

Sermon – October 18, 2020
Text: Exodus 33:12-23
L. Gail Irwin

Introduction:

Hello, I'm Pastor Gail Irwin, and I'm going to be your Intentional Interim Pastor for the near future.

An Intentional Interim is trained to help a congregation do some soul searching and self study between settled pastors. In addition to the basics like leading worship and pastoral care, I and your Council and Search Committee will work together with you to have honest conversations about where you've been, where you are now, your community's needs and your spiritual gifts, and to dream about where God is leading you next.

And in this unique time of quarantine, I want to help you be creative about new ways to be together in ministry and take care of each other and your community.

An intentional Interim is NOT eligible to be your next pastor, because that possibility would hinder your interim work; but I will walk with you until you are ready to welcome the next spiritual leader who God sends you.

For the near future, we will be gathering for worship on-line, through your weekly emails, Facebook, YouTube, and paper mail. We hope to find ways to gather together in person later, when it's safe to do so. Until then, **please let us know if you are unable to access the church's services and emails and we will work to get you better connected.**

For the near future, the best way to reach me is by email or my cell phone:

Email: pastorgail@eagleriverucc.org

Phone: 920-883-7887

Special thanks to Rev. Topher Mehlhoff for letting you participate in services in Rhinelander UCC the last few weeks! It's an example of how our churches can help each other during this time, and maybe we'll have a chance to help some other church down the road.

You may notice that other groups are now using the building with certain cleanliness protocols. If you need to come into the building, please call the church at the front door during office hours, with your mask on, and Nan will let you in.

A little about me:

I live in Oconto Falls, about 2 hours south of Eagle River, on a farm

- I live with my husband Charles who raises dairy heifers. We live with 2 working border collies, a house cat, Minnie, and about 500 dairy heifers. We think we live in the most beautiful place on earth: Heifer Heaven!
- We also have a daughter, Evelyn, age 23, who is a recent graduate from St. Olaf in Minnesota and works in Minneapolis
- I'm originally from California, went to seminary at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, then came to Wisconsin and was ordained in Eau Claire.
- I've been doing Intentional Interim pastorates for several years and have served about half a dozen churches as interim. Part of the week I will work from home
- My immediate goals:
 - 1) To make an online worship service available late each week; a written version will be send out to those without computer access

- 2) To meet one-to-one for outdoor driveway visits, Zoom or phone calls with as many active members as possible, at least once, to get acquainted; I probably can't get to everyone this way, but because of quarantine I want to do as many visits as I can before it gets too cold
- 3) To plan a creative Advent and Christmas season for your church family, and help you safely rebuild unity/community,
- After that, I will help guide you through whatever interim projects the Council and I decide to do together to get you ready for calling a new pastor.
 - Thank you to the Council and staff who have welcomed me! I'm looking forward to being in ministry with all of you!

An Opening Prayer by Amy Loving:

*Mighty God, you spoke to your people in the pillar of cloud
as they walked together in the wilderness.
Speak to us through your Word today,
that we may hear you calling us
out of the wilderness places in our lives
and into new places you have promised to show us.
In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*

Reflection:

One of the stories of Moses and the Israelites involves Moses wishing he could see God's glory or God's face.

Moses and Yahweh God were able to talk to each other "in person", but it was always with a sort of social distance between them, a mask, a veil of separation between the divine and the human. And they had conversed this way for many years in the trek across the wilderness.

And toward the end of Moses' journey, after many conversations with God, I think he was still nervous about the future; he sensed the crossing into Canaan was coming near, and he needed the assurance that God was real and would not abandon the Israelites as they entered new territory. He was having doubts!

Are you traveling with us or not? (he said in Exodus 33) How else will we know that we're special, I and your people, among all other people on this planet Earth?"

If I am so special to you, let me in on your plans.

Then he asked God in Exodus 33:18

"Please. Let me see your Glory." (your full presence, your face)

19 GOD said, "I will make my Goodness pass right in front of you; I'll call out the name, GOD, right before you. I'll treat well whomever I want to treat well and I'll be kind to whomever I want to be kind."

20 GOD continued, "But you may not see my face. No one can see me and live."

And then God made a compromise with Moses:

21-23 GOD said, "Look, here is a place right beside me. Put yourself on this rock. When my Glory passes by, I'll put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with my hand until I've passed by. Then I'll take my hand away and you'll see my back. But you won't see my face."

So Moses never gets to see God's face; but he gets to see God's back after He passes by.

I think like Moses we are all a little anxious about the near future right now:

- Covid infections are rising all around us;
- The election is coming
- Winter is driving us indoors, away from other people
- The holidays are sure to be different from other years past

It would be nice to see God's face or hear God's voice a little more clearly!

God, tell us your plans!

How do you even know God is still with you these days?

One way may be to look backward: we've all experienced some major challenge in life by now, probably many.

Look back and remember a challenge in your life, or in our nation's history: did God abandon us in those times?

Did you feel God's presence in some way? Was there some spiritual sustenance along the way: water from a rock, manna from heaven that got you through a hard day or bad night or terrible year?

Or did it feel like you were abandoned for a while?

Sometimes we become aware of God's presence by looking backward at everything God has gotten us through. God has hidden you in the cleft of many rocks, covered you with Her hand for protection, and then slipped away almost unnoticed.

Another way to look for God's presence is by looking forward.

That image of God's back after he's passed by—do you think God was saying, "*See you later, I'm walking away now*"?

Or was the sight of God's back actually a beckoning: "*Come on, let's go. I'm leading the way.*"

I'd like to think it was the second: Moses could see that God was going ahead of the people into that uncertain Promised Land and would make a way for them.

So if you're feeling anxious about the future, as you hide in whatever quarantine you've found, you might try peeking out and looking ahead with the eyes of your Spirit.

What do you see in the midst of all your anxious fears? Maybe God is up ahead! Making some kind of path for us. Maybe God has a good idea, a good destination we can trust in all of this chaos.

Maybe She's not leading you into peril. She wants milk and honey for you; she wants a future and a hope. Not disaster.

Maybe by looking backward, and then forward, you will get the sense that God is in fact here, right now, hiding behind that divine veil of mystery in the "thin place".

We're living in a time of wilderness as a nation; and maybe some of you at First Congregational are feeling like sheep without a shepherd

Like Moses, we long to see the faces of those we rely on and trust!

But we're living in a moment when we need to hide in the cleft of rocks and wait for God's presence. Later, there will be times to step out and follow God's backside.

I don't know why, but I feel very positive about the opportunity to be with you in Eagle River at this time. It's kind of a scary time to be a community leader with so many unknowns around us. But I just have a sense of rightness about being with you and I hope that continues.

At the same time, I cannot be your Moses. Each of you needs to find that internal ability to look for God's face in the world around you.

But I will promise to walk beside you through this wilderness time in your church and in our culture. I hope we can soothe one another's anxieties and buoy each other's hope. Let's walk together for awhile and dream about what might be across the Jordan for your church here in Eagle River. Thank you for welcoming me! Amen.

Music: "Be Still My Soul" (Chalice Hymnal #566)
(Piano and Vocals: Lori Hunter)

Pastoral Prayer:

Holy Creator God, in the world, everything is changing.

You've made the colors around us change;

the soft green leaves have now gone brittle;

Birds are traveling; animals are preparing for the cold;

In our world, change is everywhere.

Leaders are vying for power transitions.

People who are hungry for a better life

are traveling in hopes of finding safety and sustenance.

Whole cities have watched as fire and hurricane and flood have changed their landscapes.

Some are grieving for the dead and tending the sick in hope of healing.

Our jobs, our children, our workplaces, everything seems to be in motion.

For this church today, Loving One, here in Eagle River, there is change coming.

And yet, we find resilience and hope in your constant love.

We look backward and forward and find the assurance
that you've always been with us.

Now, we become still and center ourselves in your presence here.

We are trying to trust you.
Set our feet on the wilderness path that leads us closer to you.
Guide all your people, in all places, on a road that can be trusted.
Make us brave to scan the horizon and see beyond the current challenges, a land of milk and honey, a promise made and kept, a better world.
Hear our prayers in silence...

These things we pray in the name of Christ, our Savior and Teacher, as we say the words he taught us...

The Lord's Prayer

Blessing:

And now, may the goodness and guidance of God be revealed to us
As we join in walking the wilderness road together!
Amen, and see you next week!