



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

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

February 7, 2021

Prelude:

For The Beauty of The Earth

Gleason

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

In times of trouble and distress, God is always present with us.
When we call out, God hears us.
The name of the Lord brings comfort to heavy hearts.
In God's name alone do we put our trust.
The Lord will help those who seek God.
God will answer the prayers of the people.
Some take pride in their might and accomplishments.
We will boast in God alone.
We rise and stand on the righteousness of God.
Let us worship God who is faithful, merciful and just!

A Time of Prayer:

Almighty God, sometimes the difficulties and burdens of our lives cause us to doubt your goodness. We are an anxious people, often grasping to trust in your promise to work all things for good. Increase our faith and grant us your peace, that our lives will demonstrate our trust in you. We ask this with confidence, knowing that we are your beloved children. Amen.

Opening Hymn:

“Morning Has Broken”

Verses 1-3

Morning has broken like the first morning
Blackbird has spoken like the first bird
Praise for the singing, praise for the morning
Praise for them springing fresh from the world

Sweet the rains new fall, sunlit from Heaven
Like the first dew fall on the first grass
Praise for the sweetness of the wet garden
Sprung in completeness where His feet pass

Mine is the sunlight, mine is the morning
Born of the one light, Eden saw play
Praise with elation, praise every morning
God's recreation of the new day

Isaiah 40:21-31

- 21 Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
- 22 It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;
- 23 who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.
- 24 Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.
- 25 To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
- 26 Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.
- 27 Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
'My way is hidden from the Lord,
and my right is disregarded by my God'?
- 28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
- 29 He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
- 30 Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
- 31 but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

The Message:

“News Fatigue”

Feeling a little burned out on bad news?

You’re not alone.

The year 2020 seemed to be a month-to-month challenge to top bad news with worse news, dominated by the coronavirus pandemic. Add to that a contentious election cycle, protests and unrest over social issues, and a host of other potential crises — like an invasion of murder hornets and the government’s revelation of UFO photos — and it’s no wonder we’re all feeling a kind of information hangover. Many of us were staying home due to quarantine and social distancing, which naturally led to us watching more news than normal.

Many of us are old enough to remember when news outlets consisted of three TV channels, a daily newspaper, and the radio. When Walter Cronkite told us, “That’s the way it is” at the end of every evening news broadcast, we had some time to digest what was going on. The 24-hour, multi-platform, social media-curated, constant cycle of news that confronts us today, however, allows us no time to process and seems to pile on with information that’s not only continuous, but controversial. It tends to include a lot of conflicting information that leaves us confused and stressed, often with no tangible way to respond other than to offer an opinion. Neil Postman, in his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, called this the “loop of impotence,” or the fact that, “The news elicits from you a variety of opinions about which you can do nothing except to offer them as more news, about which you can do nothing.”

Postman, writing in the days before the internet, was already pointing to the problem of “news fatigue” or a general malaise that leaves us feeling depressed, powerless, and distrustful of news sources that often seem superficial, sensationalist, inaccurate, or hopelessly biased. The result is that the more news we consume the more anxiety we feel or, on the flip side, the more desensitized we become to the news itself.

One solution to that anxiety is to simply turn off the news, but that becomes increasingly difficult in a world where we are bombarded with news every time we go into public spaces ... in person or online. Another solution might be to only focus on the good news, as people like actor John Krasinski tried to help us do during the pandemic through his “Some Good News” videos. But neither ignorance nor selectivity would seem to be the answer in a world anxious for the kind of news that people can actually act upon.

What we need instead is a mindset that puts the current news within the context of an eternal perspective. The bad and good stuff happening now has happened before and will happen again. Rather than fret or foment yet another opinion about it all, the prophet Isaiah calls us to remember that the only news that really matters is that the God who created the world in which all this news happens is still at work and will ultimately set everything right.

Isaiah wrote to a people confronted with the reality of exile — people isolated and distanced far from home in circumstances they did not choose, but that were the result of their sinful choices. In Isaiah 40:1-11, God announces through the prophet that a return from exile is on the horizon: a new exodus in which God’s

people would be set free and restored. God himself would dwell with them and he would feed them and protect them as a shepherd feeds and protects his flock.

This is the news that God's people needed to hear, and it's the news that puts all other news into perspective. While we worry over news about the forces of nature threatening to overwhelm us, God reminds us that he is the Creator who "has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand" (v. 12). While the daily news focuses on the intrigue between nations, God reminds his people that, to him, "the nations are like a drop from a bucket and are accounted as dust on the scales" (v. 15). They are "as nothing before him; they are accounted as less than nothing and emptiness" (v. 17).

While the news needs us to be constantly concerned about our material safety and wealth, God reminds his people to be careful what they worship and to be mindful of the things over which they fret. These things become "idols" for human beings, but they cannot be compared to the surpassing glory of the God who created all things (vv. 18-20).

The glory and character of God provides us with the best news we could possibly hear. "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?" Ask the Creator God, the one who "sits above the circle of the earth" and rules over it (vv. 21-22). The natural and human-caused calamities that dominate the news cycle are not news to God. God puts them all into perspective by taking the long view. Those rulers and newsmakers who crowd our screens today are "as nothing" to God, who sees them like withered plants that are here today and gone tomorrow (vv. 23-24). No one who makes the news will ever be God's equal; he is the one who creates them all (vv. 25-26).

These are powerful reminders for the people of God who, like Israel, often got caught up in the news of the day and began to despair or, worse, began to be sucked into the world's idolatry, fear and intrigue. The resultant news fatigue made them believe their plight was "hidden from the Lord" and that they had been "disregarded" by God (v. 27). But that's when God comes shouting through once again with the news that should dominate the attention of all God's people regardless of their circumstances.

"Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth" (v. 28). Notice the repeat of verse 12, which is a way of bringing home the point that the God who created the "ends of the earth" allows nothing to escape his notice and will allow nothing to defeat his purposes for his good creation. No matter how bad the news seems to be, God's purposes will win out.

That's the reason God himself does not suffer from "news fatigue." As Isaiah puts it, "He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless" (vv. 28-29). Not only does God know the long view of his purposes in history, he offers power and strength to those who feel the fatigue of bad news in the present. Human beings tend to busy themselves trying to either come up with solutions to every problem or offering their opinions to those who "should" be doing something to fix them. But as the pandemic has taught us, there are limits to human knowledge and ability. If we trust only in ourselves, we are bound to experience the fatigue of

despair when we fail or reach the end of our ability. The energy and idealism of youth can lead to disappointment and exhaustion when the reality sets in that we cannot “fix” the news no matter how hard we try (v. 30).

Rather than fret, fixate, or forego the news, Isaiah invites us to deal with our fatigue in light of the larger reality the Creator God has once again declared to his people. Instead of “waiting” on the news by constantly refreshing our screens or scrolling through a social media feed, Isaiah instead invites us to “wait for the Lord” (v. 31). That “waiting” doesn’t mean we simply sit around and do nothing, allowing the news to continue to wash over us. To “wait” means to look to God to provide us with perspective, hope, and purpose through prayer and through being immersed in God’s Word.

How much might our “news fatigue” be mitigated, for example, if we committed to spending at least as much time in prayer as we do scrolling through the news and social media? Many of our phones and devices now tell us precisely how much time we spend online every day. Spending an equivalent amount of time (or more) listening to God and bringing our fatigue and worries to him would allow us the opportunity to put those things in perspective while renewing our strength to deal with the things we can actually do something about. The rest? Well, we simply put the rest in God’s hands, knowing that his purposes win out in the end.

Countering the news with a daily discipline of time spent in the presence of God will enable us to pick up a different pace of life. Do you grab your phone to check the news first thing in the morning? That’s a recipe for starting the day with anxiety, rather than mounting up for the day “with wings like eagles” (v. 31). Instead, try beginning the day with Scripture and prayer before you even touch that phone or the TV remote. Allow God’s Word to nourish you and strengthen you for the day ahead, to prepare you to run the gauntlet of the day without growing weary or discouraged, and to walk steadily forward without fainting under a load of bad news.

The cure for news fatigue, in other words, is to begin with the good news first!

Musical Interlude:

Prelude No.2

Scheidman

Sharing In the Lord’s Supper

Prayer of Confession:

Our God, forgive us for failing to understand and accept the great demands placed upon us by your love. We enlist in your causes, but find ourselves losing interest. We promise to be courageous, but find ourselves afraid. We want to be sensitive, but find ourselves hard and callous. Forgive us; take our limitations and turn them into possibilities for service. Have mercy on us and grant us your peace. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Listen! Here is good news: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”
-to forgive you in your follies and foibles

- to accept you as you are
- to set you free from evil's power and make you what you were meant to be.

Breaking of the Bread and Partaking of the Cup

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Heavenly Father, you gave your Son to die and raised him to give us eternal life. Grant that we who have received his body and blood may live in him and serve you as your children.

We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.

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 as we offer our praise to you O God, hear our prayer that we were taught 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."

Closing Hymn: “Sing Praise to God Who Reigns Above”

1. Sing praise to God who reigns above, the God of all creation,
the God of power, the God of love, the God of our salvation.
With healing balm my soul is filled and every faithless murmur stilled:
To God all praise and glory.

2. The Lord is never far away, but through all grief distressing,
an ever present help and stay, our peace and joy and blessing.
As with a mother’s tender hand, God gently leads the chosen band:
To God all praise and glory.

3. Thus all my toilsome way along, I sing aloud thy praises,
that earth may hear the grateful song my voice unwearied raises.
Be joyful in the Lord, my heart, both soul and body bear your part:
To God all praise and glory.

4. Let all who name Christ’s holy name give God all praise and glory;
let all who own his power proclaim aloud the wondrous story!
Cast each false idol from its throne, for Christ is Lord, and Christ alone:
To God all praise and glory.

Benediction:

May the God of all hope open your eyes.
May the God of all peace still your anxious mind.
May the God of all love fill your heart to fullness beyond measure.
Go now, in the hope and peace and love of God. And may the grace of our Lord
Jesus Christ be with you.

Postlude:

March in C

Hanz Freidmann

PRAYER LIST

Amy Belli
Carolyn Barney
Jack Brigham
Becky Colwell
Maureen Daoust
Rebecca Driscoll
David Dufour
Diana Escarbie
Cathy Fontaine
Chuck Funk
Bob and Pat Goguen
John Hanks, Jr.
Linda Hurd
Tom Kazanjian
Sarah Kee
Colin Lajoie
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
Diane Staples
Carole Ann Sumner and Henry
Donna Thorne
Daniel Tousignant
Marilyn Wales
Family of Scott White

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 Governmental Leaders