

North Congregational UCC New Harford CT
WORSHIP: 1st Sunday in Lent
February 21, 2021

MEDITATION THOUGHT: "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me to your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long."
Psalm 25: 4-5

PRELUDE MUSIC

INVITATION TO WORSHIP: On this first Sabbath Day in the 40 days of Lent, we are focused as a congregation on ways we can not only know the ways of our Lord, but also deepen our resolve to mold our lives around those ways with actions that proclaim God's presence in our lives. So in this moment of worship in our homes, we receive your word in Scripture and dedicate ourselves to bring it into our thoughts, words and deeds.

HYMN OF GATHERING #353 (verses 1,2,3) "My Hope is Built on Nothing Less"

My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus name.

(Refrain)

On Christ, the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand;
All other ground is sinking sand

When darkness seems to hide his face, I rest on his unchanging grace;
In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil.

(refrain)

His oath, his covenant, his blood support me in the whelming flood;
When all around my soul gives way, he then is all my hope and stay.

(refrain)

OPENING PRAYER

Creating and renewing God, we give thanks for this time of Lent. May the days of Lent, as we recognize the lengthening of day light and the return of the warmth from the Sun, bring an increase in the amount of light we let shine through our lives. Let us use this season to clear our eyes of the glaze of indifference and apathy. Help us to free our minds of all the distractions, obsessions, and negativity that darkens our vision of opportunities available for us to love and serve. Help us to shake free of the dust and ash that covers the beauty of who we are as your children, blessed by your grace and empowered with your Spirit. You have called us and we have our ears open, our vision sharpened, our tongues loosened, our hearts softened, and hands at the ready to reach out to bring the Good News of Jesus. Amen

GOSPEL LESSON: Mark 1:9-15

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’”

SERMON: “The Long and Short of It”

Lent has just begun with Ash Wednesday. It runs for 40 days which is longer than most movie runs happen to be—especially in our COVID-19 world. It begins with Ash Wednesday (this year February 17th) and runs forty days. It is set by when the date for Easter falls, which, in itself is a semi-complicated formula. The actual number of days is actually 6 days longer because Sundays are not included as Lent. So we have 40 days OF Lent and Six Sabbaths IN Lent. Here’s the formula- Easter Sunday follows the first full moon after the Spring Equinox. It had to do with those wishing to travel and, without streetlights, needed the “Light of the Silvery Moon.” Actually, it usually coincides, but not always with the Jewish Passover, which date is also set by the full moon but their calendars and ours are not exactly the same. The number 40, most scholars believe, is not meant to be taken literally. The period of time means “a long time needed to complete a desired end.” Hence 40 years of travelling in the wilderness, 40 days of torrential rain before the dove is sent to come back to prove waters had receded, 40 days for Jesus to be tempted by Satan, and 40 hours between the death of Jesus and the Resurrection. So we have the full 40 days to complete God’s plan for us- to repent of our sins, make a U-turn, and follow in the way of Jesus.

That seems like a long time—or at least it did, before students had to go virtual and miss all their teachers and friends. I belong to a book group and sometimes books are chosen based not on the story but on its length. If times are busy we often choose a shorter book or book with larger type set or big margins. And I’ve been known to speed read a book. The last one I read in four hours before the zoom book group meeting. I was never an official student of the “Evelyn Woods speed reading class” but I know part of the process is reading diagonally down the page and never letting your eyes go back over where they’ve been. It works well but I don’t recommend it for physics, chemistry or, for that matter, any text book where you might need to pass a test.

Another approach might be to use what was known as “Cliff Notes.” If you could not finish reading an assigned book, you might purchase one of these that summarizes the book that you needed to read. Some would call it cheating and the wise teacher would know how to structure

a test to defeat those who used it in place of reading the book. (In defense of the company, they meant their material to be used as a study guide, in the same way that our Donna at North Church is giving us a study guide for those reading Bishop Curry's book "Love Is The Way").

Finally there is also the "condensed edition" that attempts to cut out the unneeded parts. The Reader's Digest Company was famous for its condensed books but ran afoul of some critics when they came out with the condensed edition of "The Bible." It was popular at first but ran into trouble with those who quoted the verse 2Timothy 3:16 KJV "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness."

Luckily for us, today's scripture, a short seven verses, we find a very full summary of Jesus' ministry. In these verses Mark covers Jesus' baptism, his temptation, the arrest of John the Baptist and the inauguration of Jesus' ministry, complete with Jesus' summary statement of his mission: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Frequently, you find the adverb "immediately" as Mark related his account in sixteen very short chapters. (You might need Cliff notes for Matthew and Luke but not for Mark). You can read the entire gospel of Mark in a relatively short time without using any speed reading method.

As you read Mark, there is a definite sense of urgency. In the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan we hear the voice of God and it sounds very familiar. It is the same voice we hear and was heard in last Sunday's remembrance of the Transfiguration of Jesus. In Mark, the address is directly to Jesus- "you are my son, my beloved; with you I am well pleased. In the Transfiguration the voice is addressed to the three disciples- "this is my son, the beloved; listen to him." Lent which comes to about 1/10 of a year, can be seen as a tithe for us to reflect upon our lives, make changes, do a course correction, and through the scriptures, through prayer, through service, find a path to to God and a direction to go as disciples.

I do find it harder to get lost these days-in some ways. We all have "devices" that guide us. My favorite in the car is my Garmin GPS. If I punch in the right destination- it will almost always get me there-sometimes via curious side streets. My second favorite way is Waze and, if needed- with my apple phone I can ask Siri to guide me. As good as they are, they need to hear from me-what is my destination. Mark gives us the hint how to get very close to our destination. Jesus tells us "the kingdom of God has come near." Jesus himself, had to figure it out. Knowing he is a child of God, he went into the wilderness to figure out exactly the what, how, when, and why of his ministry. He learned there will be many temptations that might set us off in the wrong direction. Many of us have felt that the last year has been our wilderness- being tested by the life changes that have occurred with this world-wide epidemic. The virus certainly has forced us to consider what is really important in our lives and how we are going to use our lives. So let us journey through this season of Lent together. The Fast/Feast readings may help us in our journey. Every "feast" we enjoy can be like a small seed in us, and with God's help, will grow in ways to produce an abundance of fruit to sweeten not only our lives, but the lives of many others.

Pastoral Prayer

We gather apart yet together as a community to share in this time of prayer, for ourselves, for others in our church community, those in our State and Country and those around the world. It is impossible for us to know the magnitude of the pain and loss so many have experienced. The life and death of each of your children matters to you. They maybe nameless to us but in your universality each has had a special significance. We commend to your everlasting care all who have died regardless of the cause. You have promised that those who mourn, shall, indeed be comforted. Even in the midst of troubled times, there is much for which we give thanks. Inspirational people who model selfless love, the ability to give out of abundance, the social media outlets that help us to remain in contact even tough physically apart. It is a great concern to us that we live in a world where there is so much division. Tolerance for differences of belief is difficult to find; sharing equitably the world's limited resources seldom show respect the poorest in many nations. Leaders with world governments often rule out of self-interest. Mental health issues increase among all populations. We at North Church and surroundings strive to bring comfort to the hungry, hope to those fighting disease. We pause for a moment to speak quietly from our hearts the concerns not voiced in this time of prayer. (30 second pause) We pray in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray, "Our Father...."

HYMN for Journeying (In Glory to God Hymnal) #175 "Seek Yee First"

"Seek ye first the kingdom of God and its righteousness,
And all these things shall be added unto you, allelu, alleluia!

Ask, and it shall be given unto you; seek, and you shall find;
Knock, and the door shall be opened unto you. Allelu, alleluia!

You shall not live by bread alone, but by every word
That proceeds from the mouth of God. Allelu, alleluia."

Benediction: Mindful of your mercy, forgiveness, love and instruction, O God, we live in the world renewed, refreshed, and full of courage to be your people. We go to work for peace and justice, wholeness and holiness. Amen

Next Sunday February 28th Rev. Art will provide a worship service. For the first three Sundays in March, there will be simply scripture, brief meditation and pastoral pray.

On March 28th. (Palm/Passion Sunday) there will be a full service available.

On April 2nd there will be a Last Supper Service followed by a Tenebrae (Descent Into Darkness) Ceremony.

Easter Sunday, April 4th we again will have a full service available with Rev. Art Yost.