He’ll come down from heaven and the dead in Christ will rise — they’ll go first. Then the rest of us who are still alive at the time will be caught up with them into the sky to meet the Master. Oh, we’ll be walking on sunshine! And then there will be one huge family reunion with the Master.

“So reassure one another with those words.” Amen.

Musical Interlude:

Prelude

Bob Johansen

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.*

Loving God, we come to you in gratitude for your love, which is always present to us. In the stillness of these moments, we remember with thanksgiving the times in our lives when your love has enabled us to rise to our better selves. We thank you for the gift of your Son, who came that we might know what perfect love looks like.

We remember, too, the times when we have acted in anger rather than in love; we recall with remorse when our patience has been less than perfect and

our behavior has been childish and surly. Forgive us for the occasions when we have loved things and used people and when we have failed to make love a priority in our lives.

Breathe in us new life, instilling us with enthusiasm for the opportunities we have to begin again. Empowered by your love for us, O God, let us unite ourselves with all of life in the example of Jesus, the Lord of our lives. Help us to be intentional in the way we interact with one another, so that there can be no doubt as to whom we serve. And now let us pray together those words which Jesus taught 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.”

Closing Hymn:

“Amazing Grace”

vss. 1-4

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now I'm found,
Was blind, but now I see.

‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils, and snares
We have already come
‘Twas grace hath brought us safe thus far,
And grace will lead us home.

The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.

Benediction:

Christ Jesus has made us his own. Press on toward the goal of knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection. Press on to that upward call of God in Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord be kind and gracious to you; and look upon you with favor. May the Lord grant you peace. Amen.

Postlude:

Marche

Alexander Guilmant

PRAYER LIST

Amy Belli
Carolyn Barney
Jack Brigham
Becky Colwell
David Dufour
Diana Escarbie
Cathy Fontaine
Chuck Funk
Bob and Pat Goguen
Jerilyn Hoffman
Linda Hurd
Mary Jackson
Tom Kazanjian
Sarah Kee
Bob and Doris Lane
Diane Lane Cormier
Linda Long
Lorraine Michaud
Audrey Painchaud
Maria Piazza
Emma Pollice
Melanie Pouliot
Jackie Reiss
Martha Quinn
Del Sampson
Elwin Shepard
Ron Smith
Arlene Sirois
Diane Staples
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