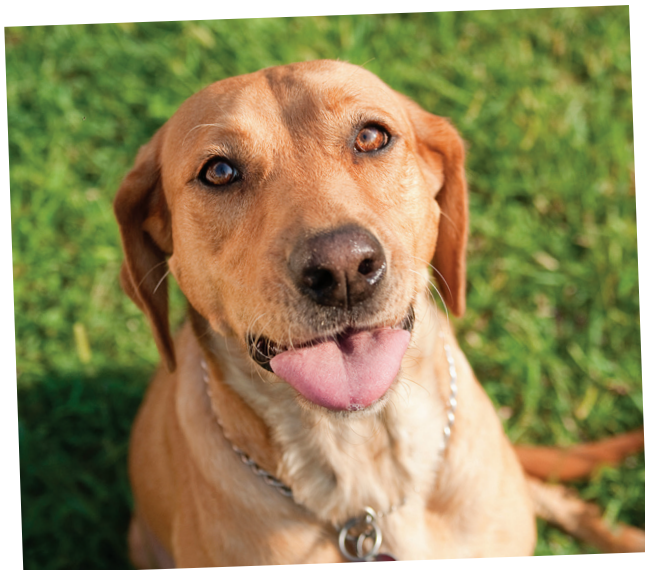


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Rollstone Congregational Church

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 of Lent

March 21, 2021

Prelude:

Aeolian

Eugene Lindesky

Focusing on the Lenten Journey:

The Lenten season is a homecoming. A home from weary years, a home to calm our fears, a home to dry our tears.

Lent is a homecoming, a home to remember our name, a home to a warm embrace, a home to a hopeful place, a home with Christ, who is one with our journeying.

Lent is a homecoming, a home to prepare again for the last days of the earthly ministry of Jesus.

May this season be a time to remember that by grace we shall be led home to that place where God has prepared for us a life of eternal life with Christ Jesus. Amen.

A Time of Prayer:

Suffering God, you told us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus. We're still not sure we want to go that far. We had hoped that becoming followers in this day and age would be a more rational business; we had hoped to fit our religion in the spare corners of our lives. It wasn't supposed to be an inconvenience. Yet you continue to call us, and we squirm uncomfortably. Teach us to respond gratefully to your invitation. Teach us to sacrifice — not only for others, but for you. And take what we can give right now, transforming it into an offering of our deepest selves. In your Son's name we pray. Amen.

Opening Hymn:

“Jesus Hands were Kind Hands”

Au Clair de la Lune

Jesus' hands were kind hands, doing good to all,
healing pain and sickness, blessing children small,
washing tired feet and saving those who fall;
Jesus' hands were kind hands, doing good to all.

Take my hands, Lord Jesus, let them work for you;
make them strong and gentle, kind in all I do;
let me watch you, Jesus, till I'm gentle too,
till my hands are kind hands, quick to work for you.

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A Reading from the Scriptures:

John 12:20-33 (NIV)

20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’ 22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and

Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷ ‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—“Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ ³⁰Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Musical Interlude:

You Are the Honor of Our People

Teresine Fonder S.N.J.M

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.*

Good and gracious God, like Paul and Silas we are no strangers to adversity and struggle. We are dogged by the inconveniences and annoyances of life. We are burdened by the relentless needs of others. We are misunderstood and falsely accused. Friends fail us and foes gloat at our troubles. We pray, Lord, for courage and patience to endure trying circumstances. We long for deeper faith to trust you and believe in your goodness. We ask for grace that we might praise you in any and every situation.

God of glory, we praise you for your presence in our lives and for all goodness that you shower upon us in Jesus Christ. Especially we praise and thank you for promises kept and hope for tomorrow, the enjoyment of friends, the joy of families, the wonders of your creation, those who have gone before us, love from our parents, sisters and brothers, love from our spouse and children, our faith and the church.

God of grace, remind us that we are all your children for we are brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. We offer our prayers for whom you love. Especially we pray for those we too often forget, people who have lost hope, those who mourn this day, those who suffer because of war, those who are lonely or sick, those who go hungry.

God of healing, come now to us with new strength to renew our grieving spirits. Help us to look into the future with confidence and assurance in Christ’s comforting love.

And now we pray the 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.”

Musical Interlude:

Choral Response

M. Heinser

The Message:

“Being Drawn Home”

Do you like heartwarming pet stories?

Most people do and among the most popular in this genre are stories of lost pets who make their way back home over great distances.

There’s the story of Laser the Beagle, who lived with his family outside Winnipeg, Canada. The family took him with them to their lake house, but the poor pooch got spooked by a fireworks display and dashed into the woods. After hours of fruitless searching, they sadly returned home, but not before putting up a whole lot of lost-dog posters.

Soon the phone calls started coming in. A lot of people had spotted Laser, but no one was able to catch him. The curious thing was that each of the Laser sightings was a little bit closer to the family’s Winnipeg home. He was living up to his name, traveling over hill and dale, straight as a laser.

Eventually, someone cornered Laser in a schoolyard and reunited him with his family. He had traveled a remarkable 50 miles.

In 1963, Disney brought to the theaters one of its most beloved animal films, *The Incredible Journey*. They released a remake in 1993, *Homeward Bound: The Incredible Journey*. Both films tell the tale of three household pets — two dogs and a cat — who get lost and make their arduous way across miles of rugged wilderness to their family.

Another classic film, *Lassie Come Home* (1943), spins a similar story about a lost collie’s epic journey from Scotland to Yorkshire, England. A 2020 German remake shifts the location from the British Isles to Germany, but the basic plotline is the same: lost dog triumphs over incredible odds to reunite with her family.

Certain mammals, especially dogs, are somehow able to accomplish feats of geolocating — figuring out where they are in the world — but scientists aren’t entirely clear about how they do it. The leading theory is that dogs have some innate ability to sense and follow the Earth’s magnetic field. It’s like they have a built-in compass. Just as a compass needle swings to point unerringly towards magnetic north, something inside a dog’s body does much the same. It’s believed that whales, dolphins and even sea turtles share these magnetic navigation abilities.

A June 2020 study from the Czech Republic tracks how this happens. Over a three-year period, researchers equipped 27 dogs of 10 different breeds with GPS tracking devices, then released them into the woods. The dogs consistently found their way back home.

They couldn’t have been using the sun’s position, because they found their way back, even on cloudy days. Nor could they have been using visual

landmarks, because there was no difference small dogs and large dogs — which are better able to see over obstructions like tall grass.

If their route simply went out and back, there was an easy explanation: the dogs followed their own scent trail. But a significant number of dogs, released from vehicles far from home, exhibited what scientists call “scouting” behavior. They began their journey home with a north-south run that the researchers believe is a way of resetting their internal compass according to the Earth’s magnetic axis. The dogs made this north-south “compass run” regardless of the direction in which their destination was located. After the compass run, they headed unerringly in the direction of home.

This leads us to today’s scripture passage found in the Gospel of John.

“Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.” They sought Philip out and eagerly beseeched him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

Although their request sounds ordinary to our ears, it would not have seemed so to Philip, nor to any other member of Jesus’ band of followers. Most of them were used to thinking of him as their rabbi. Many of them had grown up not far from his home in Galilee. Theirs was a thoroughly Jewish environment.

What could these Greeks possibly want with him?

The message/request works its way up the chain of command to Jesus. It seems to spark something disquieting in him, a certain sense of foreboding. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” he declares, knowingly.

Most of Jesus’ followers have imagined their little reform movement flourishing solely under the umbrella of Judaism. The presence of these Greek pilgrims seems to remind their Lord that his true mission will soon be played out on a much larger stage: even on a cosmic stage.

Here the next verses are grim. The necessity of seeds falling into the ground and dying before they bear fruit. Losing one’s own life — even hating one’s life — as the hard price of discipleship. The call to resolutely follow him, come what may.

“Now my soul is troubled,” Jesus sighs. Unburdening himself of his deepest dread — in language evoking his agony in the garden, in the synoptic gospels — Jesus wonders if he dares pray, “Father, save me from this hour.”

The prayer he does ultimately utter is one not of protest but of absolute resignation: “Father, glorify your name.” Notably, he seeks not his own glory, but God’s.

Then suddenly — as happened at his baptism, and on the Mount of Transfiguration — a voice booms out of the heavens: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” This is no private revelation. The crowd hears it, and wonders.

With an unearthly look in his eye, Jesus declares that the time of the world’s judgment is at hand, and with it the defeat of “the ruler of this world.” Whether he’s speaking of the emperor or of a more spiritual adversary is hard to say.

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” John is convinced that the lifting-up part refers to the cross, with Jesus’ still-living body writhing upon it. Surely, to the disciples, it’s a mystifying saying. Only later, after the cross and resurrection, will his followers discern and understand the full extent of its dark meaning.

Not all that long ago there was a time when a magnetic Jesus — or a crucifix, for those in the Roman Catholic or Episcopal traditions — was a common

item in religious bookstores. The little statue of the Savior, his arms extended in blessing, was meant to be placed on the dashboard of a car. Its purpose was reassurance, a reminder of the Lord's caring presence during morning and evening commutes.

It's hard to find a magnetic Jesus nowadays, mainly because dashboards are now made of fiberglass or plastic. But some of us old-timers know they used to be a thing.

The real Jesus is magnetic in a different sense. Just by being himself, he draws people towards him.

Gossip columnists laud the magnetism of certain movie stars or political leaders. By that, they typically mean a combination of good looks and a winning personality. These fortunate few have "star power." They draw ordinary mortals into their orbit.

Another word used for this sort of superficial attraction is "charisma." It's a religious word at its root — although that's not the sense in which the writers of *People* and *Us Weekly* magazines use it. A charism — closely related to *charis*, the Greek word for grace — is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Christian understanding of charisma is far richer.

Jesus Christ, of course, is more than a mere celebrity. What he offers the human race is far more dazzling than mere star power. The story of his life, death and resurrection speaks to our deepest spiritual hungers. The promise of his continued presence, as Holy Spirit, assures us that we are never alone.

Jesus is magnetic in a way similar to those old-fashioned bar magnets that our grade-school science teachers used to explain the physics of magnetism. Remember how, if you placed two of those bar magnets together on a lab table in a certain way, they would fly together to meet each other? And do you remember how, if you spun one magnet around the other way, you could bring the two of them together, but you couldn't make them stay there? As soon as you let go, one or both of the magnets would go spinning off in the opposite direction, unable to resist the powerful force of magnetic repulsion.

There was something attractive about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem — as described a few verses earlier in this very same chapter of John's gospel. I will talk more about that next week as we observe Palm Sunday. Well, that spiritual attraction causes the crowd to cheer. But there's also something repellent about Jesus to those who are as yet unwilling to welcome him into their hearts. "Look," say the scribes and pharisees in amazement, as they see the surging crowd, "the world has gone after him!" (John 12:19). They speak those words not in admiration, but in revulsion. Soon enough, through their schemes, they will turn that world against him, squeezing his lifeblood out upon the stones of Calvary.

Jesus is magnetic still. The crowds who will gather here for Palm Sunday may be drawn by the festive scene of children waving palm branches and cheered by rousing hymns, but that's only the half of it. It's the attractive half. This man who lurches awkwardly into Jerusalem on a donkey also has a repellent way about him.

If you lay your ordinary, greed filled life up against his, if you seek to align your life with his teachings, you may sometimes discover that your own life is spinning around until you're facing the opposite way. It's that power he has — God's power — the power of righteousness, plunged into this world of sin like a hot poker immersed in a vat of water. It's no wonder the principalities and powers crucified him. Once they discovered who he truly is, and what his

presence in this world really means, they realigned the repellent poles of their magnet against his by brute force.

Then we hear in the scriptures “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” That’s spiritual magnetism at work! On the one hand, he repels; but he also attracts. Once the power of his love gets hold of you, there’s no resisting. He just brings you along.

At his birth, he attracted shepherds to a Bethlehem hillside, and wise men from afar. In the temple when he was 12 years old, the wise and the learned gathered round to hear his teaching. He called to his side fishermen who left their nets and tax collectors who abandoned their account books. Even the wise Pharisee, Nicodemus, came to him by night, to learn how to be “born from above.”

He called to his side women of every description — everyone from the practical, no-nonsense Martha to her dreamy sister, Mary. Even the Roman governor, Pilate, felt the pull of his magnetism as he interrogated him. A pity it was that the skeptical Pilate did not give in, then and there, and cease his resistance!

Jesus can do the same thing for you today. Have you felt the pull of his love in your life, calling you out of ungodly habits? Have you experienced the fascination that comes from hearing his story, the timeless story retold by the church in every age? Have you ever turned to him in grief or worry or fear, and discovered at the center of your being a calm and peaceful place, where none of life’s storms can harm you?

If so, you’ve felt his magnetism. Very likely, it’s what has drawn you here to worship today.

Have you ever seen a magnet at work in a junkyard? It’s an impressive sight. Junkyard owners attach a large electromagnet to the end of a crane. The crane operator swings the magnet way out, over a barren field strewn with the wrecks of automobiles, and the magnet is strong enough to attract every kind of metal that’s worth refining. Everything that’s not attracted, the junkyard owner ships off to be destroyed or buried in a landfill. Everything the magnet has grabbed is saved and put to good use.

There’s one other characteristic of those clunky, old bar magnets, so beloved by science teachers. If you take a magnet that’s powerful enough, and you strap another piece of metal right up against it for a sufficient period of time, that metal, too, becomes a magnet. Somehow the magnetic force leaps the gap, and the other metal bar becomes imbued with the magnet’s power.

Then, it too can attract others. It too can invite and guide others to the one source of all attraction.

If we’ve felt the pull of Jesus in our lives, and if we’ve submitted ourselves to his power, we’ll soon discover that our lives become magnetic, too — although, of course, in a more limited way. His magnetism will work through our own lives to invite others into a saving relationship with him.

With Holy Week coming soon, maybe you’ve already begun to feel the attraction. Maybe you feel your soul yearning for that saving story of King Jesus, riding on a donkey, then hung from a cross, then bursting forth from the tomb that could not hold him in.

As we move towards our celebration of those world-changing events, know that the entry of the Son of God into human life is not only a matter of teaching, of blessing and of healing — it’s also a disturbance. His story reminds us that

God still has plans for the world, big plans. Within those plans is our own particular place: the unique duties God is calling us to perform.

You and I can respond to that divine disturbance with hostility and rejection, or we can welcome the Lord as liberator and life-giver. Either way, it's up to us to answer the call.

So, walk with the Lord in these final days of Lent. Walk with him not only as he enters the city in bright sunshine, but also as he wades into the shadows. Go with him to dark Gethsemane and beyond. Watch with him, and wonder at this spectacle of God's own Son, arrested, condemned, crucified and risen from the grave!

May we never forget Jesus' words.... "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."—John 12:32

Closing Hymn:

"If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee" Wer Nur Den Lieben Gott

If thou but suffer God to guide thee,
and hope in God through all thy ways,
God will give strength, whate'er betide thee,
and bear thee through the evil days.
Who trusts in God's unchanging love
builds on the rock that naught can move.

Only be still, and wait God's leisure
in cheerful hope, with heart content
to take whate'er thy Maker's pleasure
and all-discerning love hath sent;
we know our inmost wants are known,
for we are called to be God's own.

Sing, pray, and keep God's ways unswerving;
so do thine own part faithfully,
and trust God's word; though undeserving,
thou yet shalt find it true for thee.
God never yet forsook at need
the soul that trusted God indeed.

Benediction:

Send us forth, Lord, on this journey and call us to faithful discipleship.
Call us forth to repentance and new life.
Call us to listen and to hear your Word.
Call us to serve and respond in your Way.
Call us to live always with hope and love. Amen.

PRAYER LIST

Jacob Allen - *Deployed to the Middle East*

Amy Belli

Carolyn Barney

Jack Brigham

Becky Colwell

Maureen Daoust

Rebecca Driscoll

David Dufour

Diana Escarbie

Cathy Fontaine

Chuck Funk

Bob and Pat Goguen

Linda Haas

Douglas Hanks

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

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

Our Governmental Leaders