



# Rollstone Congregational Church

United Church of Christ  
199 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA

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Church Organist and Musician: Gavin Klein

# *First Sunday of Lent*

## **February 21, 2021**

**Prelude:**

**Prelude from *Service for Lent***

**J.P. Johnson**

### **Focusing on the Lenten Journey:**

On these days of Lenten journey, Christ goes with us side by side.  
While we gather here for worship, may our lives be focused with praise and care.  
As we sing, pray and listen, may God's Spirit deep within us come alive.  
And may this time of worship, be for us a constant guide.  
Now let us sing with joy and vigor, as we learn how to serve Christ more fully.

### **A Time of Prayer:**

God of Eternal Love, we have made our commitment to you, and have started a new journey into purposeful growth.

But, we know that if we are to remain faithful we need your help and your strength.

So, we ask ...

Teach us to pray with faith and read your word with understanding.  
Teach us to worship with passion and gather together with love.  
Teach us to give generously, serve compassionately and use our time mindfully,  
so that we may reflect your goodness, and that others may discover your grace through us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

**Opening Hymn:**

**“O Christ, the Healer”**

*sung to Tallis' Canon*

O Christ, the healer, we have come to pray for health, to plead for friends.  
How can we fail to be restored, when reached by love that never ends?

From every ailment flesh endures our bodies clamor to be freed;  
yet in our hearts we would confess that wholeness is our deepest need.

How strong, O Lord, are our desires, how weak our knowledge of ourselves!  
Release in us those healing truths unconscious pride resists or shelves.

In conflicts that destroy our health, we diagnose the world's disease;  
our common life declares our ills: is there no cure, O Christ, for these?

Grant that we all, made one in faith, in your community may find  
the wholeness that, enriching us, shall reach the whole of humankind.

## A Reading from the Scriptures:

Psalm 25:1-10 (NIV)

- 1 To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
- 2 O my God, in you I trust;  
do not let me be put to shame;  
do not let my enemies exult over me.
- 3 Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;  
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
  
- 4 Make me to know your ways, O Lord;  
teach me your paths.
- 5 Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all day long.
  
- 6 Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,  
for they have been from of old.
- 7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;  
according to your steadfast love remember me,  
for your goodness' sake, O Lord!
  
- 8 Good and upright is the Lord;  
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
- 9 He leads the humble in what is right,  
and teaches the humble his way.
- 10 All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,  
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

**Musical Interlude:**      **Interlude from *Service for Lent***      **J.P. Johnson**

**The Message:**      **“Navigating the Journey”**

Neuroscientist Sue Barry wore a hat with a magnet in it every time she went out. No, she wasn't trying to attract stray bits of metal or deflect impulses from UFOs. She was hoping it would help her improve her sense of direction, which had always been poor. Barry's husband, who is also a scientist, rigged up the magnetic hat and set it so that it buzzed every time she turned north. After wearing the hat around town, she began to anticipate not just which way north was, but also “how things connect,” she says.

She eventually swapped her buzzing magnetic hat for a smartphone app, also developed by her husband, that vibrates when facing north. But with either device, it was worth the effort. She began associating certain streets and landmarks with north due to the cues from the hat and the phone, and from there she could make connections about which streets were parallel and which ones

intersected. Her direction-finding skills improved, and in effect, she disproved the common notion that if one's sense of direction isn't well-developed, there's nothing one can do about it.

Nonetheless, it has long been known that some people seem better at finding their way than others. All of us form "cognitive maps" of locations we travel frequently. Otherwise, we wouldn't even be able to find our way around our house. But some people form "cognitive maps" even for places they've visited only once. If they ever go back there, they can navigate easily and have an inner sense of where things are in relation to other things. For example, "McDonald's is here, so the library is to the left, and the street beside that should take me back to the highway."

In his book titled *Inner Navigation*, which is about direction finding, Erik Jonsson says, "Our natural curiosity, the interest with which we look at new things, especially those that stand out as landmarks, is enough to create the cognitive map without any conscious effort." Thus, the level of our curiosity about some features of the natural landscape may determine the quality of our cognitive maps.

Stan Purdum, who's is a regular contributor to the *Homiletics* magazine, says that his directional sense seems more developed than his wife's. She often reads books or magazines when they are on long journeys, while he is at the wheel. Periodically on the trip, she may look up from what she's been engrossed in and say, "Where are we?" Purdum says he's always able to answer accurately because he's doing the route plotting and watching the road signs. But, he adds, "if we're on a route we've traveled before, I also know the answer because I'm always noticing — and apparently remembering — various unique buildings, geographic features, highway intersections, roadside vistas and other landmarks that help orient me."

Purdum adds, "My wife can find her way when she needs to, but it doesn't come naturally to her, and she prefers to let me do it when we're together. I suspect that's because she doesn't have the interest in visual landmarks that I do."

All of this is a preamble to our look at Psalm 25, where the psalmist prays, "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths." In effect, the psalmist is asking God to help him with a sense of spiritual direction and a cognitive map that shows him the Lord's ways and paths. Or to use a modern metaphor, the psalmist is praying for a spiritual GPS.

That's an especially apropos prayer for this season of Lent.

Traveling God's path implies movement and direction, a response to God's word, and a way of living that pleases God. In the Psalms, "path" often refers to the kind of conduct prescribed by the Scripture, especially in the laws of Moses. The Mosaic laws and the books containing them, the first five books of the Bible, were called the Torah. The basic meaning of Torah, however, is not "rules," but "instruction." Thus by praying, "Make known to me your ways, O Lord, teach

me your paths. Lead me in your truth ...” the psalmist is asking for instruction in traveling God’s way.

Psalm 25 tells us specific things about the path to God.

First, it tells us that the godly path is not necessarily a way that we know intuitively. When the psalmist prays, in verse 4, “Make me to know your ways ... teach me your paths,” he seems to be acknowledging that the path of the Lord is not necessarily obvious, but rather a direction that needs to be studied out, discerned and discovered. Sometimes, we even learn about God’s path when we have walked too far on another trail and discovered that it leads to trouble. Beating a hasty retreat, we finally call out to God for direction, and we encounter Jesus.

Second, the psalmist acknowledges that the Lord’s way is a path sinners are invited to walk: “God ... instructs sinners in the way,” the psalmist says in verse 8.

And third, the psalmist acknowledges in verse 10 that all the ways of God are characterized by steadfast love and faithfulness for those who follow his instruction. One thing the psalmist is sure about: The way of the Lord is a good way.

In Psalm 25, of course, the writer is speaking of the instruction provided by a loving God so that his human creatures can find the right direction in this confusing world. The psalmist opens by praying, “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul” (v. 1). Clearly the psalmist knew where the right path started!

In his book about inner navigation, Jonsson touts the advantages of the cognitive map, noting that it “is tailor made for us, showing only what we need to see.” In contrast, “a street map,” says Jonsson, “shows mostly what we don’t need, and it takes quite a bit of practice in map reading to use it efficiently, to get past the wealth of useless information and find what one actually needs.”

Street maps and their intellectual equivalent — general knowledge — have their place, of course, and we draw from our general knowledge in living our lives every day. But the way of the Lord is a special application of knowledge guided by the Holy Spirit. Thus, we need God’s help to develop our cognitive sense and set an orientation on God’s path.

So how *dō wē* do that? Here are three ways:

First, make it a matter of prayer. “To pray is to change,” says Richard Foster, who has written extensively about the spiritual practices that help us grow. “Prayer is the central avenue God uses to change us,” Foster adds. In so saying, he answers the question about why we should pray when God already knows our needs. We should pray because God uses prayer to change us. In fact, Foster says: “If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic of our lives.”

And in Psalm 25, the psalmist even gives us some words to use in these prayers: “Make known to me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth . . .”

If you find praying difficult — and a great many of us do — you might try this during Lent: Spend some time reading and praying the prayers others have written. You might, for example, use *A Diary of Private Prayer*, by John Baillie. That little book contains two prayers a day, one for morning and one for evening, for 31 days. In the original book, published in the middle of the last century, Baillie used some “thees” and “thous” when addressing God, but those shouldn’t cause you to stumble. In any case, there’s a revised edition, published in 2014, where editor Susanna Wright updated Baillie’s daily prayers using modern, accessible language. Whichever version you use, it’s likely your own prayers will begin to flow through Baillie’s timeless imagery, and you will find your spiritual navigation skills improving.

Second, make your quest for a spiritual cognitive map a matter of Scripture reading. During Lent, select a passage each day of no more than 10-12 verses from the gospels, epistles or psalms. Read it not to focus on what the passage meant to the original audience, but what God might say through it to you. As you read, notice if a word, phrase or verse speaks to you, perhaps in light of your life right now. If so, pause and savor the insight, feeling or understanding, and realize that what you’ve just noticed is likely a landmark on the inner journey, something that will help you find the Lord’s way in the future as well. Then go back and read the passage again because it will have a fuller meaning. Pause again and note what happened. Follow with prayer. This exercise will help your spiritual way-finding skills, as one of the psalms tells us: “Your word is a lamp to your feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105).

Third, this being Lent, consider how fasting might help you in your spiritual orienteering. As you probably know, there are several levels of fasting. You can go without all food (but not water) for a set period or you can do a partial fast, perhaps omitting a single meal one day a week, with many other possibilities in between. Whatever level you choose, the point is to consider how the fast helps you focus on matters (besides food!) that you might not have focused on otherwise . . . to help you hear things from God you might not have otherwise heard.

If you want to improve your ability to find your way on the streets and highways these days, you don’t have to wear a magnetic hat. Wearable devices like GPS smart watches can provide a tactile feeling to notify you about directions, and newer navigation technology is always right around the corner.

But for finding the Lord’s path, it’s hard to beat prayer, Bible-reading and fasting.

### **Musical Interlude:**

**“These 40 Days have Begun” *Service for Lent***

**J.P. Johnson**

**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.*

How can it be, O God, that as we gather here today and in our homes, it is the first Sunday in Lent? How can it be that we are in the wilderness preparing to walk toward Jerusalem when it seems that only a few weeks ago, we were gathered together in wonder in the stillness of a stable? We realize how quickly time passes. During this Lenten journey, let us strive to live each moment to the fullest. When we are tempted to squander an hour in foolishness, turn us instead to spending the hour wisely. When we find ourselves looking back at the past with regret, turn us around — not to thoughts of the future but to the present moment, walking purposefully in the present and in your presence. When we are of a mind to hold onto a grudge and withhold forgiveness, keep us centered in your love, gracious God, that we might be able to share the gift of your love with each person we meet. Keep us mindful that Lent is a journey; we pray that the grace of God will lead us home through Christ our Lord. And now as we continue this journey we pray that prayer which 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.”

**Closing Hymn: “O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus”** *sung to Ebenezer*

O the deep, deep love of Jesus! Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free,  
Rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over me.  
Underneath me, all around me, is the current of thy love;  
Leading onward, leading homeward, to thy glorious rest above.

O the deep, deep love of Jesus! Spread his praise from shore to shore;  
How he loveth, ever loveth, changeth never, nevermore;  
How he watches o’er his loved ones, died to call them all his own;  
How for them he intercedeth, watcheth o’er them from the throne.

O the deep, deep love of Jesus! Love of ev’ry love the best:  
‘Tis an ocean vast of blessing, ‘tis a haven sweet of rest.  
O the deep, deep love of Jesus! ‘Tis a heav’n of heav’ns to me;  
And it lifts me up to glory, for it lifts me up to thee.

**Benediction:**

Send us forth on our Lenten journey.

Send us forth through the wilderness of our world.

As Moses gave the Hebrew people God's symbol of forgiveness and hope,  
give to us, Lord, your spirit of forgiveness and grace.

Send us out through the desert moments of our lives,  
into the light and life of God's new dawn. Amen.

**Postlude:****Postlude in E from *Service for Lent*****J.P. Johnson**



**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  
Roland Larsen  
Linda Long  
Lorraine Michaud  
Audrey Painchaud  
Maria Piazza  
Emma Pollice  
Melanie Pouliot  
Jackie Reiss  
Family of Martha Quinn  
Del Sampson  
Elwin Shepard  
Ron Smith  
The Staples Family  
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 Governmental Leaders