

## ***No Where to Run***

A Sermon for Morning Worship on Sabbath Circles Sunday  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
September 10, 2017  
Text: Psalm 139:7-14

When I chose this title – *No Where to Run* – for this sermon several weeks ago, I had no idea how prescient it would be for this particular weekend. I had no idea a Category 5 hurricane named Irma would be barreling toward Florida filling the news and social media with stories about folks trying to escape the onslaught of this catastrophic storm hitting Florida even now. Peter and I were watching some of the storm coverage on television last night and were shocked to hear an interview of a guy who lived on Key Largo and was insisting on riding out the hurricane in his home. With his children. He had the home specially built with reinforced concrete walls, elevated on stilts and with a special third floor space that should remain well above any flood waters. After listening to this man describe his fortress of a home and why he was confident it could withstand the storm, the interviewer asked him, but what if it doesn't? What if the walls can't withstand the storm or the ground under the stilts holding the house above sea level start to give way? Then what?

The man responded by stating he was positive that couldn't happen and describing again the way his home had been built. Again the interviewer asked him, "but what if all that doesn't hold

up through the long hours of battering they will take in this storm? What is your back-up plan for your family?” The man stuttered and stumbled in his response, saying again he was sure they would be okay. In other words, he didn’t have a back-up plan. He was committed to the notion that his manmade ingenuity would be stronger than Mother Nature. He was literally leaving himself with nowhere to run if he was wrong. I was shocked at this and I think the interviewer was too. I sure hope the guy’s right but only time will tell.

“Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide.” This was the title and the main refrain of a major hit by Martha and the Vandellas in the late 60’s. Anybody else remember it? As they used to say on Dick Clark’s American Bandstand, it had a great beat and was easy to dance to. It was a song about love but not about love being inescapable. Instead, this song lamented that this woman just could not escape the heartache she knew would be coming her way because of her relationship with this guy. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide not from love, but from what happens when love falls apart.

As I think about Martha and the Vandellas and the guy in Key Largo, I can’t help but notice that the key message both stories offer – the story about the guy convinced his house is indestructible and the song about nowhere to hide when love breaks your heart – is not one of reassurance. The guy is literally

betting his life – and his kids’ lives – on whether or not his house will survive a major hurricane that has already leveled buildings on other islands not that far from his home. Martha and the Vandellas are sure love ends in heartache most if not all of the time. Wow, neither of those stories leave you with a good feeling, a sense of confidence, in the wisdom of people nor of their capacity to love. Neither of those stories points to something beyond the very real limitations of human wisdom and capacity.

But *The Runaway Bunny* does, doesn’t it. Okay, okay, the main characters are bunnies. I get that. But, I think we can agree that the bunnies are in fact very human in their actions and responses. That’s the magic of good stories with wonderful characters, like *The Runaway Bunny*. We know from the outset they aren’t real, but that only makes them more special, more meaningful, more likely to touch our hearts in surprising ways. These kinds of stories liberate our minds and hearts from being too anchored in the reality of our everyday lives. These stories encourage us to imagine what could be, instead of what is.

I have to admit, I wasn’t familiar with the story of *The Runaway Bunny* until recently. I was doing a little research on Wilcox Park for an article I was writing for the *Westerly Sun* a few weeks ago when I stumbled across a reference to *The Runaway Bunny* statue in Wilcox Park. I became intrigued and decided I needed to read this story, especially since I was already planning

to do this sermon series on children's books. Well, long story short, I read the book and I loved it. I mean, what's not to love? Since we just heard the story a few minutes ago, I won't rehash it now. But, it is a great story, isn't it? Why? What did you like about it? What do you remember? (*pause for responses*) I love the mama bunny's persistence. No matter what hare-brained, you should forgive the expression, idea the bunny came up with, the mama always outsmarted him. Finally, the bunny just gives up and decides there's no point in trying to get away from his mama because she has made it clear she will always find a way to be right there with him.

As soon as I read this story, I immediately thought of Psalm 139. "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" the psalmist asks. No matter where I go, the psalmist writes, God is already there. If I go to heaven, God is there. If I go to Sheol or the underworld some people think of as hell, God is there too! If I fly away to the horizon where the sun rises and the sea ends, God will already be there when I arrive. That's the mama in *The Runaway Bunny*. On top of a mountain, in a garden, at the circus, on the sea – anywhere the bunny goes, his momma assures him she will already be there, waiting for him. There is nowhere the bunny can run to escape his momma's love for him just like there is nowhere we can run to escape God's love for us. This love – the unconditional, unrelenting love of a parent

for a child – is how the psalmist describes God’s love for us, even using the metaphor of our being in the womb surrounded by God’s love from before life was even life as a separate and distinct person. Mamma bunny’s love for her baby bunny knows no limits. God’s love for us knows no limits. The one story clearly points to the other and vice versa.

Except for one difference. It’s barely noticeable. You have to know what you’re looking for in order to see it, but it’s there. At one point, in the middle of the story, the little bunny says to his mamma, “I will become a little sailboat, and I will sail away from you.” His momma replies, “If you become a sailboat and sail away from me, ... I will become the wind and blow you where I want you to go.” Hmmm. Blow you where I want you to go. Well, that sort of sounds like God a little. I mean God does have a way of convincing people to do what God wants. Like Moses. Like Jonah. Like Mary. Like Paul. BUT, God never forces people to do what God wants them to do. God always gives a choice. Each person – Moses, Jonah, Mary, Paul and so many more besides – always had a choice to do as God asked, as God needed OR they had the choice to walk away. You cannot hide from God, that’s true. God is always with you wherever you go, whatever you do, or don’t do. God is always with you, whatever you believe or think or feel about God – positive, negative, or indifferent. BUT – and this is the key difference between God and Momma Bunny – God

will always let you make the choice. God gives you complete freedom to choose God, to choose new life in relationship with God AND God gives you the choice to run away. In other words, God loves you even if YOU are the runaway bunny yourself. God is with you before you even decide to run away, and God is there waiting to welcome you back in love when and if you decide to come back to wanting God to be an active part in your life. There is no escaping God and God's love for you. But there is no compulsion for you to accept God's love for you either. That is totally up to you. It always has been, and always will be.

This decision to invest in a relationship with God, to accept God's love for you as unconditional and inescapable, does require something of you. That's an important thing to remember. Making the decision to accept God's love for you is also making a decision to have God be a part of your life more intentionally. And let's be clear that this decision to accept God's love as the gift it is, is a real decision. It's not just saying to yourself, "God loves me. That's nice but so what?" Accepting God's love, really acknowledging God and God's love for you, means committing to doing something to get to know God better. What that is and how you do it is as different as each person because that's just how God works. God loves you – that's step one. You decide to accept God's love once you truly get that you can't escape it anyway and who doesn't want to be loved? But then what? What's the next

step? What's your back-up plan other than just accepting that God loves you? That's great as far as it goes, but you have to admit it's not all that far.

That's the why behind Sabbath Circles©, our new Family Ministries program being unveiled and celebrated today. Sabbath Circles© takes as its starting point the simple reality that God loves us and we want to love God back but we need some assistance in figuring out just how to do that. What does it mean to love God back? What does it mean to have a relationship with God? Well, it means learning about God through intentional Bible study to see how people have understood and related to God for thousands of years. It means praying and singing and pondering together in worship as we feel called to do so. It means working alongside others to share God's love with people who really need it through service ministries like the WARM Center meals, and the Homeless Awareness Vigil and perhaps even some hurricane relief work in the future. It means caring for God's Creation as an act of love for God through the Pollinator Gardens project. And, it means celebrating our love of God together in this community through sharing good times and fun events. Never forget that Jesus loved a good party! But Jesus also wants us to offer companionship and support to each other when times are tough and we feel alone which is the why behind our Prayer Tree and our visitation ministries. This is the why behind our new

“Church Buddy” program kicking off soon. Sabbath Circles© is a program for families with little ones still at home and older folks with time on their hands and everyone in between. Sabbath Circles© is for everyone because God loves all of us and we need to figure out together how to love God back in the way God is hoping for. We need to learn together what it means to follow Jesus. That’s what church is. That’s what church does.

Never forget that there is nowhere to run where God is not already there waiting for you. There is nowhere to go where God is not already there loving you. There is nowhere you are that God isn’t. So, if that’s the case, maybe, just maybe, it’s time to be like the runaway bunny at the end of the story. “ ‘Shucks,’ said the bunny, ‘I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny.’ And so he did. ‘Have a carrot,’ said the mother bunny.” Be an active part of this community, this congregation of Jesus followers, says God, to you and anyone willing to accept the gift of God’s unconditional, inescapable love. Join the circle, we say to you in this church. Be a part of God’s love as we do our best to make it real for the world outside our doors. I think you’ll be glad you did. And rest assured, we have plenty of carrots. Amen.