

Good Sunday midday from a cold, snow covered hill in Rockport.....

I'm late with my "Sunday words" and worship service again today..... Sorry.....

Again, this week we are sad because we have lost another beloved member of our Federated family, Fred Bagnall. Fred died very early Friday morning at Windward Gardens where he had been living for a long time. Again, the reminder, *once again*, that we never know what week will be our last, what day we will take our final breath, no matter our age.... So, as I wrote last Sunday, we are reminded to live fully each day.... to have faith, no matter what happens.... to hope beyond hope that all will be well no matter what happens.... and to love as if our very lives depended on how we treat one another. I'll write more another day or two this coming week.... looks like we might get more snow come Thursday night and Friday!

Hopefully Saturday, February 5th will be bright and sunny as we gather (masked!) in our sanctuary to remember Muriel with a full celebration of her life. Her service will begin at 2 p.m. with a reception in our Leach Hall to follow. Burpee Carpenter Hutchins Funeral Home will also be broadcasting her service for those who cannot come to our church that afternoon or who are concerned about covid.....

Blessings to all this cold snow laden Sunday in January..... Susan

p.s. I will download this morning's scripture reading and sermon to the Federated Church of Thomaston Facebook page and my Facebook page freerangepastor later today for anyone who would like to tune in.....

p.s.s. As always, thank you to those of you who send me your e-mail responses to my writings. I don't always get a chance to write back to each one of you, but I appreciate all your responses! They keep me motivated to continue writing.....

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, January 30, 2022
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

A Call to Worship

We gather in cyberspace as a distracted people.

No matter where we are, someone or something wants our attention.

For God alone, may our souls wait in silence.

We are offered endless solutions that promise to solve all our problems,
and guarantee our happiness and success.

For God alone, may our souls wait in silence.

We come to this worship space to renew that silence together,
even though we are apart in body.
We believe we are always together in spirit waiting for God.
Amen.

A Reading for Today....

The Snow Drifts Down " by Robert T. Weston

Across the hill and dell, valley and upland,
Smooth as a blanket across the world,
Softly falling, falling,
Quietly, gently as a mother's kiss
On the face of her sleeping child
The snow drifts down, touches, settles,
Lies on tree and shrub, on field and woodland,
Like a soft mantle,
Making all things new.
So be my heart this day:

The pain of things done and injuries unmended,
The fears of things unseen and long dreaded,
The ache of failures and mistakes of times past,
The sudden angry passion and the bitter regret,
And strength ebbing away with the inexorable beat of time,
All forgotten, or restored to innocence,
Clothed in gentle purity,
The universal forgiveness which whispers me,
"Behold, I make all things new!"

**Scripture reading for February 2, 2022 – “Presentation of the Lord”
Luke 2:22-40**

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought [Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), and they offered

a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

A sermon based on Luke 2:22-40 “Guided by the Spirit....”

Will you pray with me. God of ritual and remembrance, as we ponder the fortieth day after the birth of Jesus, celebrated on December 25th, remind us to praise you even in the midst of all the difficulties and challenges among us. Remind us that your Spirit is our guide into the days ahead, if only we open ourselves to your leading us forward. Amen.

First a little Bible study regarding the reading for today from the Gospel of Luke -- February 2nd, which comes in three days, is celebrated in the Christian tradition as the end of the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle. Although this year there are several more Sundays in the Epiphany cycle.

February 2 commemorates the forty days after the birth of Jesus, as it is celebrated on December 25. February 2 has been observed both as the presentation

of Jesus in the Temple and the purification or cleansing of Mary, following the birth of a male child, as was dictated by Levitical law in the time of Jesus life. Because of the emphasis of Christ's light overcoming the darkness, candles have played a large part in the celebration of this day, thus it is called "Candlemas." In some churches, candles are blessed and distributed to be taken home from church and used during family devotions. (material drawn from *Seasons of the Spirit* for 2014-2015)

I chose to have us focus on the Gospel reading assigned for February 2 instead of the reading assigned for today for this reason – we need a little light, don't you think? With the seemingly never-ending challenge of covid among us, the on-going political fighting day in and day out, with news of gun violence confronting and taking down too many of us, a little light is in order, don't you think?

I've been doing a lot of praying lately – for those we know and those we'll never know – those dealing with life restoring situations and those facing impending death. I never ask people what it is specifically they want me to pray for. Perhaps I should, but I don't. I don't want people to think I believe prayer is a panacea for problems or that God is "Mister Fix-it." Mostly I pray that God will be with them through their difficulties and give them strength to go forward when they don't think they can carry on any longer.

In many circumstances, things get a lot worse before they get better. The difficulties of life – sickness and death, including the challenges of the covid nightmare, uncomfortable family and relationships stresses, economic and job loss issues, not to mention the national and worldwide strife we hear about every day.... what's the point of coming to church (whether in person or through cyberspace as we are connecting at the moment) in the midst of all this personal, countrywide and worldwide malaise? What do you think? Why do we gather to worship?

In answering that question for myself, I'm reminded again this week of one of my favorite questions in Scripture. It's from the book of Jeremiah in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament to us Christians – when King Hezekiah asks the prophet Jeremiah, "Is there any word from the Lord?" (Jeremiah 37:17) The king has sought out Jeremiah secretly to give him a favorable prophetic message about his personal future. Jeremiah says there is a word from the Lord and the word is the Lord thinks the king has made a royal mess of things and he's not

going to be around much longer. He's going to be handed over to the king of Babylon!

Even though we don't come to church with the same crooked purpose as King Hezekiah, it seems to me, you and I do come to find out "if there is any word from the Lord" for us today. I know I do. And each week in my sermon preparation, I'm continually asking myself, "What is the word from the Lord that is going to be helpful to the people listening to my words about this particular passage from the Scriptures?"

Today that word is patience and it comes from our observations of old Simeon and old Anna as they finally have the opportunity to receive the word of the Lord coming to them in the little baby Jesus. Both have lived long lives dedicated to God.

Simon "was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah." (Luke 2:25-26)

And Anna, a prophet, "was of great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer day and night." (Luke 2:36-37)

Here's the question for the day. Why do you think these two old people never gave up? Why did they keep their faith in God after so many years of difficulty and hardship? If we were together in person today, I'd ask for your responses before I gave you mine....

It seems to me they never gave up because they were able to put their lives into a context far greater than their immediate circumstances. They were able to see "the big picture" of God in which they were active participants in the play, God's play, not their own personal plays. They were able to patiently wait for the closing scene, the finishing touches of God to mark their lives in ways they simply could not produce on their own.

They did, day in and day out, what they knew they needed to do to remain faithful to God in the midst of loss, despair and difficulty. They performed the rituals of their faith, probably even on days when they didn't think they had the energy or the will to do so. They kept on, no matter what, because they understood they were small, but crucial players in the greater scheme of things in life and in death governed by the Spirit of God.

And you know what? We are all crucial players in that greater scheme of things, too. Whether we believe it or not, whether we perform the rituals of our faith or not, whether we show up on Sunday morning or not, whether we know our Bible or not, whether we care or not.... we are all part of the greater play of life that includes good times and bad, vibrant relationships and relationships gone awry.

For richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, until death do us part – we are all actors in God’s mysterious play of life. It seems to me, Simeon and Anna knew that and so they had the patience to keep on keepin’ on even when they probably wondered themselves why they were doing so.

And it paid off. They were able to see the glory of the Lord come alive in an infant. “Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory to your people Israel.’” (Luke 2:27-32)

And Anna, “At the moment [when she saw Jesus], she began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” (Luke 2:38)

Have you ever had a moment like that in your life? When you could say, “Now I see. Now I know the presence of the Spirit of God.” Perhaps it was in the words of a child to you, in a gesture of kindness and compassion, in receiving the help of a friend when you were in the midst of great despair, in a magnificent piece of visual art, in the wonders of nature, in a work of fiction in which the writer is able to draw out the most poignant elements of the human condition and make them real.

For Simeon and Anna, the Spirit of God had become part of their lives through many years of rituals and praying and doing what was right in the sight of God, who jumped off the pages of Scripture into their lives.

For us, we have only to remember and give thanks for the lives of Hank, and Muriel, and Fred and so many others who have demonstrated through their actions and their words that they are faithful followers of Jesus, along with Simeon and Anna. They walked their faith, and refused to believe there is nothing more after this earthly life ends. They patiently waited for God because they could not bear to do otherwise, even in the midst of hardships, losses and finally death.

William R. Inge, Anglican priest and divinity professor, wrote in his book entitled *Personal Religion and the Life of Devotion* in 1924, “A generation which wishes for a religion without tears must find it difficult to adjust its beliefs to the teaching of the New Testament and to the facts of life.”^[1]

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not without tears. It is not without difficulty. It is not without despair and death in the end. But it is full and rich with the facts of life that make each day we live both a challenge and a joy.

Simeon and Anna apparently knew great challenge in their lives, as do each of us, but they knew great joy in the end because they patiently and faithfully waited for the glory of God to shine before their eyes. They were rewarded for their patience and their faith. They were guided by the Spirit of God. May the same be true for each of us. Let the people say, “Amen.”

To hold in our prayers this day.....

Especially today, we hold in prayer the family and many friends of Fred Bagnall who died early Friday morning, January 28....

Especially today, we continue to hold in prayer the family and many friends of Muriel Pinkham who died in the very early morning hours of January 22....Dear Muriel, we love you..... rest in peace now and forever....

From our most recent bulletin and more....

Please hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus....

And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs among their members....

And all those dealing with the ravages of cancer near and far.....

And all those affected, which should be every one of us, by the cruel condition of racism which continues to take the lives of too many of our Black brothers and sisters, as we approach Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

And all those who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.....

And add a prayer for Tammy Whirty, a friend of Margie's, dealing with cancer challenges, and, from Jackie a request for prayers for Kyle Cloudier, continued prayers for Ursula recovering...and for “Cody,” who doesn't live locally but needs prayers for guidance; Kristin Parker O'Neal, Jo Ann Parker's daughter, who has had brain surgery and is home now!; Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Julie Pollitt, Zeke

Bryant, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, BJ Thomson & family of Mimi's Uncle Doug, Heather Van Buskirk, and for Tiffany, Lucy's granddaughter.....

Please feel free to contact Susan by phone (207)322-1948 or by email at freerangepastor@gmail.com to have her add or drop any names from the prayer list AND to let her know if you would like for her to stop by for a visit sometime. She's always glad to have a chat with you!

A Benediction

Go into this day with peace and love in your hearts.

May God bless you and keep you.

May God's face radiate upon you and flood you with grace and tender mercies.

May God smile upon you always and cover your life with peace.

Amen.

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

for Sunday, February 6, 2022

Isaiah 6:1-8, (9-13); Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

^[1]William R. Inge, quoted in *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol VIII, 1952, p. 64.