

Good cold, sunny Sunday morning from a hill in Rockport.....

Two weeks ago I wrote about dreaming. Last Sunday I was thinking about the vagaries of March in Maine. This morning, as I type, I'm listening to the birds singing in the trees just beyond our deck. The birds sing no matter the weather or the season. "Morning birds sing for many reasons...." according to Melissa Mayntz in a post from thespruce.com. Take a read! I didn't know there were so many functional reasons birds sing so brightly in the early morning! I suppose I prefer these reasons instead:

"Wherever there are birds, there is hope." ~ Mehmet Murat Ildan, contemporary Turkish playwright, novelist and thinker

"Tomorrow, the birds will sing. Be brave. Face life." ~ Charlie Chaplin, 20th century English comic actor, filmmaker and composer

"The sound of birds stops the noise in my mind." ~ Carly Simon, American singer-songwriter, musician and children's author

And my favorite reasons..... "Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark."

~ Rabindranath Tagore, 19th-20th century Bengali poet, writer, composer, philosopher, social reformer and painter

So, here we are on the third Sunday in Lent.... The sun is shining, the air is March crisp, the birds are singing and Daylight Savings Time begins NEXT SATURDAY, one week from yesterday! What's not to give thanks for this day.....

I know I've said this before, **AND** I want to say again how much I appreciate all your responses to my meditations, especially in these challenging times. I don't always get a chance to respond to each of your reflections, **AND** please know I read all of them, ponder them, and give thanks for them.... Your support spurs me on and gives me hope for the future of us all.....

Blessings to each one on this first Sunday in Lent..... Susan

p.s. I will ATTEMPT, AGAIN, to download today's scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page later today: [freerangepastor](https://www.facebook.com/freerangepastor) for anyone who wants to tune in..... and to the Federated Church of Thomaston's Facebook page....

A simple online worship service for Sunday, March 7, 2021

the third Sunday in Lent
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston

A Call to Worship

God's perfect law revives the soul.
God's stable rule guides the simple.
God's just demands delight the heart.
God's clear commands sharpen vision.
God's faultless decrees stand forever.
God's right judgments keep their truth.
Even as we worship together apart from one another
in physical space on this March morning,
let us remember God is with us in spirit
always and in all ways.
Amen.

A Meditation for the third Sunday in Lent
a 21st century "take" on the meaning of the Ten Commandments....

This is what you should do:
Love the earth and sun and animals,
despise riches,
give alms to everyone that asks,
stand up for the stupid and crazy,
devote your income and labor to others,
hate tyrants,
argue not concerning God,
have patience and indulgence toward the people...
reexamine all you have been told
in school or church or in any book,
dismiss what insults your very soul,
and your flesh shall become a great poem.
~ Walt Whitman ~
(Excerpt from Preface to 1855 edition, *Leaves of Grass*)

Readings of Scripture – Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it. Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not cover your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

“And God spoke all these words....”

A sermon based on Exodus 20:1-17

Pray with me. Wise God, you show us the way to live right every day – the Scriptures tell us so – and too often we turn and look the other way. Help us to see the errors of our ways when we attempt to go it alone. Remind us that to be human is to keep in mind that to be *truly* human we need to remember our source – You. Amen.

In my twenty years of ministry, I've had the opportunity and the gift of holding infants in my arms so that I could baptize them into the Christian faith. When I hold a baby and look into those big, blueberry blue usually, eyes and feel the lightness of their tiny bodies, I always think to myself, “How can anyone not believe in some Divine Creator of us all?”

Yes, I know the physical mechanics of how babies come into the world, but it's bigger than that, way bigger. What, or who, gives us that desire to come together to make new human beings? After all, they're a lotta trouble – beyond the

diaper changing, the spitting up, the “terrible two’s,” teenage angst, and then.... paying for college or having them stay home longer than we thought they would....

There’s just gotta be a greater purpose beyond human desire.... a holy reason for us to come into being at all. I’d like to think it’s “because God said,” because without us God would have no one to talk to, without us God would have nothing to do, no one to correct, no one to love, no one to show the way to new and better life each day.

So, the Bible came into being through many long years of discussion, thinking, writing and combining. Written by God, as the opening verse of our passage for today says, “Then (or and) God spoke all these words....” (Exodus 20:1) I don’t know about that, but the books of the Bible were certainly written with divine help, divine intention, divine love, divine desire to help us learn how to live together and how to witness to that Holy Presence that surrounds us all, each moment of our lives, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Two key passages of the Bible, it seems to me, are the Ten Commandments of Exodus and the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and on the Plain, as they appear in the Gospels of Matthew (5:1-7:29) and Luke (6:20-23) respectively.

I have a visual aid today! If we were together I would place a running shoe on the pulpit. I was thinking about my sermon for today while I was brushing my teeth one day and the idea came to me that the Bible is kind of like a running shoe. Stay with me here! It is a container, for my foot of course, but it won’t work as a container for my foot without two shoelaces interlaced and tied in a bow at the top.

The Bible is this shoe. One lace is the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament to those of us who identify as Christians. The other lace is the New Testament. Separately, one lace won’t hold this shoe on my foot very well. But interlaced with one another, they will. The Bible is kind of like that for us as Christians. We could limp along with one lace, the New Testament one, but two hold the whole Bible together and contain more wisdom than we could fathom on our own in a lifetime of study. I know some of you don’t read the Bible much. You rely on your pastor on Sundays to give you a taste of what’s in this book that has sold more copies than any other piece of writing in the past two thousand years.

In 2009, theology professor Kristin Swenson wrote an article for *Christian Century* titled, “Biblically challenged, Overcoming scriptural illiteracy.” She’s written a number of books since then, the latest one, just published, being *A Most*

Peculiar Book: The Inherent Strangeness of the Bible. In this article from 2009, she wrote, “The Bible is the all-time best-selling book – according to the 2002 Gallup poll, nearly every American (93 percent) owns at least one – yet it seems people know little about it. A Kelton Research survey in 2007 indicated that people know more about what goes into a Big Mac than they know about the Bible and can name members of the Brady Bundy far better than they can name the Ten Commandments. A 1997 Barna survey showed that 12 percent of adults think that Noah’s wife was Joan of Ark, and about half don’t know that the book of Isaiah is in the Old Testament. Yet another poll (by Gallop in 2004) revealed that nearly one in ten teens thinks Moses was one of the twelve apostles. Americans are not alone in their ignorance. Earlier this summer [that would have been in 2009 when this article was published], St. John’s University in Durham, England released its biblical literacy report for the U.K. While 76 percent of respondents said that they owned a Bible, 79 percent couldn’t identify a single accurate fact about Abraham, and 60 percent had no idea what the parable of the Good Samaritan is about.”^[1]

Does any of this biblical illiteracy make any difference in 2021? Perhaps not. As long as we have our computers, and ipods, and itouches, and iphones, and whatever else comes along electronically, we don’t need to know anything by heart anymore. We can just plug a word or two into the Google search box, say, “Moses,” or “Ten Commandments,” and the biblical world will be literally at our fingertips. But.... if we don’t know the questions to ask to begin with, how will we ever find out the answers?

I don’t know what the questions are for Jews, or Muslims, or Hindus, or Buddhists, or Native Americans, or Wicans.... but I do want to have a sense of the questions for me as a Christian. Do you? People of other faiths have their own holy books to which they can turn, or they interpret the Bible in ways different from mine. It is not in my place, or my responsibility, to try to get them to read the holy book that speaks to me so eloquently, if not always so clearly. It is not in my power or desire to convince them that MY religious way is better than theirs. But it IS in my power and with great desire that I continue to learn and study and reflect upon and give thanks for the holy book that was opened up to me in 1990 in a hospital room in Sarasota, Florida. Some of you know that story, but if you don’t I’ll tell it to you sometime if you’re interested.

The Ten Commandments teach us again, call us to remember again, what it means to be a people of faith in these amazingly chaotic times. With renewed eyes and ears in this time of Lent we need to read and hear the announcement of the Ten

Commandments from God to Moses, as God's go-between for God and our sacred Hebrew ancestors. We need to hear and respond to these commandments from a new perspective – not one worn out by repetition without thinking about the meaning of the words, not one skimmed over because we don't believe those commandments REALLY apply to US!

They DO apply to us, in critical and life-giving ways – especially now. Yes, “these ten rules form the basis of the legal system in all Western cultures, but beyond their role as legal building blocks, they are also reminders of God's hope for humanity and creation.... They call us to engage questions about what God hopes for our world, how God is leading us into that hope and what is required of us as partners with God in claiming that hope.”^[2]

I don't know if you've ever taken the time to think about which of the Ten Commandments you've broken and how you've made changes in your life since breaking them, but I have. I will confess to you that I have broken five of them, as best I can tell. I won't tell you which ones. Some of the ones I've broken I have made amends for. For others, I'm still working on my amendments.

But I also must confess that most days I don't think about the Ten Commandments. I try to be a good person each day. I try to love God and my neighbor each day. I try.... some days more successfully than others. How about you?

May we learn from our mistakes and accept God's grace and forgiveness for our human frailties.

May we forgive one another and move into that time when all realize the life-giving power of the Ten Commandments.

May we come to say “Yes” to God's call for fellowship, even with those with whom we do not agree about much of anything.

May we find comfort and peace and well-being in the months to come as we work through, hopefully the ending of, this pandemic nightmare we've all been forced to endure in many ways.

Let the people say, “Amen!”

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

And 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 and alcohol among their members....

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 pray for our new President, and Congress, that they might do the right things in office for the betterment and future of all of us.....

And add to our prayers,

deep prayers for Hank and Lucy as Hank endures his cancer journey with the help of Hospice at home....

and prayers for Coretta and her family as they mourn the loss of Coretta's Aunt Ruth as she passed away unexpectedly in late February....

Carrie Connors and the Hedstrom family of Camden as they deal with the aftermath of a fire that took their home and 14 year old Theodore Hedstrom....

and a request from Mimi for Kendall, who is 49 and has hereditary neuropathy. It is progressing rapidly and at some point he will be in braces. Mike Sodano, who has had three-way bypass surgery this week, a friend of Mimi's and known to many in Thomaston, "Cody," who doesn't live locally but needs prayers for guidance; and Ed Lee, Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine,

Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday.....

AND those you would like for me to remove from this list.

A Benediction

*Life is short, no matter the length of our days.
We do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those
who make the way with us.
So be swift to love.
Make haste to be kind.
And may the creator of us all,
the redeemer of us all,
and the sustainer of us all
be with you now and forever.
Amen.*

(adapted from the words of Henri Frederic Amiel, 1821 – 1881,
Swiss moral philosopher, poet & critic)

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

For Sunday, March 14, 2021 – Fourth Sunday of Lent

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Words to ponder today about “the Ten Commandments”.....

“The Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount contain my religion.”
~ John Adams, 18th century, the principal author of the oldest written constitution still in use in the world, and the first President to live in the White House

“Live your life as though your every act were to become a universal law.”
~ Immanuel Kant, 18th century, German philosopher and one of the central Enlightenment thinkers

“Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.” (Exodus 20:8)
~ the 4th of the “Ten Commandments”

“I have wondered at times what the Ten Commandments would have looked like if Moses had run them through the US Congress.” ~ Ronald Reagan, 20th century, American Republican politician and actor who served as the 40th President of the United States

“We have staked the whole future of our new nation, not upon the power of government; far from it. We have staked the future of all our political constitutions upon the capacity of each of ourselves to govern ourselves according to the moral principles of the Ten Commandments.”
~ James Madison, 19th century, American statesman, diplomat, expansionist, philosopher, and Founding Father who served as the fourth President of the United States

“The Ten Commandments are not prefaced with ‘if you’re in the mood.’”
~ Laura Schlessinger, 20th-21st century, American talk radio host and author

“Mr. Speaker, the fact of the matter is that the Ten Commandments are a historical document that contains moral, ethical, and legal truisms that any person of any religion or even an atheist can recognize and appreciate.” ~ Cliff Stearns, 20th-21st century, American businessman and Republican politician from Florida

[1]Kristin Swenson, "Biblically challenged, Overcoming scriptural illiteracy," *Christian Century*, November 3, 2009, Vol. 126, No. 22, p. 22.

[2]In *Seasons of the Spirit, Congregational Life* for Lent and Easter, March 23, 2003, p. 36.