

Oh Say Can You See

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
during the Independence Day Weekend
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
June 30, 2019 (Originally preached as *Dawning Joy* on July 3, 2016)
Text: Psalm 30

The Star Spangled Banner. How many of you have sung it, or pretended to sing it, before? [pause] Where and when have you sung it? [pause] I guess it's safe to say this is one song we all know, or we think we do. So, let's check your knowledge of *Star Spangled Banner* trivia – just for fun. Who wrote it? [*Francis Scott Key*] Where was he when he wrote it? [*on the deck of a British warship in Baltimore harbor during the Battle of Fort McHenry*] What year did he write it? [*1814*] What year was it designated as the National Anthem of the United States of America? [*1931*] How many verses does it have? [*four*]

Yes, the *Star Spangled Banner* does indeed have four verses, but traditionally only the first one is sung. That is undoubtedly because the other three are just dreadful. Francis Scott Key was an “amateur” poet and those verses are the proof of it. I thought about reading them to you so you could get the whole feel of what he was trying to express but, honestly, it's not worth the time it would take to come close to reading it well. And I can't even imagine trying to sing them! Poetry, however, was Key's chosen artistic medium to express his emotions in the heat of the battle as he wondered and worried all night about whether or not the Fort

would make it through the fierce British bombardment. He knew, along with everyone else, including the British, that if the huge flag with fifteen stripes and fifteen stars was still flying over the Fort in the morning, the battle had been won by the Americans. And we know he did see it and the rest, as they say, is history.

But, just a few more trivia bits about this song which lives at the center of so much of how we see ourselves as a nation. First, it was written as a poem, not a song. It was quickly set to music in the aftermath of the battle, and it was sung to the tune of a popular British folk tune of the time. Second, the Star Spangled Banner was the actual name of that particular flag which flew over Fort McHenry. Third, at the time it became the National Anthem, it actually beat out other equally popular patriotic songs such as “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” and “America the Beautiful.” That’s because the Veterans of Foreign Wars were so upset the United States didn’t have an official National Anthem that they started a petition in 1930 to have the “Star Spangled Banner” so designated. They were successful and President Herbert Hoover signed the Congressional resolution proclaiming it as the National Anthem in 1931.

So, what’s up with all this thinking about the National Anthem this morning? Well, one obvious reason is that this is the weekend before Independence Day and we all know there have been and will continue to be a lot of fireworks displays as a

celebration of this most important national holiday. Technically, all those fireworks displays are supposed to remind us of the price we paid in battle for the right to be the United States of America. We see this in the “Star Bangled Banner” and its most famous line – “And the rockets’ red glare, the bombs bursting in air, gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.” Setting aside that Key was actually describing a battle during the War of 1812 and not the Revolutionary War, this description of bursting bombs as proof that the flag had survived IS what we’re remembering through all those fireworks. We forget that, I think. It’s just fun to set off fireworks and the Fourth of July is what we associate with fireworks, sort of like we associate Christmas trees with Christmas. But just like the Christmas tree does have a deeper meaning for Christmas (evergreens symbolize the new life possible through the Baby Jesus), fireworks also have this deeper connection to the Fourth than we usually remember. They are intended to remind us that our freedom was won at a high cost, a cost that we have had to pay far too often in war after war.

I think what is so compelling about this first verse of Key’s poem is the scene it describes so powerfully. Key and all the Americans with him and in the Fort knew that if they could survive the bombardment through the night, if they could keep that flag flying through the worst the British could throw at them, then they would be okay. They would win the battle and maybe,

just maybe, those pesky British would go home. And, in fact, the war did end just six months later in February of 1815. The heroic battle of Fort McHenry was, in fact, an important turning point in the birth of the United States.

Thankfully I don't think too many of us have had to keep watch through the night for the outcome of a battle to become clear. Peter's dad had some stories about all night vigils during World War II, and perhaps you've heard those kinds of stories from others you know but for the majority of us, that's not an experience we've had. However, I'm also pretty sure most of us have had the experience of being up all night for some other reason. Maybe it was the need to pull an "all-nighter" in college to cram for finals or finish a term paper. Maybe it was the night a baby was born, yours or someone else's. Maybe it was the night a loved one was in an accident, or was seriously ill, in the hospital with you keeping vigil at the bedside. Or maybe it was you in that hospital bed with loved ones keeping vigil for you. Or maybe you just couldn't sleep one whole night, or a series of nights, because you were so worried about your job, or your finances, or your relationship, or your health, or just life in general.

Those sleepless nights, whatever the reason, are not easy to make it through. Minutes pass like hours when it's 3am and sleep is just not possible. I remember one night when I was sitting at my sick child's bedside in a hospital emergency room and I swear

it stayed 3:05am for at least two hours. I don't know what it is about those long, long nights when you're waiting for something to happen, or hoping something won't happen or just wondering if you'll get through whatever looms in front of you. If any of this sounds familiar, then you have had the same experience which the author of Psalm 30, our text for this morning, has lived through and written about.

The Psalms are simply amazing, one of the greatest works of literature ever compiled. Written over a span of five centuries the Psalms are remarkable in that they retain an incredible ability to address our emotions, our concerns, our worries, our deepest thoughts about God, just as powerfully today as they did when they were first written. Composed primarily of two types of songs, hymns and laments, the psalms record the range of human emotion about life with its successes and failures, its ups and downs, its joys and fears. Psalm 30 is a hymn of praise and thanksgiving apparently written after the author has come through some sort of ordeal, most likely a serious illness which could have ended his life. It contains a series of images which repeat a theme – a going down into crisis, the reality of death looming, silence before God and then a rising up, a celebration of new life and praise to God for new beginnings.

This repeating theme of a going down and rising up due to the intervention of God is a powerful one for all of us. It speaks so

clearly to what we've all experienced. "I will extol you O Lord for you have drawn me up ... [you] have restored me to life." "Yes, God, I was at my wit's end," the Psalmist is saying. "I didn't know if I'd make it through all this stuff happening in my life. I didn't know if I'd make it through that long, long night but I reached out and you were there, God. You were there and I know it." This psalm was written thousands of years ago and sung by all sorts of people for thousands of years precisely to remember and celebrate that God is always there, even if not especially when God seems so far away. "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning."

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. Francis Scott Key knew that to be true and we have the proof in the Star Spangled Banner. Each one of you have the proof of it too, right inside yourselves. All those sleepless nights you made it through, all those times you didn't think you'd ever be able to move forward again, but somehow you did. Maybe not perfectly. Maybe not willingly. Maybe not for any other reason than because you had to reach for that morning. But, always, always, always, you made it through that long night, that dark night of the soul. Why? Only you know that. Perhaps because you allowed yourself to lean on the everlasting arms of God and filled with God's grace freely poured out on you just as you are.

And here's the thing. Even if you didn't consciously lean on God, I promise you God was there anyway, holding you up.

The Psalmist knew that weeping is a fact of life because sometimes life is just very, very difficult and painful. It can be so discouraging and disempowering. Life can literally beat us down so that we don't know where to turn or what to do. But God does. God always knows what to do. God always is there, ready to reach back to us when we reach out to God. The truth is, dear friends, God is right beside us through all those sleepless nights. God is right there at the bedside of a sick child or a beloved elder. God is right beside you as you sit in the darkness wondering if daylight will ever come and, what it could bring when it does. Weeping may linger for the night, but as sure as the sun rises each day, joy creeps back into our hearts, often times in tiny, tiny ways, as the sun crests the horizon once more. Each new day carries within it the hope of a new beginning – sometimes so tiny as to be almost invisible, but there nonetheless. We know this is true because God promises us it is. God's grace enables us to hold on until we find it, this strange joy that wipes away tears and carries us into the future, one tiny step forward at a time.

And when we find it within ourselves to trust that this is so, no matter how impossible or improbable it seems, then we will echo the psalmist's words as this beautiful psalm comes to an end:

“God, you have turned my mourning into dancing;

You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
So that my soul may praise you and not be silent.

O Lord, my God, I will give thanks to you forever.”

May the rest of this day, the rest of this holiday celebration week, and the rest of your life be filled always with the gentle glow of hope and new beginnings always possible. And remember, always, to look for God’s abiding presence in your life. “Oh say can you see” Francis Scott Key wrote. Dear friends, when it comes to God in your life, I pray you always can. Amen.