

Good early Sunday morning from a cool hill in Rockport.....

Well, we're going to give it a try this morning – worshiping in person, downstairs in Leach Hall at the church!

**If you would like you can print off at home a copy of the bulletin I've put together for this morning and bring it with you to church. But, if you don't have a printer at home, you won't really need a bulletin in your hand for the service.** I'll copy it below, after these words and the sermon.

We need to keep paper touching to a bare minimum, and NO touching of one another, no singing, no hugging, no coffee hour sharing of food and coffee.... and **we need to wear our masks. If you forget yours this morning, one of our deacons will gladly provide you with one as you enter the back door.** We'll plan to gather for only thirty to forty minutes. We have learned that what makes the difference in the spread of Covid-19 is time and distance – the amount of time we spend together and how close we are to one another, *and* whether we are wearing masks or not.

I know these seem like extreme restrictions, but we've learned what has happened at churches where all these precautions and restrictions haven't been followed. Parishioners and preachers have ended up with the dreaded virus, and some have died. I know that sounds harsh.... We're living through a very harsh time of a public health crisis.

**I do hope we can continue to meet in this way each Sunday for the foreseeable future. BUT, the situation with the virus in our area will dictate whether that will be possible or not. Stay tuned each week!** We will abide by the guidelines of the Maine CDC and the Governor. I will continue to send out my daily meditations (almost daily!) and my "Sunday words" and worship service and sermon on line. I will continue to post my sermon "done live" on my Facebook page, freerangepastor, and Margie will post it on the church's Facebook page.

I know many of you will continue staying home on Sunday mornings rather than coming to church in person. Please know that is an entirely appropriate and wise decision, especially if you are "of an age" and/or are compromised healthwise in any way.

I am trying to find a way in which we can share in holy communion, but stay tuned for that. We may have to wait until this public health crisis is over before we can share in that sacred meal monthly.

To say that we are living through a very stressful time for many reasons is a gross understatement. BUT, this, too, shall pass. We will get through this. How do I know that? The Bible tells me so.....

Blessings to each one this Sunday morn..... Susan

p.s. I will download this morning's scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page shortly: [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. A few of you have taken me up on my offer to come chat with you in your yard or open garage, on your porch or deck, etc..... wearing one of my many masks, Be in touch if you're interested – call me at 207-322-1948 or send me an e-mail to [freerangepastor@gmail.com](mailto:freerangepastor@gmail.com).....

p.p.p.s *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 keep writing.....*

**“Is the Lord among us or not?”**  
**A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston**  
**Thomaston, Maine**  
**Sunday, September 27, 2020**  
**Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet**  
**Scripture: Exodus 17:1-7**

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.” The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, **“Is the Lord among us or not?”**

Exodus 17:1-7

Will you pray with me. Thirst quenching God, we come to you this day longing to receive the water of life you offer to each of us. Some of us don't know we're thirsty, others of us know it all too well. Help us to not turn away from you in search of something sweeter and easier to swallow than what you have to offer us. Amen.

Have you ever been thirsty? I mean REALLY thirsty?

Not the kind of thirst you feel when you wake up in the middle of the night and would like a swallow or two of the water on the nightstand next to your bed.

Not the kind of thirst you feel after you've shoveled snow too long, or raked the leaves or mowed the grass more hours than you thought you would.

Not the kind of thirst you feel when you find yourself saying to yourself, "Boy, I'd sure like an ice cold Diet Coke, or a frosty mug of beer!" But the kind of thirst that leaves you almost unable to swallow, or perhaps unable to think about anything else except how thirsty you are?

Maybe it was before and/or after surgery when you had to be "npo" – which means nothing by mouth.

Maybe it was because of medications you were taking.

Maybe it was because you were in a foreign country where drinking the water wasn't safe.

I've experienced that kind of thirst only once in my life – in the twelve days I spent in Russia in 1994. My three traveling companions and I were told before we left the United States to NOT, under any circumstances, drink the water in Russia, not even when brushing our teeth. So, we didn't. It was a challenge.

Even now when I have the slightest hint of thirst, I flash back to those days in Russia when I was more thirsty than I've ever been. What saved me in those twelve days were two things – Russian vodka and a tin of "Krasnodar tea." My dear friend, Natasha, gave me this tin of tea when I left her flat for the last time in 1994. She would boil Russian water for me on her very old stove, and we would have "Krasnodar tea." When I asked her what kind of tea it was, her answer was simply, "It's Krasnodar tea!" So, I keep this tin, although I couldn't find it this morning to show you, full of Krasnodar tea, to remind me of the greatest physical thirst I've ever known, and how Natasha helped me to quench it.

As some of you know, that trip to Russia was crucial in my decision to finally leave the business world for the church world. I thought I was only thirsty physically. I had no idea how thirsty I was spiritually in 1994.

Thirst – that experience of needing something to drink to quench the dryness of one’s mouth... or the dryness in one’s mind and heart. In an eloquent and exquisite explanation of the addiction of alcoholism, theologian James Nelson writes in *Thirst, God and the Alcoholic Experience*, “Ultimately the word [thirst] comes from an Indo-European base meaning ‘to be dry.’ [Nelson says,] I find it an important metaphor for both alcoholism and for the fundamental yearning behind every spirituality, included that which can bring recovery. We alcoholics surely know the experience of craving ‘our drug of choice.’ And though we might express it in a thousand different ways, we also know what the psalmist was speaking of in Psalm 42: ‘As a deer [or a hart] longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?’ (Ps 42:1-2)<sup>[1]</sup>

In our story from Exodus this morning, the Israelites, who have been traveling through the wilderness of Sin to reach a new and hopefully better home, become thirsty – so thirsty they complain to Moses, so thirsty they do more than complain, they “quarrel” with Moses. What does he do? He passes the buck – to God.

“Moses cried out to the Lord, ‘What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.’” (Ex 17:4) Can’t you just imagine God’s thoughts and response? “Oh for God’s sake. All right! All right! ‘Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.’ (Ex 17:5-6)” And then under God’s breath, “These people are a feisty bunch and I can see I have a LOT of work to do with them! They’re not getting the picture!”

The people asked Moses the question I hear many times in different forms, “Is the Lord among us or not?” (Ex 17:7) In our time I hear it expressed this way, “If there was a God, why did God let this horrible thing happen?”

“If there was a God, why did my baby die?”

“If there was a God, how come I lost my job?”

“If there was a God, how come I did all these good deeds and still got cancer?”

“Is the Lord among us or not?” – It’s the question that I believe underlies our thirst for righteousness – our desire to be in right relation with God when nothing is going right. Although... some of us might turn that idea around and say we want *God* to be in right relation with *us*. It brings many of us to church.

It's the question that brings some into treatment for addictions.

It's the question that brings some *to* a sense of faith and drives others *away* from faith altogether, never to grace the door of a place of worship ever again because their prayers have not been answered to their liking, their wishes have not been fulfilled, their dreams have not come true. Perhaps you've experienced some of that sometime in your life.

What is a thirsty person to do, but to complain to God, and sometimes to anyone within earshot of their complaining? Over the past twenty years I've heard the stories again and again. "If there was a God... I wouldn't be in the mess I'm in. The world wouldn't be in the mess it's in. If God cared, all would be well." I believe we carry this complaint around with us because we learned it from our sacred ancestors. It's hereditary.

It's in the Bible. The role of Scripture in our congregational life is central. Theologian and pastor, Anthony Robinson, writes, "The Scriptures and how we understand them theologically address two very different aspects of congregational health: identity and memory, on the one hand; energy and transformation, on another."<sup>121</sup>

The Scriptures can help us to *remember and better understand* our identity as people of faith, as followers of a God who does answer prayers, even if it's not in the way we always hope. But even more important, the Scriptures can *give us energy and show us the way* to transformation in body, mind and spirit through the stories about how others before us have been given energy and been transformed.

"The Israelites quarreled and tried the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord present among us or not?'" (Ex 17:7) They were thirsty, so thirsty they probably couldn't even spit. All they could do was complain to Moses who then passed the buck and asked God to settle the natives down. So God did, and does, again and again and again.

In the midst of all we're going through right now.... in the midst of the pandemic and economic uncertainty, in the midst of deep political and racial strife, can we hold on to the amazing thirst quenching God who offers us something to drink even on our thirstiest days.

Let the people say, "Amen."

**Federated Church in Thomaston**  
**United Church of Christ    United Methodist Church**

**All Are Welcome**  
**Sunday, September 27, 2020**

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

*Please be respectfully silent once our worship service has begun.*

**GATHERING FOR WORSHIP**

**Welcome and Announcements**

**Prelude** *Alice's choice*

**Call to Worship**

Repeat after Pastor Susan: God of goodness and life, we gather in the hope and beauty of this day, to be further opened along the pathways of faith you set before us. Holy One, be our journey and our destination.

Question our safe decisions, prod our imaginings, and walk boldly beside us into the unknown, yet promise filled future. Let us worship God!

**Opening Hymn to hum.....** *Amazing Grace* (three times through)

**A Moment of Silence**

**SERVICE OF THE WORD**

**Scripture Reading** Exodus 17:1-7

**Gloria Patri** No. 338 Red for us to hum..... (follow Alice's lead)

**Message** "Is the Lord among us or not?" Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

**Hymn of Meditation to hum.....** *Alice's choice* (three times through)

**RESPONDING IN FAITH**

**Sharing Our Joys and Concerns with God and Each Other**

**Pastoral Prayer followed by The Lord's Prayer.....**

Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.

**Offertory** *Please place your gifts in the offering plate as you leave today....*

**Doxology** No. 95 Blue for us to hum..... (follow Alice's lead)

## Prayer of Dedication

Closing Hymn to hum..... *Alice's choice* (three times through)

## Benediction

Postlude *Alice's choice*

**Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, October 4, 2020**  
**Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46**

*“There is strange comfort in knowing that no matter what happens today, the Sun will rise again tomorrow.” ~ Aaron Lauritsen, 21<sup>st</sup> cent. writer*

*“The greatest thing in this world is not so much where we stand as in what direction we are moving.” ~ Johann wolfgang von Goethe, 18<sup>th</sup> cent. writer*

## PRAYER LIST

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, Muriel's grandson Jared, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine, Pricilla O'Hara on the death of her husband Wally.... *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!*

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

Please feel free to contact Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet anytime by phone (207) 322-1948 or by email at [freerangepastor@gmail.com](mailto:freerangepastor@gmail.com) or [susanstst@aol.com](mailto:susanstst@aol.com)

The flowers this morning are given by Nance Brown in memory of loved ones.....

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

FCT email is [thomfedchurch@gmail.com](mailto:thomfedchurch@gmail.com)

WiFi password is #1Church

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- <sup>[1]</sup>James B. Nelson, *Thirst, God and the Alcoholic Experience*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p. 22-23.
- <sup>[2]</sup>Anthony B. Robinson, *What's Theology Got to Do with It?*, Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2006, p. 48.