

This morning's Old Farmer's Almanac predicts "this winter will split the country in two. 'Depending on where you live, this will be the best of winters or memorable for all the wrong reasons,' reports Janice Stillman, editor of *The Old Farmer's Almanac*. 'One half of the country will deal with bone-chilling cold and loads of snow, while the other half may feel like winter never really arrives.' For 231 years – since George Washington was president – *The Old Farmer's Almanac* has been helping readers to prepare for the season ahead with its 80 percent-accurate weather forecasts." (from Almanac.com for today)

Predictions.... Do we believe them? Do we follow them? There are lots of them floating around now.... political predictions, societal predictions, weather predictions. A prediction is a forecast, a guess, an indicator, a prognosis, prophecy (according to my iPhone Dictionary). It seems we usually look *forward* with predictions, and seldom *look back* to see if they came true. Maybe that's a good thing. Yes, "hindsight is 20/20" as the saying goes, but perhaps it's good that we can't predict the future with 100% accuracy, or even 90% accuracy, or with 20/20 vision. Perhaps it's good that we get reminders often that we are not infallible, not always right in our views and pronouncements, and sometimes wrong in our personal predictions. *The Old Farmer's Almanac* folks admit they are only 80 percent-accurate in their weather forecasts.

As we move closer to up-coming political elections, weather changing, and personal decision-making, perhaps it would be wise to step back, take a long breath, and leave room for the Spirit to guide us into future days, months, and seasons.... Perhaps we could all get along better with one another.... if we just took a long breath, and left room for one another.....

Blessings to each one this cool Sunday morning.... Susan
I will "try" to get my sermon posted later today on my and the church's Facebook pages, but after this morning's worship service, and then a service at the Methodist Home in Rockland, and then a service at Bartlett Woods after that, I may be outta steam later today.....

"radical love"
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, August 28, 2022

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Numbers 21:4-9 & 1 Peter 4:7-11

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food."

Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us."

So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live."
Numbers 21:4-9

The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.
1 Peter 4:7-11

Will you pray with me. Compassionate God, we are too often sick at heart and suffering from the poisons within us and all around the world. Help us to find healing in the midst of pain and worry and to give love away even to those who seem unlovable. Help us to *believe* in you as one, even as we are so scattered in our searching for your presence among us, that it seems we will never *serve* you as one. Amen.

Serpents. We don't talk much about serpents these days. They're not part of our theology, nor are they too much a part of our way of life here. I've been told there are NO poisonous serpents – snakes – in Maine. So our story from the book of Numbers this morning might seem very foreign to us, and unrelated to the monumental and tragic problems confronting us each day on too many levels.

But let's take a look at the serpent from the perspective of the ancient biblical world. In those days, "there was general respect for, revulsion at, and fear of serpents, most being assumed to be poisonous and therefore dangerous. The serpent thus came to be understood symbolically with both negative and positive and connotations.... In the Old Testament, serpents usually have a negative connotation.... [But in our passage for this morning, the serpent has both negative and positive connotations. Moses made a bronze serpent] in

the wilderness that was believed to have healing properties. But note that Moses made the bronze serpent only after an attack upon the people by deadly serpents.”^[1]

Even at this early point in the sermon, you could easily be thinking, “So what, Susan? I don’t want to hear about serpents. I want to hear some words of comfort and solace and assurance about the days to come. I want to hear words of joy and hope, not the dangers of snakes and evil!

Believe me, there is nothing I would like to convey to you more than those thoughts, backing them up with words of scripture, and conveying my confidence in their truth.... but some parts of the Bible call us to dig a little deeper, to search a little harder to find the light behind the dark of human nature in our lives, past and present.

Our ancient Israelite brothers and sisters were behaving like spoiled children once again. They were impatient, not thankful for what God had done for them, and complaining about everything – God, Moses, the desert, the food, “this miserable food.” (Numbers 21:5)

So God thought, “Alright, you think things can’t get worse – I’ll show you that they can. Here’s some nasty serpents to make you REALLY unhappy.” The serpents bit the people “so that many Israelites died.” (Numbers 21:6) And the people confessed to Moses that they realized, again, that they had sinned, and they asked him to pray that God might take away the serpents.

God said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” (Numbers 21:8) “So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.” (Numbers 21:9)

That’s quite a story, don’t you think? Take something that is deadly and turn it into something that gives life? That’s what is done with vaccinations – we’re given a small amount of something deadly and it protects us for the rest of our lives from that deadly thing – whether it be polio, or tuberculosis, or small pox, or the covid virus.

Be exposed to something dangerous and deadly and live. But there’s a catch. Isn’t that always the way? There’s almost always a catch before we can receive something good. In the story of the bronze serpent, before the people receive God’s mercy, they have to say they’re sorry. They come to Moses and say, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you...” (Numbers 21:7) “We have sinned...”

Our second passage of scripture today is a very appropriate one to read along with the passage from Numbers. In Peter's first letter he says, "the end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good servants of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received." (1 Peter 4:7-10)

"Maintain constant love.... for love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:3) If there is one thing I want each of you to leave here this morning thinking and believing, it is this – maintain constant love.... for love covers a multitude of sins.

I've told you this story before, but it bears repeating now. A friend of mine in Oregon, who usually visits us here for a Sunday or two sometime during the year, told me that her minister a few years ago was talking with a parishioner one day. And the person asked her, "What makes Christianity different from the other religions of the world?"

Judaism is known for its focus on sacrifice and endurance.

Buddhism is known for its focus on accepting the notion that all of life is suffering.

Hinduism is known for its focus on many gods, not just one.

Islam is known for its focus on the centrality of Allah, God, as the only reality.

Native American, now known as Indigenous, spirituality is known for its focus on the natural world and our place in it as creatures no better or worse than the other natural creatures of life.

But what is Christianity known for? What makes it different from the other religious traditions of the world? The minister answered the inquirer, "radical love." The central fact, the main theological point, the crucial act of Christianity is "radical love."

It is the radical love of a man who gave his life to God for all the sins of humanity,

who carried the hatred and fears of the world upon his shoulders,
who refused to fight back when he was accused and wronged and
confronted with the evil in the world,

who remained silent when asked, "What is truth?" (John 18:38)

It is the love of a man who, according to the Gospel of Luke, hung dying on a cross, saying to the condemned man who hung next to him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43)

Radical love is the hallmark of the Christian faith. Radical love is the central fact, the main theological point, the crucial act of all who call themselves Christians.

Right now, many of us are having a difficult time living out that crucial act of our faith. We're spending much time and energy, too much time and energy, pointing fingers at others and blaming them for the mess we're in right now.

Some of us blame political leaders, past and present, in our country and beyond our country. Some of us blame our fellow citizens for what we believe is their ignorance and their prejudices. And perhaps some of us blame God for not getting those "other stupid people" to shape up and agree with what we believe.

And that get us around to that pesky "finger-pointing problem."

As my colleague and former professor, Sue Davies, said in class one day, "Remember when you point one finger at someone else, you have three dirty fingers pointing back at yourself."

Jesus didn't point his finger at anyone but God. Actually, the scriptures don't tell us he pointed a finger at all. In all four Gospel tellings of Jesus' life and ministry, we learn that he extended an outstretched hand and said, "Follow me." (Matthew 4:19; Mark 1:17; Luke 5:27; John 1:43)

Therein lay the questions I will leave you with today –

Are you following Jesus – in your thoughts and your words and your actions?

Is the radical love that Jesus demonstrated for us what motivates you each day?

Are you able to pray every day, "Forgive me, God, for I have sinned?"

And as the Israelites looked at the bronze serpent and lived, can you look at the evil that rages in the world, and somehow find goodness hidden in the midst of it?

Radical love.... risk it. "Maintain constant love.... for love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8)

Let the people say, "Amen."

Federated Church in Thomaston

United Church of Christ United Methodist Church

All Are Welcome
Sunday, August 81, 2022

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet, Pastor Alice Billheimer, Organist/ Choir Director
Lector: Jackie Harjula

Please be respectfully silent once our worship service has begun.
An asterisk () indicates where you are invited to stand.*
Bold print indicates that the people speak these responses & prayers.

GATHERING FOR WORSHIP

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude "Oh Jesus I have promised" -- hymn tune "Angel's Story"

Call to Worship

One: We come seeking a word from God to help us get through our days!

Many: We come seeking comfort, sustenance and forgiveness for our wayward actions!

All: We come asking for a holy blessing and are surprised at the ways in which it is given to us! Let us worship the God who amazes us and always offers us new ways in which to respond in this chaotic world we live in!

***Opening hymn "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" #384 Blue Hymnal**

A Time of Silence....

Responsive Reading 1 Peter 4:7-11

**The end of all things is near; therefore be serious
and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers.**

**Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of
sins.**

Be hospitable to one another without complaining.

**Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God,
serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.**

**Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God;
whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies,
so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.
To him belong the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.**

SERVICE OF THE WORD

Scripture Reading Numbers 21:4-9

***Gloria Patri No. 70 Glory Be to the Father....**

Message “radical love”

***Hymn of Meditation** “Let Us Plead for Faith Alone” #385 Blue Hymnal

RESPONDING IN FAITH

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns with God and Each Other

Pastoral Prayer & The Lord’s Prayer.....

Offertory Offering in G -- J. S. Bach

***Prayer of Dedication**

***Doxology No. 95 Blue “Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow**

***Closing Hymn** “Jesus Calls Us” #398 Blue Hymnal

Benediction

Postlude Minuet from "Music for the Royal Fireworks" by G. F. Handel

Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, September 4, 2022
Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Philemon 1:1-21; Luke 14:25-33

“Becoming a truly human community is a long, complex, messy business. Simply growing up demands all the wisdom and patience and courage that we can muster. But growing up with others, parents and siblings and neighbors, to say nothing of odd strangers and mean enemies, immensely complicates the growing up. The book of Numbers plunges us into the mess of growing up. The pages in this section of the biblical story give us a realistic feel for what is involved in being included in the people of God, which is to say, a human community that honors God, lives out love and justice in daily affairs, learns how to deal with sin in oneself and others, and follows God’s commands into a future of blessing. And all this without

Collection

Total for Sunday, 8/21/22:

Pledges - \$445.00

Loose

- \$ 89.00

Total

- \$534.00

The 2022 weekly budgeted operating cost for the Church and parsonage is \$1623.00 per week.

**Federated Church of Thomaston
United Church of Christ
&
United Methodist Church
Together Since 1929**

Sunday, August 28, 2022

8 Hyler Street, Thomaston, Maine 04861 (207) 354-6105

To contact the pastor via e-mail: freerangepastor@gmail.com

WiFi password is #1Church

[1]In *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, New York: HarperCollins, 1985, p. 928.

