

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

First, thanks so much to the members of the Federated Church of Thomaston for your very generous Christmas gift to me! I appreciate your generosity and your faith in me as your pastor more than you could ever know....

Second, this is the last Sunday of 2020. I imagine we are all heaving a sigh of relief that this year is coming to an end in four days. It has been a year of too much sickness and death, too much political and societal mayhem, just too much of the hard stuff of life! As we go forward, *I* look forward to sharing whatever is to come with you, the congregation of Federated, and my readers near and far. “This, too, shall pass, my dear.” That’s what my 95 year old friend, Vera, used to say to me. You’ll read just a bit of her at the end of my sermon below. The cycle of life includes it all – the good, the bad, the joyful, the sad.... It all happens and repeats over and over. Thank you for making the journey with me as we approach the new year, with hope for better times, with compassion for one another, with a willingness to receive the guidance we need to live into whatever is to come in 2021....

I know I’ve said this before, but 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, but please know I read all of them, ponder them, and give thanks for them....

Blessings to all on this first Sunday after Christmas in the Christian tradition..... Susan

p.s. I will ATTEMPT to 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.... I tried to send out my Christmas Eve message three times! I don’t believe it ever made it through cyberspace to my Facebook followers!

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, December 27, 2020
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

A Call to Worship

Whoever you are, and whatever you are carrying in your heart today –
joy, stress, grief, anger, loneliness, relief –
know that you are welcome here in this cyberspace community of care.
It’s a new day, and the last Sunday of the year.

We come together, from physical distance, but always in spiritual closeness,
to renew our faith, to give evidence of our hope for a better tomorrow.
We come to worship together, no matter near or far...
Amen!

**A Prayer of Confession for the End of the 2020
and Words of Affirmation”***

Holy One, you have accompanied us through the year,
reminding us of your intended peace and justice for the world.
You have the power to bring joy in unexpected places.
You have the power to transform our minds and hearts.
Sometimes, in the hype of the holiday season,
we fail to see the miracle of your presence.
God of love, at this time of the year,
we may not always be mindful of those struggling
to get through another stressful family dinner, another holiday alone,
another season in the absence of a loved one,
another night with an empty stomach.
God of new beginnings, dreams, hopes,
when the holidays are a busy time for us,
we may get preoccupied, overtired, excited, or sad.
We might push through the days and not acknowledge our feelings with honesty.
Sometimes, we are scared to look deeply inside ourselves,
or to reach out to others.
We do not always find ways to hold the complexity of our experiences
with care and compassion.
Forgive us when we are not open to dreaming
new possibilities, new habits, new thoughts,
a new world more aligned with your ways.
Remind us to pause and remember all the ways we have been blessed.
Friends, our God is a God of mercy and new beginnings.
Even in our brokenness and imperfection,
we are never alone.
We are forgiven and cherished through and through always....
Amen.

*Adapted from a prayer in *Seasons of the Spirit* for Advent/Christmas/Epiphany, 2016-2017

A Reading of Scripture – 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, on this first Sunday after the celebration of Jesus' birth, remind us to praise you even in the midst of difficulties and despairs 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.

In the past few weeks, as so often happens around the Christmas holiday season, I've been made aware of a number of sad, difficult and painful situations in a lot of people's lives. You all know some of them. And others you're aware of and I'm not. Some are in the lives of people in our congregation and community. Some are beyond our local borders. I'm often asked specifically to pray for certain individuals who are experiencing very hard times – some due to illness, others due

to economic difficulties and still others due to relationship stresses and complete breakups.

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 the 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. We've been hearing that a lot lately.... that we are on the road to recovery from the deadly covid virus, with the help of vaccines, but the coming month(s) may be worse before they become better.

The difficulties of life – sickness and death, uncomfortable family and relationship stresses, economic and job loss issues, political strife.... they just keep coming, and coming, and coming. What's the point of coming to worship together in the midst of all this personal, country-wide and worldwide malaise?

I'm reminded again this week of one of my favorite questions in Scripture. It's from the book of Jeremiah in the Old Testament -- when King Hezekiah asks the prophet Jeremiah, "Is any word from the Lord?" (Jer 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. (Jer 37:17)

Even though we don't come to worship 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's going to be helpful to the people listening to *my* words about this particular set of words from the Scriptures?"

Today that word, it seems to me, 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.

Simeon "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.” (Lk 2:25-26)

And Anna, a prophet, “was of 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.” (Lk 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?

It seems to me they never gave up because they were able to put their lives into a context greater than their immediate circumstances. They were able to see “the big picture” of God in which they were a part of the picture, but not the whole picture. They were able to patiently wait for the final strokes of paint, 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 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 scheme of things that include 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.” (Lk 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.” (Lk 2:38)

Have you ever had a moment like that in your lives? 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’re 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.

Have you ever read *Hannah Coulter*, a novel by Wendell Berry? Berry is one of those authors who knows and is able to write about in exquisite detail the trials and joys of life among simple people. His characters jump off the page and become part of my life. 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.

A commentator of today’s text wrote in 1952, “Some people never find God or know that they might find God because they suppose that God must be identified with some far-off and surprising thing. They do not walk the road that would lead to God through the simple process of taking the next clear step in spiritual obedience. It is not in imaginary flights that people will most surely find God. They will find God in the growing confidence that life is good which comes to those who are going steadily ahead in the direction of the next goodness that they know.”^[1]

These are the people for whom the glass of life is always half full, not half empty. I think of Flora Wright, who lived beyond the age of 100, totally wheel chair bound, but almost always she had a smile on her face and a hymn in her heart when I visited her in Quarry Hill. I think of my dear friend, Vera Hills, who grew up in Camden and who died at almost 97. Vera was one of the reasons I came into ministry. She always had her Bible in her hands or beside her chair every time I went to visit her in a retirement home in Bradenton, Florida.

These are two of the people I’ve knowns who believed in walking the talk of faith well into very old age, not just mouthing the words on Sunday mornings. These are the people who refuse to believe there is nothing greater than

them. These are people like Simeon and Anna who are righteous, meaning in right and good relation with God, and devout their whole lives before they come to see the glory of the God before them. These are the people who patiently wait for God because they cannot bear to do otherwise.

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 in 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.....

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.....

Also continued prayers for Hank Cary, Ed Lee, 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

*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, January 3, 2021 – the second Sunday after Christmas
Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 147:12-20; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1(1-9), 10-18

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

“If you allow yourself to expect guidance, guidance will show up.” ~ Richard Bartlett

“There is a deep need in the world just now for guidance almost any sort of spiritual guidance.”

~ Carl Jung

“True guidance is like a small torch in a dark forest. It doesn’t show everything at once, but gives enough light for the next step to be safe.” ~ Swami Vivekanand

“We are blessed with guidance and it is within our power to find ways to both express and listen to this wisdom. The choice is ours.” ~ Susan Barbara Apollon

“There is guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word.”

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

[1] *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol VIII, 1952, p. 66.