

North Congregational UCC New Harford CT
WORSHIP: 2nd Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2021



FOR YOUR MEDITATION: “The forces of hate and violence must not be allowed to gain their victory, not just in our society, but in our hearts. Nor must we respond to hate with more hate. This is a time of coming together.”
Billy Graham, Prayer Service Oklahoma City 1999

PRELUDE *Amazing Grace* arr. Robert Hughes

INVITATION TO WORSHIP: Are you searching for something that lasts? Are you hungry for meaning, thirsting for knowledge, and seeking a blessing? Here - in this time of worship - find forgiveness and healing. Here, find a community of care and a spiritual home. Let us express our thankfulness in this time of worship. Amen.

https://youtu.be/OfayXG_c9jE

HYMN OF GATHERING *Take Up Your Cross, the Savior Said* (verses 1, 2, & 4) **No. 718**

Take up your cross, the Savior said, if you would my disciple be;
Take up your cross with willing heart, and humbly follow after me.

Take up your cross; let not its weight fill your weak spirit with alarm;
Christ's strength shall bear your spirit up and brace your heart and nerve your arm.

Take up your cross, then, in Christ's strength, and calmly every danger brave;
It guides you to abundant life and leads to victory o'er the grave

(Written by 19 year old Connecticut youth Charles William Everest 1833)

OPENING PRAYER

Creating and renewing God, we call on your name as we bring our words and works before you, seeking your affirmation and blessing. We are fully convinced that you are able to do according to your promises, and we want to live in covenant with you as disciples of Jesus Christ. Help us in this time of worship to break down any barriers that exist that separate us from our highest intent to follow the way of Jesus Christ. Amen.

PSALM 22:25-31

Pages 616-617

"From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him. The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord. May your hearts live forever! All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over all the nations. To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow down all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him. Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

GOSPEL LESSON: Mark 8:31-38

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Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

SERMON

"THE PETER IN ALL OF US"

Rev. Art Yost

The name Peter and the "concept" of Peter has followed me much of my life. My father was named Peter and he passed the name on to me via my middle name. On these "name cards" they sell, Peter literally means (from the Greek) "small rock" (Petros or feminine Petra). It says that Peter "values his good reputation, enjoys beauty in nature, laughter can be very contagious, family is foremost in heart and mind, believes in humankind's ability to love,

admired for courageous nature, enjoys outdoors, and compliments are sincere and genuine.” Not bad. The first “Peter” that comes to my mind is Biblical. Known as Simon and Cephas, Jesus calls him Peter and uses a verbal pun (petros) when he says “Upon this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). I will say more about this later.

Peter, as a name, used to be more popular. Many Christian families would choose this name along with other male names like Matthew, Paul, John and girls after Ruth, Rebecca, Mary and even Martha. Even fanciful characters were named Peter- Peter Rabbit (one of my favorite rascals), Peter Pan (played by a woman) and for those born in the 21st century, there is the hero of House of Thrones, Peter Dinklage, who plays Tyrion Lannister and has won many awards for this role as well as others.

Then there is the concept of Peter; the phrase “petered out” was first used in connection with mining in the mid nineteenth century. Some connect this to biblical Peter because he “petered out” when he denied knowing Jesus after Jesus was arrested. “For the love of Pete” and “for Pete’s sake” were both popular expressions in 1906, the decade my dad was born (and possibly why so named?) My last connection is a phrase made popular with a book written by Lawrence J. Peter entitled “The Peter Principle”. He observed that employees are promoted based on their success in previous jobs until they reach the level at which they are no longer competent. Meant to be a satire, it actually helped understand promotions in hierarchical organizations. I can personally testify to the truth of this when I was “promoted” from a district position in the New York Annual Conference to a conference-wide position for which my administrative skills were pushed to their limits; I left that post after one year. (Praise God!)

The Peter of the New Testament was called by Jesus to become a fisher of men (women) rather than just fish. While the disciple John is often cited as “The Beloved” and his brother James together were known as “sons of thunder”, it is true that both of them and Peter were part of the innermost circle, even among the 12. In my understanding of the place of Peter he is the numero uno of the disciples. He certainly is the most interesting from the stories we have of him in the gospels.

In the scripture today, Peter has just answered the question posed by Jesus, “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered “You are the Messiah.” This confession is also recorded in the other gospels. While Peter gives the right answer, Matthew reports that Peter is blessed “because flesh and blood has not revealed this but my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 16:17). Many see this as the high point in Peter’s career. There are many examples that put Peter in a different light: Peter wanting to build shelters for Moses, Elijah and Jesus at the transfiguration of Jesus; Peter jumping into the water to meet Jesus then having to be rescued as he begins to sink; Peter refusing to let Jesus wash his feet in the upper room and then wanting Jesus to wash all of him. Then there is Peter’s aforementioned three times denial of being with Jesus when questioned after Jesus was taken away. And when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane one gospel reports a disciple drew a sword and cut the ear of one of the soldiers. The name of the disciple is not mentioned, but my money is on it being Peter. To be fair to Peter, the other disciples were not stellar in their support of Jesus. James and John would argue

over who would receive the privileged seats in God's kingdom. Judas, whose disappointment with Jesus' concept of Messiah, betrayed Jesus for money. ALL FLED.

The crux of today's scripture is Jesus telling the disciples that he, Jesus, would undergo great suffering and rejection by the elders, be killed and after three days rise again. This was too much for Peter. He REBUKES Jesus. Imagine that. He actually scolds Jesus, reprimands him. Peter certainly had nerve. He might have said "This saddens me because we love you etc." The response was quick: "GET BEHIND ME SATAN". We have all had this kind of experience. No one likes to be scolded. No one likes to be tempted when you have set forth a course of action that might be difficult to achieve. One simple example: you're trying to watch your weight and someone keeps insisting "you must have this piece of cake; I made it special for you". In fact, I have only half-jokingly said in response, "get behind me Satan". Jesus knew he was going to face hardship. Having someone question his decision was not what he wanted or needed to hear. So, he sets forth very clearly what was expected of his followers. He gave this instruction not only to the disciples but to people in the crowd as well. We are today, part of that crowd. "IF ANY WANT TO BECOME MY FOLLOWERS, LET THEM DENY THEMSELVES and TAKE UP THEIR CROSSES and FOLLOW ME." This is an OMG moment. Let's explore what that means.

It was not easy for Jesus to face what he knew was coming. He had insulted and threatened the leaders of his faith. He would pray on his knees for this cup to be removed from him while his closest disciples slept. The religious leaders were jealous and mean-spirited. Jesus had become a superstar. The first half of the Gospel of Mark reads like DC Comics superhero stuff. Jesus feeds everyone, teaches everyone, heals everyone. There is nothing he can't do. He has drawn crowds to what the disciples hoped would be a coronation. To the leaders it was going to be a disaster because the pax romana would not stand for any mass protests. The leaders would soon come to the conclusion that it was "expedient" for Jesus to die for the sake of restoring the status quo. Jesus knew that there was more to life than what was being practiced. He would talk about abundant life which meant more than just prolonging life. A life of obedience to the living God was a purposeful life. It was a life that nourished the spirit of the creator in us. For Jesus, his cross was going to be a physical object that inflicted great pain and then death.

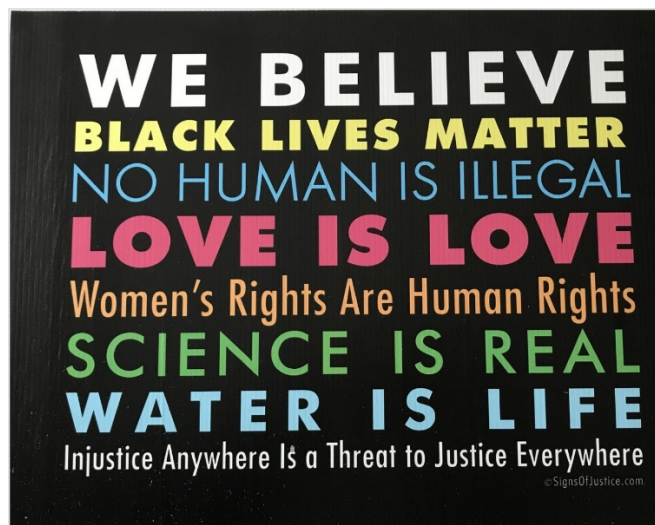
So let's look at what is demanded of us. Deny oneself. During this epidemic, we have had countless examples of the human spirit denying self; unfortunately, we have seen others putting self first. We have seen whole communities come together in support while leaders and some media outlets have been trying to divide us. The fasting associated with Lent is to remind us to control our passions and our appetites for those things that truly take away rather than add to life. I have encouraged feasting on behaviors that nourish our spiritual connections. With lives so busy and full, the fasting is needed to make room for the feasting. In the first ten days of Lent, we have considered feasting on God's image in us, kindness, gratitude, reconciliation, patience, sharing good news, smiling, being gentle and doing it all with enthusiasm.

When Jesus speaks of picking up a cross he doesn't mean his cross. He says their cross. So, what is our cross? Would we still follow Jesus if it cost us a promotion, friends, standard of living,

reputation, less reliance of energy that is destroying our planet, and, yes, for many, even risking death? Much as we have seen how difficult it was for the disciples to accept this version of Messiah, more than half of them suffered a premature and violent death. Peter, despite his rebuking of Jesus and being rebuked by Jesus, had a mission to the Gentiles: bringing God's love in Christ to them. There is tradition that Peter himself finally faced death on a cross, and legend has it that he asked to be fastened upside-down on the cross. (This is legend - not fact - but fits his personality.)

When Peter was praised by Jesus and used the play on words Petros, he wasn't directly saying "upon you" I will build my church. Peter certainly deserves much credit, and in the Roman Catholic tradition he is considered to be the first Bishop of Rome. Many Biblical scholars believe that the intention of Jesus was to say that Peter's affirmation "You are the Messiah" is the foundation upon which the Christian community owes its existence.

I'd like to quote Rev. Jeff Crews who preached on this text on March 4, 2012 at Spring Glen Church in Hamden. "Jesus says take up YOUR Cross. Whatever message you need to live, whatever truth you need to be witness to-take up your cross and follow Jesus. Follow Jesus' heart, his steps, his life and dedication. How can you relinquish selfishness and focus on love and compassion in your life?" In conclusion, it is great to confess Jesus as Messiah but you have to have skin in the game. Denying self and carrying the cross is part of living a life that follows Jesus.



Pastoral Prayer

God of Grace and Glory, for music and scripture and spoken word, we are indeed blessed as we have shared in this expression of our love and service. Unite us now in our prayers of petitions so that our hearts, minds, and spirits might unite with your desire that all will live in wholeness and peace. We pray for our leaders in our communities, in our political world and among all communities of faith that decisions taken will be of benefit to all human kind, including the poor and oppressed. God of creation, you entrusted us with the care of your creation. Help us to take this responsibility seriously. We need to seek ways to ensure a more equitable distribution of all you have provided including safe water to drink and clean air to breathe. God of compassion, we lift up to you all those who love in places of strife and warfare. Blessed be the peacemakers, for they live out their calling to be truly your children. God of love, we ask your loving care for those awaiting diagnosis, suffering from physical or mental illness or recovering from surgery or accidents. We pray also for all caregivers. Give them patience, strength and compassion, as well as time to care for themselves. God of all life, comfort those who mourn the loss of loved ones. May they be blessed with memories and find true solace in the love you provide so that none, even in death, are away from your presence. Be with all those who have worked so hard on vaccines to bring healing and some normalcy so that the financial, social strains of this world epidemic upon so many will soon be alleviated. We commend all our prayers to you, knowing that you are aware of all the joys and concerns of our hearts, even the ones we cannot put into words. We pray in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray- Our Father....

https://youtu.be/_wUvPH_gy1c

HYMN OF JOURNEYING # 320 *The Church of Christ in Every Age*

No. 320

The Church of Christ in every age beset by change but Spirit led,
must claim and test its heritage and keep on rising from the dead.

Across the world, across the street, the victims of injustice cry
for shelter and for bread to eat, and never live before they die.

Then let the servant church arise, a caring church that longs to be
a partner in Christ's sacrifice, and clothed in Christ's humanity.

For Christ alone whose blood was shed, can cure the fever in our blood,
and teach us how to share our bread and feed the starving multitude.

We have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our Lord:
to care for all, without reserve, and spread Christ's liberating word.

BENEDICTION

As we have met God in worship, we go forth to encounter God in all areas of our work and play. The cross of Christ goes before us into the world, reminding us of the cost of discipleship. The promise and presence of God's covenant go with us to strengthen our resolve. We will praise God in or words and deeds. Amen

POSTLUDE

Prelude in F Major

J.S. Bach

Announcements:

For the next three Sundays in March, there will be simply scripture, brief meditation and pastoral prayer provided by our supply pastor Rev. Art Yost.

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.