

**Worship Service for Sunday, November 8, 2020**  
**First Congregational UCC, Eagle River**  
**L. Gail Irwin, Interim Pastor**

\*\*\*\*\*

**Scripture Reading and Sermon**

- I. If you've forgotten your Old Testament history, here's a crash course about all the incredible deeds God did for the Hebrew people before they came into the Promised Land, from Joshua chapter 24:
  - a. Joshua recounts the long history of his people being protected and saved by Yahweh God, and how they immigrated into Canaan (a land with many competing gods that people worshiped).
  - b. When Joshua comes into the land, he makes a covenant with God at a place called Shechem. And he asks his people to make their own decisions about whether they will be loyal to Yahweh God, or worship other gods instead.

**Hebrew Scripture Reading:** Joshua 24:1-8, 13-15

*Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. <sup>2</sup> And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. <sup>3</sup> Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac; <sup>4</sup> and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. <sup>5</sup> Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out. <sup>6</sup> When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>7</sup> When they cried out to the LORD, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness a long time. <sup>8</sup> Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan; they fought with you, and I handed them over to you, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you.*

*<sup>13</sup>I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive yards that you did not plant.<sup>14</sup> "Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. <sup>15</sup> Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."*

- II. Joshua reminds the people that everything good that's happened to them is because God took care of them. And this fruitful land they've been given is a gift from God, not something they earned and worked for. They are eating fruit they didn't plant and living in houses they didn't build. They are enjoying the labor of others who came before them.
- a. Now they have to decide, knowing everything God has done for them, whether they are going to be loyal to God or not.
    - i. Joshua says, in effect, *Make your choice and stick with it. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.*
    - ii. (In family systems, we call this self-differentiation: being true to your beliefs regardless of what others do). It's like that line in the song: *If none go with me, still I will follow!*
- III. In your church, you also benefit from the gifts and loyalty of generations who came before you.
- a. Other people built your church home
  - b. And the additions and improvements you enjoy today
  - c. Others taught your kids in Sunday School and led youth groups
  - d. Others started your choir, and taught about your unique theological heritage,
  - e. You didn't build most of this yourselves; it was here for you.
  - f. Hopefully, since then, you've done your part to help build it.
  - g. Through different life stages and moves to new communities, you had choices about whether you would be loyal to a church; sometimes you chose NO; sometimes you chose YES.
  - h. And every year, you decide whether you want to continue to maintain and build the Church, not just for yourselves, but also to leave something for future generations.
  - i. That takes some loyalty through good and hard times.
- IV. In the good times, that commitment has led to new friends, an "alternative family" in Eagle River, great music, spiritual growth, potlucks, youth programs, adult studies, just great community life and faith enrichment.
- i. it's like a little party every Sunday when you get together and exchange hugs and news and cookies!
  - ii. You get to be affirmed in your faith, loyal to the Church AND have fun!
- V. But this year, we've had to live without all those warm fuzzies.
- i. No live music, hugs, no friendly faces, no shared singing, shared meals...
  - ii. Now the music and worship is on a computer screen; the hugs are just emojis;
  - iii. We're realizing how important that commitment is or was, because now we're all living without the blessings that came with it.
  - iv. It won't be like this forever. But right now, it's like all the fun is sucked out of church life!
- VI. This year is a test of our Christian faith and practice, and its proving to be a test of our loyalty to the institutional Church.

- a. When you first committed to follow Christ with other Christians, you didn't realize we would need to stick with it even when it got this hard and lonely;
- b. And being apart has made it harder to keep up our positive habits!
  - i. You're probably wearing sweat pants to worship instead of dressing up
  - ii. No one knows if you're tuning into the YouTube service or not!
  - iii. Or if you're praying regularly
  - iv. Mission projects – you have to act on your own right now; no one will remind you to bring groceries to the pantry or cook for a fundraiser;
- c. Your financial giving habit may have been interrupted too: now giving and pledging requires a stamp and envelope and a postbox!
- d. You and God are the only ones who really know if you're still following. Are you?

VII. Covid 19 has presented the Church with a crisis/opportunity – to recommit ourselves to our faith practices and adapt to living as Christians in this new territory of the pandemic. We could all choose the worship other gods.

- a. But if you still want to keep up your commitments to God and the Church in this new situation, here are a few ideas about how to do it:
- b. The pandemic has brought economic hardship on communities;
  - i. Some people are doing fine;
  - ii. But some have had interruptions in employment and experienced business failures;
  - iii. Your church's Melody of Compassion fund; your local pantry and shelters still need us. What creative fundraising or partnerships can we develop to help them in ways that work during a pandemic?
- c. Loneliness, physical and mental illness will be all around us this winter. People really need to hear a word of hope and encouragement. The Church knows how to do this, or if we don't, we can learn!
  - i. We can help address people's emotional and spiritual needs as well as their physical needs. Invite someone to our worship or a fellowship Zoom. Share with them the music emails and Sheltering Thoughts. Invite them to like our Facebook page.
  - ii. (Last week on a whim I invited my friend Anne to our All Saints Zoom; she lives in St. Paul and she has her own church, but she lives alone and a little socializing is good for her so she took a few minutes to come to our Zoom and say hi!)
  - iii. Call or write notes to people to spread some cheer and hope
- d. We're living through a time of division in our country, and the Church can be a place where people are taught to see past our labels and factions, to see each other as fully human, the way Christ taught us to look at each other.
  - i. Maybe we could start a conversation about community building or racism or civil discourse.

- e. And think about your own personal commitment to your faith practice. It's no longer about just "church-going", it's a spiritual discipline to be a Christian!
  - i. Set aside time and space for weekly worship and daily prayer or another spiritual practice that works for you, and encouraging others to do so
  - ii. A prayer group is now meeting and they've committed each of them to personal prayer for members of your church and for the world; send them your prayers or pray with them
  - iii. Commit to learn new skills on the computer to help you connect you're your church family through emails, Zooms, YouTubes and Facebook so others can hear from you
  - iv. Re-commit to a giving practice, marking a time on the calendar to send the church a gift. *Do it prayerfully!*
    - 1. Not just because we have bills to pay
    - 2. But because it's a spiritual practice to let something go for the good of the world.

VIII. This year is a chance to ask ourselves if this venture, the Church, is really worth committing ourselves to, in its stripped-down version; now that we're just a group of people who want to love each other, love God and love the world...

- a. If that is still worth something to you, then what are you willing to commit and give, including financially, to keep it alive, even when there are less warm fuzzies for you?

IX. If, after these months of being apart, you find that the Church really makes no difference in your life; if you don't miss or care about it; it doesn't hold value in your heart, don't make a promise you cannot keep. God doesn't like wishy-washiness!

- a. But if these months have driven home for you, as they have for me, the deep value of living in a faith family, make a commitment:
- b. *As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord!*