

Good Sunday midday from a very chilly, yet sunny and slightly snowy hill in Rockport.....

Are you making your holiday “to do” lists? If you are, they are probably different this year – no plans for big family and/or friend gatherings around a spiked punch bowl, no gatherings of family and/or friends to decorate your Christmas tree, no plans for gatherings of family and/or friends to go to Christmas Eve Candlelight Services, no gatherings around the Christmas tree on Christmas morning to open presents, with anyone other than those in your “family bubble.” Yes, it is definitely a different “to do” list I have this year. Nance reminded me this morning that maybe what we need “to do” this year is finally call or write the people we care about whom we’ve neglected to call or write so far this year, but kept intending to..... Maybe we need to stop regretting and feeling sorry that we *can’t* be doing the things we love to do in this season, and be glad for the things we *can* do – enjoy the music of the season, feel the warmth of the fire more often, sit still and just be, give more to charitable causes and those organizations who are working so hard to bring anything joyful to those who do not have the luxuries of life we have.... There’s a lot “to do” in this crazy, unexpected, unwanted time of pandemic pain.... Let’s do it...

Blessings to all on this second Sunday of Advent in the Christian tradition..... Susan

p.s. I will download today’s scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page later today: freerangepastor for anyone who wants to tune in..... and I believe Margie is also downloading my sermon to Federated’s Facebook page....

p.p.s. *AGAIN, thanks so much 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, December 6, 2020
The second Sunday of Advent
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston

A Call to Worship*

We gather, from a distance, in spirit and on line,
longing for gentleness among all:
Peace is the home we seek.

We gather, longing for healing where there has been harm:

Peace is the home we seek.
We gather, longing for generosity to inform all actions:
Peace is the home we seek.
We gather, longing for peace in all parts of life:
God is the home we seek.
Come, let us worship God....
in spirit if not in physical closeness
in a spirit of peace.
Amen.

*Adapted from a Call to Worship in *Seasons of the Spirit* for Sunday, December 9, 2012.

“A Prayer of the People for the 2nd Sunday of Advent”*

Holy One, like the shepherds of old,
we give thanks for the beauty of hills and sky,
cloud and sun, snow and wind, rock and tree.
Like the shepherds of old,
we give thanks for companionship
of the creatures who surround us,
and of family and friends who share our days,
from a distance this year.
Like the shepherds of old,
we long for the day when the wolf and the lamb
live together in peace.
We create prayers expressing the yearning we feel
for reconciliation and wholeness in our world.
On this second Sunday of Advent,
we are not together in person this year
to light the second candle of Advent for peace.
But we can light the candle of peace in our hearts,
and we can offer prayers for those we hold dear,
and all those affected by the coronavirus in our midst and beyond,
by silently watching over one another
as the shepherds watched over their flocks by night.
Like the shepherds of old,
we place our lives and our prayers into your hands, O God,
for you are the Great Shepherd of us all.
Amen.

*Adapted from a prayer in *Seasons of the Spirit* for Sunday, December 9, 2012

A Reading of Scripture – Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “*See I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’*”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were **baptized** by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “*The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have **baptized** you with water; but he will **baptize** you with the Holy Spirit.*”

A sermon based on Mark 1:1-8 “baptized”

Will you pray with me. Creator God, grand parent of us all, be among us as we try to make sense again of the sacrament of baptism. Help us to grasp the holiness of this action of placing water on one of your children, no matter their age, and pronouncing them blessed as a child of yours. Amen.

Here’s the question for the day: Does it make any difference whether a person is baptized or not? If we were together in person today, I’d say, “It’s response time!” and ask for your answers to this question....

My first response to this question – does it make any difference whether a person is baptized or not? – is this. If it makes a difference to the person being baptized, or to their parents, if they are children, then yes, it makes a difference. It can make a huge difference in their lives, if they *believe* it does and that it will.

To make a difference, meaning to have a significant effect, speaks of several matters. It means that it somehow impacts how a person is going to live,
how they’re going to find their place in life and in creation,
how they’re going to experience their relationships with others,
how they’re going to understand their relationship with the Spirit, with God.

Some of our more traditionally oriented Christian brothers and sisters believe baptism makes a difference in a different sense. Based on their reading and interpretation of the Gospels of the New Testament, they believe unless a person is baptized they will not be saved and they will not get to heaven. This reading and

interpretation of the Scriptures implies that some people are “in,” and some people are “out,” in the eyes of God.

Many of us do not follow this particular interpretation of the Scriptures, especially as it relates to baptism. It seems to me this is a fear-based understanding of the Gospel message, the assumed “good news” of Jesus Christ – “If you want to be *in*,’ you’d better get right with God and be baptized as a Christian before you die.” I know people who fear for the lives of their friends and family members who are not baptized Christians. They become almost frantic if a loved one is near death and hasn’t “accepted Jesus” as their personal savior and been baptized Christian. My Aunt Mid, who lived in Elkins, West Virginia, and is long gone now, was a very devout Catholic in her earthly life. She absolutely feared for all of us in our family because we didn’t go to church!

I don’t know about you, but I can’t bring myself to believe in a God who invites into the kingdom only one particular group of people, those who have been baptized as Christians sometime during their lifetimes. I know too many good people, who are not and never will identify themselves as Christians, to believe they’re any less welcomed into the kingdom of God just because they’ve not been baptized. Some of them were baptized as children, because of their parents’ decision to have them baptized, but have denounced the Christian faith as adults. Some of them are fine, compassionate and giving members of some Christian congregations who have chosen to not become baptized!

My reading of the Scriptures tells me that’s what Jesus had in mind in his ministry. *Everyone* was welcome at Jesus’ table, to receive healing, to be granted entry into the kingdom of God. Some people would call that “loosey goosey” ministry or a “shallow” interpretation of the Scriptures, or “bad theology.” I call it following the direction and example of Jesus in his ministry.

Mark’s telling of the baptism of Jesus is full of the stuff of everyday life. One of the commentators of our reading for today writes that Jesus’ ministry “is down to earth, grounded in the real, tactile, sensual, fleshy world. In these few verses are references to river water, clothing from camels, diet from bugs, and tying shoes.... Mark’s earthiness gives us a hedge against faith and worship that are too ethereal, otherworldly, abstract.”^[1]

So if it doesn’t make any difference in an exclusionary way in the eyes of God, if a person is baptized, why do we do it? Again, if we were meeting in person today, I would ask for your responses!

I believe we do it because holy ritual is part of the sanctity of life. I hurt for people who see no need for holy rituals. I didn't see any need for them for the first half of my life. Holy rituals bind us together eye to eye, touch to touch, water to forehead, tears from eyes. Holy rituals are the stuff of Jesus' ministry – healing, teaching, proclaiming the presence of God in all life in every person's life.

And perhaps most important, baptism, as a holy ritual of the Christian church, is not something we choose to “get.” It's not like deciding to go get a tattoo, or many tattoos, or piercing one's ears or anything else on one's body. Baptism is deciding to *receive* God's grace... in the Christian tradition... in a public way.

We may become numb to having received our baptism. We may forget the experience of it much of the time. We may not remember our baptisms at all. Mine took place when I was two and a half years old in a Methodist church in Wheeling, West Virginia. I have no memory of it. I know that it happened because I have my baptismal certificate. But it wasn't until the change in my life in my mid-forties that the reality and the grace of it bubbled to the surface of my life.

I clearly remember the first baptism I officiated as the pastor of United Christian Church in Lincolnton in 2000. It was Logan Sampson's baptism. He was about six or so. I believe he told his mother he wanted to be baptized. It was to have taken place on the first Sunday in January in 2000. I was a little nervous about this – having never performed a baptism before. But I was eager and ready to share in this holy ritual with Logan and his mother, Sharon.

Unfortunately, I awoke that morning with a terrible sick headache and couldn't make it to church. When Sharon told Logan we couldn't have his baptism that Sunday he said, “Well, I guess we'll have to wait. We can't do it without her!” What a guy – I love a person who can be flexible! So on Sunday, January 9, 2000, I baptized Logan with tears running down my cheeks. I had no idea that would happen. But now I know... with holy rituals, for me at least, tears flow. I remember Sharon telling me that when she told Logan a while later that there was going to be a baptism at church, he said, “Well, Mom, you know Susan's going to cry.”

Does baptism make a difference? In my book it does... whether you're a baby, or a young person, or eighty or ninety years old before the water is placed on your forehead in the sign of the cross, and you're told you are a holy child, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism makes a difference *not* because it guarantees you a place in heaven, *not* because it means you're saved and others aren't, *not* because it means you're a "good Christian."

Baptism makes a difference because it means you are ready to receive and acknowledge the grace of God in your life, in a public statement of faith in Jesus as your guide, as your bridge to the holy.

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 President that he might do the right things in coming weeks for the betterment and future of all of us.....

From our most recent bulletin and more....

From a Thomaston resident, please pray for Sean for healing, and for James fighting Covid-19,

Also continued prayers for Ed Lee, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, April DeVarney, 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 Sustainer of us all,

and the Holy Spirit surrounding us all,

be with each of you this day and forever.

Amen.

**Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)
for Sunday, December 13, 2020 – the third Sunday of Advent**

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Words to ponder today about “baptism”.....

*“Baptism consists of getting dunked or sprinkled. Which technique is used matters about as much as whether you pray kneeling or standing on your head. Dunking is a better symbol, however. Going under symbolizes the end of everything about your life that is less than human. Coming up again symbolizes the beginning in you of something strange and new and hopeful. You can breathe again.” ~ Frederick Buechner in *Wishful Thinking, A Seeker’s ABC**

[1]Elton W. Brown, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 240.