

**summer
sermon
series**



Summer Worship

September 12, 2010

**First Congregational Church
Winchester, MA**

**9:45 AM in
Ripley Chapel**



Summer Meditations

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CALL TO WORSHIP

All the clear and shimmering waters,
Praise the Lord.
All the tiny insects hovering over the waters,
Praise the Lord.
All the winds in the trees,
Praise the Lord.
All the bass that avoid our lures,
Praise the Lord.
All the loons that glide and dive,
Praise the Lord.
All the chipmunks and squirrels
and baby rabbits
that eat from our doorsteps,
Praise the Lord.

All the huge rocks and palisades,
Praise the Lord.
All the silent canoes,
Praise the Lord.
All the early morning joggers,
Praise the Lord.
All the late sleepers,
Praise the Lord.
All the kind and considerate neighbors,
Praise the Lord.
All the unnamed sounds and mysterious
paths,
Praise the Lord.
May this peace and stillness
heal our noisy minds
so that we, too, may always
Praise the Lord!!

GATHERING PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER

O God,

**We gather this morning to bring You praise and thanksgiving.
By Your mystery the fields burst into bloom.
By Your purpose the earth turns, the sun shines, the clouds race.
By Your mercy people dare to rise to the new day.**

**Let Your mystery, Your purpose, Your mercy fill our praying,
our singing, our speaking, and even our silences,
as we seek today to express more than we can convey
and as we seek to understand deeper truths than we can grasp.**

**Shake our drowsy spirits.
Breathe new life into every dying place in us.
Keep us always in Your care
and fashion us for Your work of love and of justice.**

**We pray in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray,
saying...**

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
JUNE 27th, 2010

Nick Wankowicz

**Mark 6:30-32 &
Matthew 15: 21-28**

“Finding Jesus on Vacation”

This being the first service of summer vacation, I began to wonder if Christ ever went on vacation. Being curious, I went to my computer and Googled, “Christ on Vacation,” and actually came up with a few passages.

Of the passages that did pop up, you heard two of them today in the scripture readings. (Mark 6:30-32 & Matthew 15: 21-28)

I thought about these for a while and worked them over for about a week before I came up with the sermon. It seems that Christ did go on vacations, although he didn’t appear very good at “getting away from it all,” we are all the better for it...

The first of these passages seems easy to me and I can come away with a clear correlation and an understanding of a “how it applies to me” The other not so much. Let’s dig into how Christ “did vacation”

The first passage was Mark 6:30-32. Did anyone recognize it? Let me read the New International Version.

*The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”
So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.*

Do you recognize this passage? It is well known, but more for what happens in the middle and end, not so much the beginning?

But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

Recognize it yet?

By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. “This is a remote place,” they said, “and it’s already very late. Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy

themselves something to eat." But he answered, "You give them something to eat."

By this time, you may know the rest of the story...

They said to him, "That would take eight months of a man's wages. Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" "How many loaves do you have?" he asked. When they found out, they said, "Five—and two fish." Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

It is the first two verses are what I want to concentrate on today:

He said to them" Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.

So here we have the disciples going with Jesus to get away from it all. And when they got there, what did they end up experiencing, not the intended rest and relaxation, but a miracle...

On vacation is when I really appreciate being in "quiet places" in nature. It was a member of this congregation that once said, "I find God in Nature" That pretty much sums it up for me as well. When in nature, I see the work of the Creator all around. I tend to see the interactions and balance of nature in what I call "miners miracles." These are the miracles that happen every day. They are not quite as obvious as feeding 5,000 with a couple of loaves and fishes, but they are there for the observant.

The breaking morning, the beauty of sunset, and so many stars in a dark night that you wonder how big "all of creation" really is. Rain, even on vacation is a blessing to behold, it is the never-ending balance of evaporation to condensation that brings forth the bounty of the earth.

At some point observe the busy life in a square foot of grass. Be amazed by the beings of the ocean, from seeing a whale on a whale watch to the balance of a tidal pool ecosystem.

All complex and perfect systems, all living and existing, all in a delicate balance, all miracles.

Being in awe of this balance, and thinking of how we could never create such a perfect system always brings me back to the Genesis.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

And "Let there be an expanse between the waters." God called the expanse "sky." And the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas."

"Let the land produce vegetation:"

"Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night and God made two great lights. He also made the stars.

"Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky." And God blessed them.

"Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: And it was so.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

And it **is** very good.

So, from this point forward, if willing, try and do what the Apostles did, go Jesus when you go on vacation, or as we say in my family, "go with God and safe home." Look to observe the miracles that surround you, no matter how small or insignificant they might appear. Hopefully where you go you will have more than five loaves and two fishes, but you will still have the opportunity to see millions of miracles.

The second passage is one that I had not heard before, but found very interesting. From what I learned, it can also be quite difficult to preach on...

In this passage a worn out Jesus has retreated to the Mediterranean Coast. It was important to point out; he was way out of his "territory."

He must have been exhausted and looking for a break from all his "preaching, teaching, and healing." Who can relate to feeling worn out and needing a break?

So here he is, you can imagine him relaxing and taking in the scenery, when lo and behold this Canaanite woman, a Gentile, approaches him and asks for a miracle. Not thinking this was to be a "busman's holiday" what does he do? He insults her,

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel... It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

May people are actually a bit taken aback by this part of the passage. This is not the response that people would expect Christ to give, but that is a sermon for another day...

To me it sounds to me like Christ was well in need of a break...

Back to Matthew, not to be deterred the woman shows incredible constraint and will power. She doesn't leave, but replies to the teacher with some Cainnite teaching of her own.

"Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Jesus, realizing the strength of this woman, and her faith, heals her daughter. Yet another miracle performed while on "Vacation."

There are so many interesting angles to look at in this passage, but the one I want to dig into is how this experience might have changed not only the Canaanite woman, but been a growing moment for Jesus himself.

If you listen to Jesus' you would initially her him tell her

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

The Gospel of Mark ends with the passage:

*Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of **all** nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

So, was this the influence of the Canaanite Woman? People believe that this interaction opened Jesus' eyes to the greater flock beyond just the "lost sheep of Israel"

So again I have to ask, how does this tie back to me? How can I relate?

I know people who take "vacation" in service to others: I know people who have gone on Earth Watch's vacations giving up their time to help steward this "big blue marble."

A good friend of mine is in the habit of taking his vacation to escort youth groups on Habitat trips to build homes for those in need. People from our own church have "vacationed" in New Orleans, Central America, Chicago, and Staten Island.

I would be willing to bet that while serving, they, like Christ, came away a changed people having learned something they didn't consider before. They also changed the world for the better, maybe not in quite so dramatic fashion, but with their own contribution and in their own way.

So, in summary, what does this all mean?

- Realize that everyone needs a vacation. Even Jesus made the time to get away.
- Do as Jesus did, plan on taking one if you can. Hopefully you will be more successful then he appeared to be in these two passages
- Whether you physically go somewhere, or not, do as the Disciples did, go with Christ
- Again, do as the Disciples did, be on the lookout for Miracles.

- If given the opportunity to serve, consider making a difference, even if it doesn't appear to be relaxing. My mother has a saying that, "a change is as good as a vacation." You may even learn something
- Most of all, try and do something this summer to refresh the body, the mind, or at least the spirit
- Come to as many of these Chapel services as you can for a "vacation from the week"
- And finally, after this summer break, come back home refreshed in September, to this, God's house, to be joyfully received by those within your faith community.

May your summer be one of refreshment, miracles, and thanksgiving.
Amen

**FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
JULY 11, 2010**

Julianne Zimmerman

Psalm 25:1-10, John 11:1-16, John 14:1-15

'Beloved Thomas'

Good morning. Today we have heard a combination of scriptures which are not commonly used together, by which I hope to offer a new interpretation of our beloved disciple Thomas.

I call him beloved in sincerity, because I think he demonstrates much worth loving in his few brief appearances in the Gospels. I also call him beloved in a wry sense, because I believe we enjoy maligning him, and probably unfairly.

We rarely think of Thomas without the epithet, "Doubting". Occasionally, one of our Sunday School teachers will have impressed upon us at some point in our Christian education that he was a twin. That's an intriguing detail, especially because it is incomplete, and implies in some sense that *he* was incomplete: was he an identical twin or fraternal? Was his twin a man or woman? Where was his twin — and was his twin still living? Was his twin also a believer, or opposed to Thomas's choice to become a disciple? But like most of the disciples, we don't know much else about Thomas. There is nothing beyond this barest description, leaving him largely a mystery to us.

Our notions of Thomas come primarily from another passage, the one in which he receives a blessing and a gentle chastisement after withholding belief of Christ's resurrection. We'll come back to that.

I think there is much more to learn about Thomas from today's gospel passages.

At the opening of John's chapter 11, Jesus had been encountering increasingly violent opposition from Temple officials and other guardians of the faith, who considered His ministry, His statements, and particularly many of His miracles to be blasphemous. They perceived Him as an assault against their traditions, law, and cultural order, and they interpreted that to mean He was of the devil. Therefore there were many powerful figures who wanted Him killed, in keeping with the Law, which states that blasphemy is a capital offense. Several times already they had attempted to kill Him, but each time He had somehow eluded death.

Now having fled across the Jordan once again, Jesus learned that His friend Lazarus was ill. Lazarus and his two sisters lived in Bethany, very near Jerusalem, where Jesus and His followers could have expected to be killed.

At first Jesus showed no hurry to respond to the news of Lazarus' sickness. He lingered for two days, and no doubt the disciples were relieved to keep a relatively low profile for a little while.

But then He announced that Lazarus had died, and it was time for Him to go raise His friend from the dead.

The disciples had no interest in heading back into danger. They were frightened. Even with all that they had witnessed and experienced with Jesus, they still feared and they still didn't know what to believe. They expected His luck to run out, and for Him to be killed. It was insane to walk toward that fatal threat. But Jesus was going. And Thomas spoke up: "Let us go also, that we may die with Him."

Thomas showed a devotion that overrides fear: if He is to die, let us at least be with Him in death. Neither Thomas nor the other disciples yet grasped that there could be anything after death, but Thomas was willing to go, and encouraged the others to go along as well.

This is not the act of a man marked by doubt. This is the act of a man marked by a courageous heart.

I love him for that.

[As it happened, they witnessed Lazarus' resurrection, and we are privy to Mary's statement of faith — two more in a long string of revelations. The visit must have been mind-boggling, even for the disciples who had already seen so many other miracles.]

After raising Lazarus, Jesus didn't retreat from Bethany, but instead stayed on a few days with His friends, and then continued on toward Jerusalem — the very center of the threat against Him — for the Passover.

To their credit, the disciples all went with him, and at first they might have imagined that somehow there could be a happy ending to their journey, as crowds formed to cheer Jesus into the holy city. But even that impromptu victor's welcome must have been fraught with terror. The disciples would have known that such a fervent public display would only sharpen their danger.

And so the Passover Seder must have been a strange celebration for the disciples, with so much fear, and yet with Jesus teaching them so much in such intimate company. No crowds now, no seekers, no Pharisees; no one but their tiny group, gathered together over the sacred table.

What a cacophony of emotions they must have experienced as they celebrated the millennia-old feast of God's miraculous salvation from bondage and death, while under the imminent threat of fatal violence, and while receiving the revelatory lessons of their teacher and friend. It must have felt as though all of history was imploding at their table. No wonder they had difficulty comprehending it all.

This brings us to this morning's second Gospel passage, in John 14. When Jesus tells the disciples He is departing from them, to prepare a place for them with His Father, He tells them that they already know where He is going. Thomas speaks up — unwilling to be left behind, and not afraid to admit his incomprehension: "Lord, we do not know where You are going; how do we know the way?" Indeed, no one has ever gone before where Jesus intends to go. Jesus is about to make that path for the first time. It is a mystery beyond their comprehension, and for that matter, beyond mine as well. And they all sense by now that whatever that path involves, it won't be pretty. But once again, Thomas wants to know how to follow. Now not only into death this time, but into a mystery beyond human comprehension.

Of course we all know the next time we see Thomas, in John 20. But I think our shorthand recollections are unfair to him.

After Jesus' crucifixion, the disciples were thrown into complete disarray. Their hopes and dreams had been dashed, their worst fears had been confirmed, and then some. Jesus was dead. Judas had betrayed Jesus and his followers, and killed himself. Peter, "the rock," had also betrayed Jesus, and had to face his own cowardice. They were grieving, they were lost, and they were terrified.

A few nights later, all but Thomas gathered together in hiding. They had every reason to be afraid — after all, Jesus had been killed, and who else but He could protect them?

But whatever was in Thomas' heart outweighed fear. Whether out of the need to grieve alone; shock over the Passover events; a quest to understand Jerusalem, "the city that kills her prophets;" a faint magical hope that somehow he could wake himself from this nightmare; or perhaps a wish to die as well; Thomas did not go

into hiding with the others. While the others gathered in hiding, he was out on his own.

I wonder what he did that night.

When the others told him the next day that Jesus had come to them in their locked room, blessed them, shown them his wounds, and breathed the Spirit into them, Thomas refused to believe their story.

Would you accept it? Would I?

And would it seem fair to any of us if we were in Thomas' position? After all, none of the others were closer to Jesus than he had been. And they were all in hiding. Why should Jesus have come to them in their hiding place, and not to him, out in the world? Why?

It doesn't seem fair. It doesn't make sense. It wouldn't to me, anyway. Not if I were Thomas.

Still, a week later Thomas joined them in the hiding room. Was it because fear had overtaken him? Or was it because he hoped beyond all reason — his denial notwithstanding — to also have a glimpse of Jesus? I believe it was the latter, and that in the hope of seeing Jesus again he was willing to do something that made no sense, and moreover something that went against his strong instincts to plunge ahead.

In any case, he was rewarded. Jesus appeared to them and addressed Thomas directly, offering Thomas all the others had seen and everything he had demanded in order to believe.

All of Thomas' objections fell away, as he released himself to relief, gratitude, and wonder.

How many other cases can you think of where such conditions were met by God, either in the Old Testament or in the New? In most cases when others required proofs, they were left unsatisfied, chastised or even punished for testing God. I think Thomas must have been truly beloved to Jesus, to receive such exceptional treatment — and to respond with such adoration.

That brings us back to the Psalms, and to David, another person God loved exceptionally. In Psalm 25, David wrote:

*"To Thee, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
O my God, in Thee I trust.
Do not let me be ashamed;
Do not let my enemies exult over me.
Indeed, none of those who wait for Thee will be ashamed;
Those who deal treacherously without cause will be ashamed.
Make me know Thy ways, O Lord;*

*Teach me Thy paths.
Lead me in Thy truth and teach me,
For Thou art the God of my salvation;
For Thee I wait all the day.
Remember, O Lord, Thy compassion and Thy lovingkindnesses,
For they have been from of old.
Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
According to Thy lovinkindness remember Thou me,
For Thy goodness' sake, O Lord
Good and upright is the Lord;
Therefore He instructs sinners in the way.
He leads the humble in justice,
And He teaches the humble His way.
All the paths of the Lord are lovingkindness and truth
To those who keep His covenant and His testimonies."*

I believe this is the story of *beloved* Thomas, the devoted — *our twin* — the one who sought and was shown the way, who was welcomed and embraced with lovingkindness and with forgiveness.

Perhaps this is your prayer, your story.

Let it be mine.

Amen.

Julianne grew up hearing and singing hymns in a small UCC church in Pennsylvania. As her husband Rick will attest, her faith remains an active work in progress.

**SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
JULY 18, 2010**

Sarah Gallop

**Psalm 139:1-6
The Inescapable God**

"Disappointment"

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

Habakkuk 3: 17-19

Trust and Joy in the Midst of Trouble

*Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines,
Though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food,
Though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls,
Yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will exult in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord is my strength;
He makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
And makes me tread upon the heights.*

Good Morning!

Not to be a killjoy, but I'd like to talk about disappointment this morning. This year I feel particularly experienced in the concept, and therefore, hopefully qualified to try to make some sense out of the emotions and actions that come with it. I feel comfortable talking about it with all of you because I know, without asking, that every one of you has experienced disappointment, whether small or big, whether fleeting or enduring, whether superficial or scarring. We've all been disappointed in some manner by family and friends, by events and circumstances, and by material things.

Disappointment is the gap between expectations and reality. We expect that our family and friends will treat us lovingly and respectfully. We expect that our partners and children will be healthy. We expect that our new all-in-one phone, cable, and internet service will actually cost what we were told it would cost. When reality occasionally reveals that our expectations will be unmet, we can experience disappointment. Depending on the severity of the incident, our disappointment can manifest itself as simple annoyance, extreme despair, or more likely, something in between. Obviously, there's a great spectrum to the emotions of disappointment. In doing a little research on this topic today, I read that the #1 cause of depression is getting stuck in the emotions of disappointment—that gap between expectations and reality. I also read that our individual capacity to process and overcome disappointment is the single greatest factor impacting our personal sense of happiness and peace. In other words, if we allow ourselves to linger in the feelings of disappointment, we can strengthen our negative thoughts and possibly experience depression, but if we can learn to work through our disappointments, we're more likely to find our way to contentment.

But we all know this, don't we? So, why do I, at 48 years old, still allow myself to be occasionally victimized by my feelings of disappointment? Why do you? Or maybe you don't. Maybe you've discovered a reliable way to process and move through your emotions.

In the realm of disappointments, it's the type in the human interaction category that has caused me to focus on this subject today. Those of you who know me know that I'm an optimistic and glass-half-full kind of person. I have a reasonably

high threshold of patience and tolerance, and try to keep a broad perspective of what's happening around me.

But I feel that I've experienced more disappointments in the past year than seems typical. Now let me be clear that there have been no accidents, no deaths, and no grave illnesses in my circles, and I am very aware each day why I count my blessings. However, my mother is suffering from fairly serious dementia, and my father, at 88, is having a hard time staying grounded in reality. I had two difficult interactions with close friends that left me feeling misunderstood and sort of empty, and I had an experience with my sister that I'm actually going to tell you about. It's not the most remarkable story, and it's probably the least important of the issues I just mentioned, but, for me, it's a real and current example of experiencing the emotions of disappointment. I think also that some of you might be able to relate to it. After I tell you about it, I'm going to try to connect it to one of the scriptures that we just heard, in case you're wondering if I'm going anywhere with this.

This past spring, my three siblings and I helped to move my parents from their home of 50 years in Williamstown, MA to a retirement community in Maine. Those of you who have faced or managed such a move know that it isn't easy. We worked weekend after weekend sorting, organizing, cleaning, and throwing out. Once we determined what belongings my parents were taking with them, we began the process of dividing up the rest among the four children. Like many people in their golden years, my parents had accumulated some nice things that had been passed down to them from previous generations. They also had a collection of unusual items from several countries where we had lived during my father's sabbatical years.

So, my siblings and I went through a fairly organized process of choosing which things we each wanted to keep. It was rather uneventful except that my sister, who is the oldest, appeared after a few rounds of decision-making to have very strong feelings about many of the items. Before each round of choosing, she would indicate which item she preferred, even though we were following a process of taking turns picking first. And then, in my family's classic conflict-avoiding way, none of us would choose the items that she had expressed feelings about, even though most of those things would likely have been our first choices too. So in the end, as a result of our combined dynamic, my sister went home with essentially her first choice from 50 or so rounds of making decisions about our parents' belongings. She also wanted to take much of the stuff that was intended to be sold—so much so, that we had to make arrangements for the moving truck to take a separate trip to her house to deliver her new belongings, while the rest of us were able to fit our things into our own cars.

I didn't expect this from my sister, and I didn't completely understand it. There was a gap between my expectations and reality. I was disappointed. For several days afterwards, as I cleaned, admired, and found a place for each of the belongings that I brought home, I offered myself various rationales, and this was the most viable one to me:

My sister, as the oldest, has the clearest memories of our grandparents and other long passed relatives, and the clearest memories of our sabbatical years in Japan, France, Austria, and the Netherlands, and because of that, she had the strongest desire among the four of us to take home the most sentimental items that represent our family history and story. In short, she really wanted that stuff because it meant a lot to her. I used that as a working premise, and my disappointment dissipated.

We got my parents settled into their new place in Maine, and shortly after that my sister called to tell me that she realized when she got home that she didn't have space for all the things that she had acquired from our parents house. She said that she laid out all the china, crystal, silver, pottery, and other pieces that she had brought home, on her dining room table and invited in an antique dealer. She told me that the dealer surveyed the 50 or so items, and afterwards recommended that she have them individually appraised and sold more strategically, but, he said, if she really wanted to sell them to him now, he would give her \$700 for the lot. So, she told me, she sold him everything.

I didn't expect this, and I didn't understand it. In fact, there was a huge gap between my expectations and reality. My theory was shot, because if those family items meant a lot to her, which I believed, then she never would have sold them. I was bewildered, hurt, and mad. I was really disappointed. As I've said, my family culture is not confrontational, but I wanted to ask my sister: "could you just explain to me why you wanted all those things so badly, and then sold them?" But I knew I wouldn't ask, and I knew no one in my family would. The only thing that did happen is that one of my brothers called the antique dealer to see if he could buy back all the items, but the dealer indicated that he had re-sold every piece within two days.

I think the hardest emotion of disappointment, particularly when it involves human interaction, is not being able to understand the motivation behind someone's words or actions. When we can't come up with a viable rationale and have no premise with which to work, it makes the task of processing much more challenging. When there's a void of explanation, there's no framework within which to carry out the important work of sorting through our feelings, even though we know we're supposed to be doing that. We're left feeling unguided as we navigate the twists and turns of that divide between expectations and reality. I find that difficult.

Typically when I write a summer meditation, I read the lectionary texts to get ideas for a topic. This year, I did read them, but I wasn't finding what I needed, and for the first time, I just sort of read through parts of the bible to see if I could find something that would help. I'm not a religious scholar, but I made a connection with Psalm 139 "The Inescapable God" (a portion of which Walter just read).

It describes how God knows exactly what we are feeling, thinking, and doing. It showcases the awe of God's complete understanding of each of us. "You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away." It also demonstrates the psalmist's acceptance that God's ability to know what we thinking and doing is unreachable for the rest of us. "Such knowledge is too

wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.”

God knows each of us completely, but we can't know ourselves, or one another with that same completeness. In open and safe environments like our church community, we're provided opportunities to venture outside of our boundaries and share with each other, which helps to grow our personal and mutual understanding. But in the mainstream of our lives, and generally in our families, we don't typically have a built-in vehicle or framework to explore and advance human understanding.

I may not understand my sister's decisions regarding our parents' belongings, but God does. The Inescapable God knows her completely—what she's feeling, thinking, and doing. Since God knows all that, I figure I'm free to choose to relieve myself of the burden of trying to figure it out. Instead, I can decide to try to perceive my sister through God's eyes. So let me try that. If I asked God to tell me about my sister, I imagine that God would say first about her that she is loving, caring, loyal, funny, and kind-hearted, because... she is. I imagine that God might also say that she is a complex human being with her own conditioning and life experiences that make her uniquely her own person.

Even as a general optimist, I expect more disappointments in my life. It's inevitable, and a part of our existence living in family groups within a broader society. Expectations and reality don't always see eye-to-eye. And when that gap presents itself, my hope is still to be able to find ways to process the emotions of my disappointments. But when no rationale is evident, I know that God has a point of view worth looking into.

None of us intends to disappoint or hurt anyone, but we do it anyway, sometimes unwittingly, sometimes unmindfully. When it happens, I hope that those whom we hurt can try to find a path towards understanding our actions, and if not, I hope they will look to God—who knows us—for some perspective. The exercise of imagining how God perceives someone or something is revealing, illuminating, and I think, can allow any of us to move on when we're stuck in the emotions of disappointment, even though we are, each one of us, complex human beings.

May The Inescapable God be with us all.

Amen.

Sarah, her husband Andy, son Nick, and daughter Julia have been members of the church since 1998. Sarah taught both Nick's and Julia's church school classes for nine years, and is currently serving on the Worship Committee and co-chairing the FCC's participation in the Dwelling Place.

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
JULY 25, 2010

Penny Sparrow

Hosea 1:1 – 2:1

When Judy asked me to preach, I asked her for the lectionary texts, so that I could start to think about what I might speak about. I printed out her response and did not look at it for a couple of weeks. Then one afternoon I knew I'd have to wait in the car for an hour while Sophie was at a music lesson and I stuffed the printout in my Bible. When I took it out to look at it, after reading through Judy's note, I found that I had stuffed it, completely at random, in one of the lectionary readings for today. Since I am trying to be aware of God's nudges from day to day, I took this as a huge elbow from God that it was this passage that I should be using today. I was rather surprised when I started to read it, as you may have been when you heard it read today!

It certainly is a rather startling story. Hosea starts his ministry of prophecy – speaking on behalf of God to the people around him – by marrying a prostitute. Not the top aspiration we have for our children! SO what's going on? Why would he do that?

It's clear that he believed that God told him to do so. And he understood why. It was because God wanted Hosea to be a living and shocking metaphor for the situation in Israel. Hosea had a passion for God and a clear view of the disastrous way the Israelites were headed and he was prepared to speak out about it in a way that affected his whole life.

We are told what the historical context of Hosea's life was. He lived during the reign of the kings. It was many years after King David and the land of Israel had been broken up into 2 kingdoms – Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Both kingdoms ended up coming to very unhappy ends, but the kingdom of Israel deteriorated faster and Hosea lived a few years before Israel was defeated by the Assyrians and the people were taken away into exile. The years leading up to this situation were particularly bloody and unpleasant. The Bible repeatedly says that the kings of Israel 'did what was evil in the sight of the Lord'. And it interprets the decline of the kingdom as the inevitable consequence of this evil. Hosea records this, in our passage today, as 'the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.' In many other passages in the Bible we get a very clear picture of a people who no longer worshipped God, but had taken to worshipping Baal, who was the god of the people around them – the worship of this god promised them agricultural abundance.

So Hosea gets married. A covenant is formed between him and his wife Gomer. A binding, exclusive commitment one to the other. The metaphor is established – God in covenant relationship with his people – Hosea in covenant relationship with

Gomer. We don't know much about their relationship, except that the Scripture suggests that she may have been unfaithful to Hosea. We do know that they had 3 children. God uses the names of the 3 children to express what has gone wrong with His relationship with Israel.

The first child was named Jezreel. Jezreel was a valley in Israel which had been the scene of a lot of the violence in the recent history of Israel. In the naming of the child, God expresses his horror of this violence.

The second child was named No Mercy. Actually the name is even more shocking than that – it comes close to meaning Not Motherly Loved, or even Abused. It reveals the shocking truth that God is saying that He is no longer going to be acting towards Israel in a loving way.

Not My People, the name of the third child, is a striking reversal of the relationship that God had made with the Israelites. Back in the time of Moses, hundreds of years before this, God talked of taking 'My people' out of slavery. He promised, as recorded in Leviticus, that "I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people". But he had also warned them of the consequences of breaking the covenant. And now the people have chosen to take this path so that God can no longer call them My People.

SO what was the message that Hosea was trying to get across by these extraordinary actions?

God had offered the people of Israel the chance for a special, covenant relationship with Him. Like a healthy marriage, this was supposed to be a 2-way street. But the Israelites had prostituted themselves – turned their backs on God, lost sight of the special relationship, looked for their satisfaction elsewhere and stopped holding to the standards of behavior that this relationship required. He used the image of the prostitute Gomer to draw attention to how far below God's expectations they had fallen.

What about the names of the children? We see God's horror at the violence of recent years, caused by the behaviors that were a consequence of their turning their backs on God. We see Him saying that they are no longer going to feel so loved – an inevitable consequence of their turning away from Him. We see Him saying that their actions have broken the covenant relationship that gave them special privileges of relationship with God. The passage talks of punishment, but makes it clear that the results are not because God is vengeful but are inescapable consequences of the behavior of the Israelites.

So, a dramatic story with a clear and uncompromising message to the Israelites. What can it say to **us**?

What was so attractive to the Israelites about the worship of Baal that it would draw them away from the worship of God – the God who had done amazing things for them in freeing them from slavery and bringing them to a Promised Land? The worship of Baal was rooted in agrarian society and involved many rituals designed

to persuade Baal to provide an abundant harvest. It was the dominant religion in the surrounding region and the Israelites had been tempted into it off and on for many generations. So turning to Baal represented a couple of things – one was the desire for security – plenty of food in the barns – and this was a security they could achieve by their own efforts, in this case by following the rituals correctly. The other was a willingness to fit in with the surrounding culture. These desires – for security and to fit in - seem like things that have not yet gone out of style. How easily we rationalize our behavior when it makes life more comfortable for ourselves. How little we question the standards of the culture around us. I remember an occasion when a young man, a friend of our son Patrick's, was discussing with us the decisions about his future which he was considering. We asked what he wanted from his future. To be successful, he quickly said. Malcolm asked what he meant by that and he said 'to make a lot of money'. As we continued the conversation, he started to think a little more deeply. Here was an intelligent and decent young man who had not even thought about what he wanted out of life because he had simply absorbed what is in his culture and taken it on as his own. Wealth, of course, is one of the obvious ways in which we try to establish security. But we all know how life can not be entirely controlled by us. When ill-health stalks us, when the economy collapses and we lose a job, when a child we love loses their way, when we face our own mortality, when our life seems to lack meaning, then we need more than rituals. Then we need God. We need His presence, His guidance, His love. Actually we have needed God all along, but it is when things are tough that the lack of connection with God is really exposed.

What was it that Hosea saw as being of value in the worship of The Living God? It was rooted in a covenant – a relationship – that promised exactly that – a relationship. A relationship with the Living God. Sticking with God represented being different, seeing something higher to which to aspire, and understanding God to be more than a being who requires sacrifices and rituals. I think that we generally recognize our calling to aspire to good things. But have we gone beyond the view of a God who requires sacrifices and rituals? Do we think about our Christian faith as something that restricts our freedom or cramps our style? The message of Hosea is that it is about relationship. A relationship which God is actively seeking and encouraging and to which we have to respond. A mutual relationship of love. One in which God wants the best for us and expects us to be the best we can be for him.

But even in the passage we read today, with its dire messages, it's as if God can't help himself. He follows up immediately with promises of restoration, and even an improvement in the relationship. 'Not My People' will be transformed into 'Children of the Living God'. We read of this fulfillment in the New Testament. John says, in his first letter, 'See what kind of love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.' And in the opening chapter of his gospel he says, 'But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God'. It is clear in many of the writings of the New Testament that this right to be called children of God actually comes through our faith in Jesus Christ and the reconciliation is enabled by Jesus death. Of course, Jesus was born hundreds of years after Hosea lived, so in talking of us becoming children of God, Hosea was prophesying about something of which he knew nothing. But we can

know. We have each been given the opportunity to be considered children of God through our faith in Jesus. We are offered the relationship with God that Hosea yearned for on behalf of his nation. May we each know what it is to be children of the Living God and to live in relationship with Him.

Penny Sparrow hails from the UK, but has been part of this church for 22 years, along with her family.

**EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
AUGUST 1, 2010**

Jena Roy

**Hosea 11:1-11
Psalm 107:1-9, 43**

I had the pleasure of meeting this week with a group from a church in Abington that is planning a year-long celebration for its *300th* anniversary next year. If you've never been to Abington – I hadn't before the other night – it's in Plymouth County – Pilgrim territory. As is true with our church's relationship with the town of Winchester, the gathering of the congregation preceded and enabled the incorporation of the town. The church has a long and blessed history, but has not been without its struggles. Like so many others, their membership is down from the hey-days, and they have many members who are dealing with financial hardship; the church is worried about the well-being of its members and wider community, and also about how to pay for needed repairs to their building, which also houses a large counseling center and numerous AA meetings every week. As we talked, the thing that shone through and rose above their concerns was their love for God and their church, which in turn is the embodiment of God's love for them and the community.

One of the women, Donna, told a great story that I want to share with you...

As will become clear, Donna is an enthusiast – which literally means filled with the spirit of God. She sings in the choir and is involved in every ministry from church school to stewardship. A year or so ago, she sensed that people were getting worn down with their cares, and feeling like there was never enough – time, energy, money, etc. – to satisfy all the needs at or outside of church. Donna had an inspiration. One Sunday morning, she made an announcement that everyone's presence was requested in the social hall after the worship service. Everyone looked around quizzically and asked one another what was going on. Nobody knew, but apparently they liked and trusted Donna enough to humor her. When

the 100 or so people entered the hall, they found that there was a party waiting for them. There were banquet tables laden with food, festive decorations, and places set for everyone. Donna and her family – who have modest financial means – had spent all of their free time that week preparing this surprise.

What do you suppose was the other people's response? They were taken aback. What was going on? Why had no one told them? How were they going to pay for this? And Donna told them, "Don't worry, it's a party. It's a gift for you. Enjoy!"

And then what do you suppose happened? They were flustered and abashed. But we didn't bring anything! How can we possibly accept? And Donna said, "It's okay. God loves you. Enjoy!" And they did. People lingered for hours - eating, laughing, and sharing stories. Everyone had a wonderful time – and I imagine that God's smile was the biggest of all.

Poor Hosea. I don't think he had a lot of fun. Being a prophet can be a tough assignment. As Penny described last week, it was as though Hosea's life was a metaphor for God's relationship with his wayward people. God instructed Hosea to marry a known prostitute, who was repeatedly unfaithful to him. His children were given names that sounded like curses: "God sows" (vengeance that is), "not loved", and "not my people". (For those of you who never liked your name, it could have been worse.) If that's not bad enough, Hosea spent his days venting God's intense and righteous anger. I suspect that he did not have many friends.

And yet – the book of Hosea is a love story. His message is packaged differently, but the essence is the same as that of today's psalm: "O give thanks to God, for God is good; God's steadfast love endures forever."

One thing that prophets and psalmists have in common is that they believe in and operating in relationship with a living God who is vibrantly engaged in their lives and in the world. God is neither abstract nor distant; God is powerfully present and actively seeks mutual relationship with God's people.

While the Psalmists are poets who voice human longing, lament and praise to and for God, the prophets lift us out of our limited human dimension – sometimes by the scruff of our necks - to glimpse the transcendent perspective. It's an awesome but not always comfortable shift – for the prophet or for us, their listeners.

Now, if you spend any time with pre-teen or teen-aged girls, you cannot help being aware of the Twilight book and movie saga. The pressing question on the lips of these young fans is "Team Edward or Team Jacob?" – referring to the handsome leading men who represent the vampire and werewolf clans, respectively. I cannot say that I am invested enough to take sides in that debate, but if a different question were posed to me: "Team Psalmist or Team Prophet?" I would have to say that I've tended to favor the psalmists. I can more readily empathize with them, their human perspectives and range of emotions. While their songs to God are not without pain and angst, with few exceptions, they begin and end with a note of trust and praise.

The Old Testament prophets on average are a scarier, hairier, sun-burnt bunch. Their prolonged, unfiltered exposure to the divine light has made them exotic and edgy. I confess that their tough talk, vivid imagery, tempestuous emotional states and sense of urgency make them daunting fare for this privileged suburbanite. But frankly, their purpose is to stir us up. Prophets are not pastoral in our modern sense of the word; their calling is not to be particularly sympathetic toward humankind. Their loyalty and sympathy rest firmly with God.

Reading Hosea this week renewed my appreciation for the difficult and essential role that the prophets play in calling us out of our comfort zones – that is, when we “zone out” and lose our way, which most of us, like the Israelites, are wont to do from time to time. Whether we like it or not, the prophets come barging in with their “outside voices” to call us to our senses and remind us who and whose we are.

Our passage today is the heart of the book of Hosea, which in turn gives us insight into the heart of God. Whereas much of the book is outwardly focused, this passage comes to us through Hosea as a divine interior monologue. The tone initially oscillates between tenderness and dismay that reveals the struggles of God’s broken heart:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt, I called my son.
The more I called them, the more they went from me.

I taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms;
But they did not know that I healed them.

I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them.

What a beautiful image. And yet, the people rejected their loving, nurturing parent – the God who loved them into being and set them free, the God who humbled himself and sacrificed for them - in favor of their personal interests and pleasures.

God’s dismay gives way to justifiable anger. For a moment, it seems as though God will leave the people to suffer the consequences of their actions. According to the law in 8th c BCE Judah in fact, rebellious children could be turned over to the town council and stoned.

Any of us who have experienced rejection and/or betrayal by a loved one – whether in the context of a parent/child or other intimate relationship – knows the raging conflict that ensues. Our emotions may flare up as anger and lash out in vengeance, but stem from pain that may be complicated by ego, but is rooted in love. In these situations, we have the ability to bring our laments to God, but who can God turn to? While I do not wish to project my limited human frame of reference on God, my own experience makes me feel both sympathetic and humble.

The good news is that God’s love is far bigger than the law and human emotion. Verse 8 is the turning point in God’s soliloquy:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?...
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.

Nothing has changed as far as the behavior of the people, but God seems to allow an internal shift. In a bold move, declaring "I am God and no mortal," God makes a decision and takes a stand, renewing his covenant with us. Fortunately, God's good faith is not dependent on us.

God's lion roar is not wrathful; it is a powerful claim and summons. It is an expression of God's yearning for us to come home. It is ever up to us to make a decision whether or not to heed the call and turn toward God, trembling not in fear, but in awe and wonder at God's power and mercy.

God's love does not let us go. For God, there is no such thing as a hopeless case. God loves us despite of and perhaps even because of our human limitations. God wants the best for us, but loves us even at our worst. Even when justifiably angry, God willingly forgives us and remains faithful and open-hearted. With God, the first and last word is LOVE. And what have we done to deserve this love? Nothing. That's God's amazing grace.

Along with medieval mystic Julian of Norwich, let us "Spend a few moments imagining your imperfections, failures and sins that have been forgotten in God's love." If you can't think of any of your own short-comings just now, I'll gladly lend you some of mine.

How far would God go in that love? "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but may have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The UCC tells us that "God is still speaking..." And that's true, but that's not the best part. Hosea shows us that God is still **LONGING** for us, his beloved children. This blessed identity is a gift of grace and is ours to claim.

One of the most moving experiences that I've had at this church is the laying on of hands, which I first experienced when I was affirmed as a deacon. In this sacred ceremony, we say to one another, "You are a beloved child of God, with whom God is well pleased." It absolutely melts me; I look forward to participating every year. Recently, I had the joy of sharing this experience with my Rite 13 class as we celebrated the end of two years of adventures in growing up with faith.

I don't think an experience that wonderful should be saved just for special occasions. Let's do a modified version of this ceremony now.

Please repeat after me. "I am a beloved child of God." Pause and let that soak in.

Now tell somebody else, "You are a beloved child of God". What the heck – tell 3 people or 7 or everybody. You might even want to move...

That's what we're here for – gathered as the church – to remind one another of God's steadfast and unconditional love: to re-member as the body of Christ.

We're invited to a celebration... all is now ready.

(Communion)

Jena lives in town with her two children and two dogs. She first got to know God in the wilderness of northern Minnesota and Canada, and later met Jesus in youth group. She is grateful for her family and friends, and loves to read and have fun. Jena will be a student minister at the Congregational Church in West Medford this coming year.

**NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
AUGUST 8, 2010**

Steven Lauterwasser

Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16

I'd like to open with a question: what do we know about God? Let's get the easy stuff out of the way first: God is an old man with a grey beard ordering the universe from a throne like a king, and Jesus is white with smooth brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard. Or, so modern imaginings would tend to have you believe. Aside from the fact that the second of these images is verifiably false and the first might as well be, there is something interesting to them: why we have them. Douglas Adams, an avowed atheist, once argued that man created god because man, being a maker of tools and much else besides, when he sat thinking one prehistoric day asked the question most natural to him: who made this for me? Nice cave, nice river, nice trees; it's all very congenial to my existence, so who made it for me? He then naturally imagined someone like himself. I'd argue roughly the same thing: that, working from the notion of God and the reality of his creation, we attribute to him archetypes familiar to us because it's easy, and because it allows us to understand, to grasp the concept and archetype of God. Now hold on to that idea for a moment, we'll come back to it shortly.

Having dealt with those misconceptions we can go further, what else do we know about God? Well, we have a whole book which tells us things about God, which is

rather a better source than our pop-culture conceptions. The Bible has rather a lot to say about God and plenty to say about his son, like that he is God, but some of the most common statements are: God is righteous, he is good and powerful and loving, etc. And there are also plenty of stories which don't just tell us, but show us how God is all these things. But sometimes that very book tells us stories that make us doubt those appellations: for instance, the tenth plague set upon Egypt. No one argues that it was wrong for the Hebrews to be set free, but it might be wondered whether killing every firstborn was a just or moral punishment. One can add to this the generally wrathful disposition of God throughout much of the Old Testament and seeming contradictions may arise with the descriptions I gave earlier.

Now, this has been seen as a problem for a long time, so long in fact that it influenced early sects of Christianity, the Gnostics. They, in their most extreme incarnations, argued that the Old and New Testaments in fact described two different gods, locked in eternal struggle. They saw the Old Testament god as evil, which neatly explained the problems of suffering in the world, and claimed that a different God had sent Jesus to bring salvation. Their ideas do hold a certain amount of attraction, but are somewhat less than scripturally supported. I, however, would like to propose an answer, though it may not be very satisfying.

God works in mysterious ways. This, nowadays, is taken to be something of a truism. An unsatisfying semi-meaningless comfort when things don't make any sense. I know I've dismissed it often enough. However, when one unpacks it and examines the truth behind it, there is something worthwhile to be found. This truth is very simple: God is totally, utterly, incomprehensible to us. We are, in a very fundamental way, absolutely incapable of understanding God. See, we live in a universe bounded by rules and laws. Laws like Gravity, electromagnetism, the principles of Thermodynamics. Now, it's fairly obvious that God is not bound by those laws, being all powerful. However, we also live bounded by a different set of laws, the principles of logic and reason, the law of cause and effect. Even in our wildest dreams, we cannot escape these abstract rules. We can imagine that there might be a world without them, but we cannot imagine what it might be. These are fundamental tools of our cognition. And God is above them.

God created this universe, and so he created its laws. But these laws were not simply physical, they were abstract. And because he created them, he is not bound by them. For us, it is impossible for a thing to be both true and not true at the same time, the basic principle of contradiction. For God, it is a common place, or meaningless. It is often said that our universe is an unlikely thing: just a slight change in the physical constants (an increase or decrease in the gravitational constant, for instance) and we could not exist. More powerful gravity, and the universe would be comprised of massive stars, lacking planets. Weaker gravity, and there would be eternal fields of dust, with no stars to speak of. But this is meaningless for God. God could very well have created a universe in which we would live, which lacked gravity. We cannot imagine how it could be so, but but he could do it. And that is the point.

So what does this mean? I see it as having a huge impact on faith, in two major ways. First, it makes faith more difficult. And second, it makes it stronger. It makes

it more difficult because it completely obliterates so much of what we know about God. All those images we ascribe to him (as those pop culture ideas I opened with) in order to make him easier to comprehend are just the slightest veneer over the yawning chasm of our incomprehension. This is not to say that we know nothing about God, the Bible says just as much as it did before, but it has become infinitely more difficult to use to create a consistent picture of God. This makes faith more difficult because we want to understand before we believe, that was why we created such images in the first place. The leap of faith we want to make is the short one, in which we can see the other side, and preferably make out that the landing is well padded. We want to be able to grasp God, to grasp and understand him as we do the physical things of this world. But we can't.

And this is where we finally connect to the scripture, I'm sure you've all been waiting. The scripture states that „faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.“ And this is why I believe the aforementioned incomprehension makes faith stronger: because this quotation, and the feel of the entire passage, implies to me an inverse relation between the strength of faith and its ease. Faith which is supported, whose object is understood, is easier than one which is not. However, it is the faith which has realized the incomprehensibility of God and moved beyond it which allows one to confess that he is a stranger and foreigner on the earth. One with such a faith makes it clear that he is seeking a homeland. Those with such faith „desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.“ And they are ready to find that, „indeed, [God] has prepared a city for them.“

**TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
AUGUST 15, 2010**

Laurie Roby

**Psalm 139: 1-5: 23-24 from the Iona Book of Worship
1 John: 7-12 from the International Bible**

“Traveling Mercies”

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.

This is how Emily, our host from Wonder Voyage, would start our daily discussions each evening during the Journey to Adulthood's recent pilgrimage to Charleston.

This pilgrimage was the culmination of 2 years with an incredible group of our young people and four dear friends as co-leaders. It was also, for me, just one leg of an amazing personal journey these past few months, which included an unexpected and hurried move in March, being homeless for 6 weeks, finding and then moving into a new apartment in May, my daughter, Helen's wedding in July, and babysitting my granddaughter, Adelle, for a week while Josh and Helen were on their honeymoon. Some people thought I was crazy to go on the pilgrimage so soon after the move and returning just 2 weeks before the wedding, but I had been looking forward to this experience with these people for a long time and I would not have missed it for the world. And in many ways, this pilgrimage and these pilgrims have taught me something about myself, about how I have made my way in this world and how I want to make my way in this world.

Upon my return, I came across Annie Lamott's book, *Traveling Mercies*. This title seemed a fitting way to describe my experiences these past few months. It's a phrase her congregation uses when someone leaves on a trip. They say, "Traveling mercies; love the journey; God is with you; come home safe and sound."¹

Well, I am home safe and sound, and just a wee bit tired. I also feel a little unprepared to speak to you this morning since I am still processing all these events; savoring them; sorting them, and basically just trying to remember them. All the events in our lives that we spend so much time planning for and anticipating. They are over in a blink of an eye and we are left trying to re-capture the memories. But in this act of remembering, two truths about my own life stood out, truths that I have, perhaps, only just begun to believe.

The passages I chose this morning illustrate these truths. Psalm 139 because it speaks so beautifully of our relationship to God. And 1 John because it speaks to our relationship to each other.

Before I share some memories from the pilgrimage, I'd like to start with two personal memories, which have nothing to do with the pilgrimage and yet have everything to do with the pilgrimage.

First a memory from a long time ago, in a galaxy far far away...no, no, no. Just kidding, although some of you might think it was in a galaxy far, far away. It was in Los Angeles. In a hospital. I was 3 and the doctor thought I might have mumps meningitis, a highly contagious disease. While my memory of this hospital stay seemed clear, I always wondered if it was accurate. A number of years ago, I came across my baby book. I was curious to see if my mother had written about this event. When I flipped open to the section on "Childhood Illnesses," the pages were completely filled in and there was a separate sheet in my mother's handwriting inserted between the pages. And here, indeed, was the event that I remembered so clearly and, as it turned out, accurately. I was in a crib in a room all by myself. At the far end of the room was a large picture window and my parents were on the other side of this window. I couldn't go out to them and they couldn't come in. Apparently, and this I did not remember, there was an intercom system, but I was too young to know how to use it. I was aware of my parents' distress and I was certainly aware of my own distress. At some point, my parents left. I remember

crying and wondering if they were going to return. I don't know how long I was in the hospital, but I do remember riding home with my parents and sitting on my mother's lap in the front seat of the car. My mother wrote that I talked about this experience for some time afterward, worried that other children would have to go to the hospital. I do know I tested my mother from time to time. Whenever I was angry with my mother, I would sometimes pack my overnight case and announce that I was leaving home. I would then march out to the curb, and sit myself down and wait for my mother to come get me, knowing full well that she could see me from the kitchen window. One other time, I had been sent to my room. I don't remember why. I climbed out my bedroom window and went to the house of my best friend, Tommy Morton, which was just behind our house. And waited with both fear and hope for the telephone call, and felt such relief when it finally came.

Now I know that my parents loved me and I know I wasn't abandoned. And I know my childhood was a good one. But that seed of fear that was planted so many years ago has been hard to dislodge, especially since I have continued to water it from time to time.

Flash forward to another, more recent hospital memory, just over a year ago. The day my granddaughter was born. I remember arriving at the hospital with my son, George, and Dick, Helen's dad. At some point after our initial hugs and kisses and just looking and admiring Adelle and holding her for the first time, I moved to the window at the far side of the room and took in this whole scene. Suddenly, I felt this blinding, piercing love for my daughter, and I knew that the love she had for her daughter was every bit as powerful as the love I had for her. I also felt a twinge of sorrow and a sense of loss, or the anticipation of loss. I knew that just as my mother had loved me and left me when she died, there would come a time when I too would leave. And I just wanted to stop time in that moment.

Now flash forward to the pilgrimage.

Memory One: It was probably the hottest day we had in Charleston, upper 90's, the sun was out in full force and it was very humid. We were visiting Boone Hall Plantation. As we disembarked from the vans and were waiting for our tour of the main house, we scattered, heading for shade or something to drink. I had wandered off by myself and was walking toward a stand of oak trees on the far side of the house. Now these oak trees didn't look like anything like our northern oaks. They don't grow up as much as out with their lowest branches quite close to the ground. And I later learned that they're called live oaks because they are evergreens. And here perched on the lowest branch of the largest tree like a flock of birds was our little band of J2A pilgrims, talking and laughing and enjoying the shade and each other's company.

Memory Two. On our last day in Charleston, we had some free time. The kids were allowed to go off on their own and we expected them to pair off or at least split up into smaller groups. They all had cell phones and we were instructed to meet back at the old slave market at a designated time. I went off by myself in search of some gifts to take home. As I was headed back on Church Street and

lost in my own thoughts, I heard my name called. I looked across the street and there again was the entire group of kids. They hadn't split up after all.

Memory Three: Towards the end of our last night together in Charleston, we gathered in the lodge for daily discussion. We had dimmed the lights and lit a candle. As was her practice, Emily started the evening with "The Lord be with you." To which we responded, "And also with you." We talked a little about the day's events, and then Emily asked each of us to speak about one person in the group. As each of our young people spoke, I was surprised by their choices, and even more awe struck by the clarity, the honesty, and the tenderness with which they spoke. I should mention here that in our daily discussions, we were often asked to speak to how we had experienced God's presence or seen God's wonder that day, which was difficult for some of our young people. So this final night after everyone had spoken, Judy said to the kids, "I know that some of you don't believe in God or are unsure, but I know that God exists, and I know that God exists in each of you, and I hope that you know that too some day."

Memory Four: Returning to my cabin this same night, a cabin I shared with 3 of the girls, I noticed the lights were off. Now we were leaving very early the next day. Had the girls gone to bed already? This seemed unlikely. I opened the door as quietly as I could to what was like a scene from a cartoon, pitch black and multiple pairs of eyes glowing in the dark, certainly more than 3 pairs. Who's in here? I asked. A voice called out, "Everyone." "I'll be back later" I said and closed the door.

What do these memories have to do with one another? Well, it gets back to those two truths I mentioned earlier and which we heard about in Psalm 139 and 1 John.

Kathleen Norris, in speaking about her own faith journey, said that "over time, I have learned two things...First of all, that it is God who is seeking me, and who has myriad ways of finding me. Second, that most substantial changes, in terms of religious conversion, come through other people. Even when I become convinced that God is absent from my life, others have a way of suddenly revealing God's presence.... It is through Jesus Christ, and the suffering Jesus Christ at that, that God seeks us out and gives us to each other."²

When Judy gave us all journals at the beginning of the pilgrimage, she said that our journey really begins at the end of the pilgrimage. These young people are just beginning their lives and faith journeys. They will be finding their way and their place in this world. And while some of them may not think they are seeking God, I know that God is seeking them and in a "myriad of ways." We all yearn to be known, by God, by ourselves, by each other. And if they don't know or believe that yet, I hope that they remember what Judy said to them that last night in Charleston. And I hope they remember how they cared for each other, how we all cared for each other. When we remember each other, we remember God. "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."³

In closing, I'd like to share the last stanza to a Patty Griffin song, which I have been playing obsessively for the past six months, and it goes like this:

When you're lost and you're found
And you're found and you're lost
When you're dancing with no one around

You're coming home to me, just remember
You're coming home to me⁴

And so fellow pilgrims, traveling mercies to you all; love the journey; love your companions on the journey; God is with you; come home safe and sound.

The Lord be with you.
And with you also.

Amen.

¹ Lamott, Anne. *Tender Mercies* (First Anchor Books Ed., 1999) 106

² Norris, Kathleen. *Amazing Grace* (Riverhead Books, 1998) 294

³ 1 John: 12 International Bible

⁴ Griffin, Patty. "Just Remember." *DownTown Church*. (Credential Recordings, 2010).

Laurie joined FCC shortly after moving to Winchester with her family in 1983 when Oliver Black knocked on her door and explained to her why she might have difficulty finding a Presbyterian church in Massachusetts. Her family has grown to two adult children, Helen and George, a son-in-law, Josh, and a much beloved granddaughter, Adelle. She has served in many capacities in the church over the years and has just completed 2 years with the J2A program, a definite highlight for her. She is currently the chair of the Worship Committee. This is her third year as a lay preacher in the summer services.

**TWENTY FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
AUGUST 22, 2010**

Bruce Lauterwasser

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

Mark 1: 4-8, 14-15

“Turn, Turn, Turn”

Good morning. Once again I feel privileged and delighted to have an opportunity to share some thoughts on faith with you. I am becoming quite a veteran of these summer services, and as the years go by I find that I am able to say what I really want to say in fewer and fewer words. So listen up! This won't take long.

Last Sunday Laurie Roby spoke movingly about how the love of God is reflected in each one of us and in our interactions with each other. As a Christian community of faith we talk often about the love of God and about the grace of God through which that love is offered unconditionally. But it seems to me that we speak less often of the vehicle by which that grace is accepted, the act by which we acknowledge God's grace and allow it to infuse our lives. That act is repentance.

Repentance is foundational to the Christian message, as reflected in this morning's New Testament lesson. And yet we, or at least I, tend to shy away from thinking or talking about it in favor of more comforting concepts like forgiveness, grace, and love. I'm not quite sure why that is, but in my case I think there are at least two factors that have shaped my thinking on repentance, both of which have roots in this morning's scripture. The first factor is intimidation. For the longest time I associated repentance with a pending day of judgment. We read this morning from Mark's gospel in which John comes from the wilderness preaching a "baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" and Jesus himself tells his followers to "repent, and believe in the gospel". For me the most memorable version of this passage comes from Matthew's gospel in which he quotes both John and Jesus as saying "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." That sounds like a threat to me. Get right with God now, they seem to be saying, or you haven't got a chance. But I don't really believe that, primarily because I don't believe that John, or Jesus for that matter, is talking about an "if, then" situation. I believe that when Jesus says the kingdom of heaven (or kingdom of God) is at hand, he means that the kingdom is here now and that we need only recognize that fact and recognize that it is in our actions, starting with repentance, that the kingdom will be made manifest. That understanding makes the idea of repentance a bit less intimidating for me.

But there is another factor, call it the big bang theory of repentance if you like. Perhaps it is because this passage from the gospels associates John's call to repentance with his call to baptism, and our belief along with the apostle Paul in "One Lord, one faith, one baptism", that I for many years thought about repentance

as a grand one shot deal. The thought that I, in a single grand epiphany, could both atone for everything that I had ever done wrong and at the same time promise never to sin again was just way too much. Wasn't gonna' happen. Like the apostle Paul, I understand that I do those things that I should not do and I fail to do those things that I should do. After forty or fifty (or now going on sixty) years, the likelihood of a sudden change in lifestyle is not great. But this view of repentance is deeply flawed as the result of multiple misunderstandings. For one thing, it incorporates an echo of Jesus' words to the woman caught in adultery, "go and sin no more". But did Jesus really believe that someone could sin no more? If he did, why would he tell us to forgive each other not once, but seventy times seven times? And this interpretation also mixes up the meaning of repentance with that of atonement, the idea that we should regret our past sins and do penance for them. While there is certainly an element of this in repentance, the fundamental meaning of repentance is to turn, to turn not so much away from our sins but to turn toward God. To reorient ourselves, to align ourselves with God's purpose, to position ourselves to feel and accept God's grace, this is what repentance is all about. To me repentance is much more about a mid-course correction than about an abrupt change in direction. Or better still, a continuous series of mid-course corrections. For if repentance is not a grand repudiation of our sins and a life changing vow to sin no more, but rather a turning toward God to more fully experience the life that God has intended, then there should be not one, but innumerable opportunities for repentance. And that brings us to the passage from Ecclesiastes.

Nearly 50 years ago, the great American folk musician Pete Seeger set the words of this morning's Old Testament lesson to music. The words from Ecclesiastes are lovely and familiar, suggesting that each of our emotions and activities has its place in God's plan. Not surprisingly Seeger used the opening words of the passage as the chorus of the song. "To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven". That message lays out the theme of the passage and, as a chorus, reinforces the theme after each verse. But Seeger also gave the chorus a twist. It was his insight and inspiration to add the phrase "turn, turn, turn" to the chorus. In my mind, Seeger is suggesting that the underlying message of the scripture is that in those everyday acts and activities of our lives, each of which has its place and season, there is the opportunity to turn, toward God, to repent. As I think about how this plays out in my own life, it is fairly evident to me how central and important repentance has become for me, and how it is made manifest. When I sit in a Sunday school classroom with a group of bright and eager 5th graders, sharing with them my love of our biblical heritage, I am turning toward God. When I stand shoulder to shoulder with a group of young people from our church in the hot sun of a South Carolina field and glean vegetables so that poor families around Charleston will not go hungry, I am turning toward God. When I join a small inter-faith group of singers and lift my voice in song at the bedside of a dying person whom I have never met, I am turning toward God. It is not in the grand and deep crisis moments of my life, but in the everyday activities that I am given the opportunity to repent, to turn toward God and accept God's gift of grace. So ultimately the injunction of John and Jesus to repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand is not a threat. It's an invitation.

Bruce and his wife Karen have been members of First Congregational Church since 1980 when they moved to Winchester. Their four children, Steven (20), Clara (17), Gregory (14), and Hannah (11) have grown up in the church and have been very active in the Youth program. Bruce has taught Sunday School as well as Confirmation classes and has just finished his tenure as one of the first group of J2A (Journey to Adulthood) teachers. Bruce and Karen contribute to the music program of the church through participation in senior choir and handbell choir.

**TWENTY SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
AUGUST 29, 2010**

Jason Parkhill

Good morning. I remember my first summer sermon, several years ago. At that time, I was trying something completely new, so I covered a more familiar subject: the process of writing a summer sermon. This is a clever technique that many first-time lay preachers use. I told the story about how someone first asked me to do the sermon, and how I volunteered, and procrastinated, and waited until the last minute, and then ended up talking about my faith journey, rather than speaking to the text.

The following year, I was determined to break the mold of my prior sermon, so I preached on a common second-sermon theme: everything. I brought in a dozen references from a variety of sources, and spoke about how I viewed the world, faith, life, love, and all of those huge topics. The year after that, I was lucky. My scripture passage was about joy, so I took the opportunity to speak about all things that made me joyful. I encouraged the congregation to seek joy in simpler things, a timeless if well-worn message.

This year, I'm going to try yet another direction. I'm going to ask you to join me on a sort of philosophical experiment. I'm going to propose a difficult hypothetical, and walk through it here with you. It's something that I've pondered occasionally, and I'd like to share my thoughts on it today. Afterwards, I'd love to hear your thoughts on the subject.

The hypothetical is this: What if heaven as we often think of it does not exist? Now, I'm very comfortable with the uncertainties of my faith, with the areas that can't be explained and the questions that can't be answered with complete certainty. And I'm not suggesting that we hypothesize away the other parts of our faith, the belief

in God, the belief that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, et cetera. I'm simply suggesting we consider, purely for sake of argument, that the place in the sky where we go when we leave our physical bodies, where we hang out with our lost loved ones, and wear white all year, even after Labor Day, that this place does not exist. Hypothetically speaking.

Now our scripture begins, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal." Certainly the first part still stands true; amassing treasures on earth seems a wasted pursuit when we know that they simply cannot last, and when we know that human life is finite. We can try to get more toys than our neighbor, but someday we won't be able to play with them anymore.

The scripture continues, "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you?"

By now you are probably thinking, "Well, if we hypothesize-away the existence of heaven, what reason do we have to live our lives in a Christianly way?" But remember I said 'heaven as we often think about it'. I believe that even in the absence of this sort of heaven, there is another definition of life after death that we should consider.

Regardless of your faith or religious tradition, I'm sure you'll agree that we all are affected by all of those who we've met, and that we in turn affect all of those who we meet. My consciousness is a product of all of my influences, and their influences, and so on. So I carry within me a part of my Dad's late father, for example. He served in World War II in a unit with Ronald Regan, Spencer Tracy, and the like. So I have a bit of our former president Regan in me, a bit of Spencer Tracy, and I even have a bit of the great Katherine Hepburn.

Now, I'm not speaking in a loose, new-agey way, but in fact quite literally. The interactions that my grandfather had with others informed who he was, what he thought, how he acted, and how he loved. He distilled this down and passed it along to my father, in every moment that they shared, every Christmas, every school project, every joy and every sadness. These things helped develop who my father is, and how he lives his life, which he in turn passed along to me.

When I think about life after death, it's perhaps more comforting to imagine a perfect utopia where all of my ancestors and friends and loved ones will be there with me, but after a while, doubt creeps in. And that doubt is part of what makes the idea of death so scary. It's what makes us cling to material things, and fight to extend life as long as possible. But what if we think of life after death as less of a literal existence, and instead as a metaphor for the ripple effect that I am having

and will continue to have throughout the lives of the people I know, and the people they know, and so on? I feel that this is far more reassuring.

Our scripture says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." So rather than focusing on our own life, our material possessions, and lining things up neatly for some sort of spiritual accounting at the end of our life (plus five for that time you helped an old lady across the street; minus 10 for that time you cheated on a test), we should focus on the ripples that our actions will send through the lives of others, and into the future. Rather than being judged solely on our deeds, what if we were judged, in the greater scheme of things, based on the effect we have had and are having on the lives of others?

Now, admittedly it is sad to think of letting go of that chance to see our loved ones again. But perhaps we can find some peace in the awareness that in some ways, they have never left us. So much of our value as humans lies in our thoughts, our memories, and our emotions. My memories of my grandfather are priceless, so when I pass them down directly by telling my children of that wonderful man who lived a full and exciting life, who used to cut my hair on a tall chair in his lush, jungle of a backyard, whose house was so full of antiques it was a museum, that man who taught me so many things, and when I pass along my grandfather through my actions, through living life in a way in part influenced by his integrity, his experiences, and his love, in both of these ways I am continuing the ripple effect of my grandfather's influence. So in a way, I am helping to give him that life after death, because his influence will never really die.

I'm not pretending to have any idea what's in store for us after we die. I like to believe that there's some state of enlightenment, that some of our unanswerable questions are answered. It's tempting to imagine a place where we'll get an extra chance to spend time with our loved ones. And maybe that's the case. But as someone who likes to be mentally prepared for other contingencies, I find it comforting to think of us living on in this way. Being mindful of this interpretation gives me added perspective, and a greater appreciation of each moment I get to share with someone.

Stop, and consider the moment that you are in. Live as if this moment is your last chance to pass on a part of yourself to the people that you are with. Is that petty argument really that important? Do you really want to leave without embracing, and saying "I love you"? Even with strangers, when that person that you've never met and will probably never see again pushes past you to get that taxi cab, do you really want your only influence on that person's life to be a mean gesture or angry shouting? We should try to live our lives mindful of our ripple effect on others.

Two hundred years from now, a man is driving along, and sees someone beaten by the side of the road. He pauses. What he decides to do next could depend on a moment you shared with someone two centuries before. That is part of your legacy, part of your life after death. Amen.

Jason has been an active member of this church since before he first began collecting the offering at summer services when he was in 3rd grade. Since then, he's preached in summer services, helped with countless church events and meals, sung in the choir, played in the hand bell choir, worked with the youth group, and co-taught the Rite 13 class. Jason loves to be a part of First Church, and hopes that he can pass on the many gifts he's received in his more than twenty years here. He and Kristen Kohrt will be married at First Church this October 9th.

COMMISSION AND BENEDICTION

The way is long, let us go together.

The way is difficult, let us help each other.

The way is joyful, let us share it.

The way embraces the past and moves toward the future -- but is the here and now.

The way is open before us:

Let us go with the love of God, the grace of Christ,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Thank you to these members and friends who shared their musical gifts with us during the summer worship services:

Karen and Bruce Lauterwasser, Todd Gordon, Alex Rohall, Lucy, Julia and Elizabeth Page, John Fiske, Elizabeth Cooper, the McPherson Family, Sophie & Malcolm Sparrow, Cindy Wancowicz, Bob & Marilyn White, Eric Fieleke, and Nick Gallop

And to these Deacons and others who greeted congregants and assisted as liturgists, in receiving the offering, and in serving communion:

Debra Damren, Chris Noble, Meg Shin, Anne Hoenicke, Karen Roberts, Walter Ogier, Becky Parkhill, Cathy Crabtree, and Bob Lord

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