

“God of the Ages”

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
on November 15, 2020 – Stewardship Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Text: Psalm 139:1-12

Yesterday was a picture perfect November day. The sun was shining, puffy clouds dancing overhead as breezy gusts sent random leaves skittering across the parking lot. Yes, it was a gorgeous November day as we gathered for the second of our surprisingly successful pop-up mini-Christmas Bazaars. Spread out in the upper parking lot, table after table held many of our usual bazaar items. Gift baskets galore for every price range, yummy baked goods, homemade jams, butters and jellies, buckeyes, pies – just waiting for folks all too anxious to savor something yummy. And let’s not forget the delightful mini-Christmas trees, the gorgeous wreaths, and the exquisite antique linens. It was a remarkably wonderful day, organized and executed by the truly remarkable people of this church.

I missed last week due to a family event but I was front and center yesterday and, honestly, our folks and the Bazaar just blew me away. At 8am, we had an empty parking lot. By 9:45am, we had a mini-bazaar “popped” and ready for shoppers! And they came, miraculously at a steady but reasonable pace. I confess that in advance of yesterday morning, I was more than a little anxious that if the mini-bazaar drew anything like the crowd size the regular bazaar is famous for, we’d be in big trouble given that current Covid restrictions for outside are for 50 people on premises at any given time. We came close at one point, but never crossed that line. I know because I kept counting folks. Good thing too because, just as I suspected, the Stonington Police drove by a few times just to make sure we were staying under capacity. That was yet another Christmas miracle for this amazing, wonderful, courageous and creative church. I am truly blessed to be your pastor.

I say that in all sincerity because it’s true, especially as I consider how our church has responded to the Pandemic crisis. Our leadership has responded proactively and quickly from the moment when the dramatically shifting realities we faced as the Pandemic first emerged last March. The

church's leadership and her people were right there, ready to respond as the situation required in terms of what we needed to do to keep our folks safe and our church functioning. In those early days, we had no idea we would end up having the entire life of the church up-ended for going on nine months now. But this church – all of you who are active members and friends – were right there with us every step of the way and that has made all the difference.

The bazaar yesterday reminded me once again just how creative, hard-working and dedicated so many of you are. You are real problem-solvers, willing to forge ahead and look for the unconventional answers when the same old, same old just won't work. Hence the pop-up bazaar! I would never have thought of that! But you did – and it's working, better than any of us thought it would. Will we make as much money as the usual bazaar did? Probably not. Did we learn a lesson even more valuable than money? You betcha – we learned we are up to whatever challenges come our way. We learned that if we just work things through, talk things through, *together*, we *will* find the answers we seek. The key word there is "together." We have learned that there is always more wisdom in the midst of our conversations together than in any one person. We've also learned to be patient with each other, to hear each other out, and to speak our truth with kindness on our tongues and in our hearts. It is not always easy and I don't mean to imply that it is. But it is who we are, who we have learned to be, and be assured that this ability to work together in the midst of a crisis such as the one engulfing our country and our world at this moment is the greatest blessing any church can claim. And, dear ones, we have that here, thanks to all of you.

So, what, you may be thinking, does all this have to do with the hymn I chose for our reflections this week – "God of the Ages?" Everything, to my way of thinking. Being able to face a crisis like the Pandemic together, as the people of God in this time and place, is exactly what this hymn is about. "God of the ages, whose almighty hand leads forth in beauty all the starry band" -- that's what I saw unfold on our upper parking lot yesterday morning. There was splendor here yesterday – the splendor of a community of God's faithful coming together to support the ministries of this church so important to them personally and to the community as well.

God's abiding presence leading us forward as a church – "the love divine hath led us in the past ... with thee our lot is cast." Yes, that is us. That is this church and, dear ones, in this day and age that is pretty darned amazing. The hymn continues on with so many phrases echoing our experiences in these strange days of 2020 – war's alarms, deadly pestilence – feel especially appropriate to where we are in this moment when the muddied transition from one national administration to the next is mired in delays and insecurities of a magnitude that is overwhelming at times. Yet, as verse four declares, God remains with us as we dare invite God into the midst of this situation so difficult to fathom – "Refresh thy people on thy toilsome way; lead us from night to never ending day; fill all our lives with love and grace divine." Yes, yes, Sweet Jesus, this is our prayer this day. Guide us forward through the moments when we've reached our limits of patience. Restore in us the sure confidence of your presence in the midst of all the craziness.

I have to confess this was not the hymn I had originally chosen to preach on for today. No, that was going to be the closing hymn we're singing – "Won't You Let Me Be Your Servant." An excellent hymn as well, describing as it does what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus. "Let me be as Christ to you" it says even as it reminds us that we need to receive assistance and support as much as we need to offer it: "pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too." Its admonitions to help each other to "go the mile and bear the load" are even more important these days when too much of life seems so unpredictable and beyond our ability to manage or control. Yet, as I consider our current predicament of being stuck in a limbo on the national level which is not of our own making yet which has potentially dire consequences for our lives with an unchecked pandemic raging and national security at risk, I realized no hymn could be more appropriate for our consideration today than this one – "God of the Ages." Also known as the National Hymn, this beautiful hymn captures so eloquently what many of us see as God's role in the life of this country we love. The simple lyrics envision God as our partner in the great endeavor known as the United States of America. It sings of God's presence in the midst of every aspect of life in our country. It is a powerful and inspiring reminder that we can, and we should, invite God into the midst of every

challenge this country has faced, is facing and will face in the future. In this hymn, God is not a distant, dispassionate observer of our lives but an active partner. This is the God who acts in history, our history.

That's not entirely surprising since this hymn was written to celebrate the Centennial of the nation in 1876. What is surprising is that it was written by an Episcopal priest who was the pastor of a small rural parish in Vermont and he wrote it for that parish. His name was Daniel Crane Roberts and he had served in the 84th Ohio Volunteers during the Civil War. Following the war, he was ordained a Deacon and then a priest in the Episcopal Church and he served parishes in Vermont, Massachusetts and New Hampshire. No one was more surprised than Roberts when the hymn became so popular. In 1901, he wrote, "I remain a country parson, known only within my own small world." One interesting fact about this hymn is that Roberts originally wrote the lyrics to be sung to an entirely different tune known, ironically, as the Russian Hymn, and this was the tune with which it was first published in 1892. It was in 1894 that George Warren, organist of the St. Thomas Episcopal Church in New York City, was commissioned to write the tune – National Hymn – by which we know and sing the hymn today. It was then published in the official Episcopal Hymnal with National Hymn as the tune and has been published as this ever since. (www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymn)

As I considered the lyrics of this majestic hymn, and its rather odd story of origin moving from "Russian Hymn" to "National Hymn," I pondered which Scripture text would capture its unique ethos. It didn't take me long to find its echo in the opening verses of Psalm 139 and its familiar words: "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." Both in the hymn and the Psalm, God knows what is happening to God's beloved and is ever present in the midst of whatever it is. "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" God is with us, always, no matter what. We cannot run away from God, or escape God's action in our lives, even if we want to. It's just not possible because God has been with us, each one of us, from before we were born and through every minute, every step, every breath of life we take. This is true for us as individuals, as well as our church, and our nation. God knows what we are

doing, even before we do it. God knows what each day holds, and God provides what we need to endure. Especially in those moments when we are afraid, in those moments when we are confused and anxious, even in those moments when a raging pandemic keeps us from gathering as a physical congregation. Here's the thing to remember about that— we are God's beloved people wherever we are. The church building is important as a tool for ministry, as a gathering spot for supporting and nurturing each other in faith. But, the building is not the church. We are the church, God's people gathered together in whatever form that gathering takes, online or in person, and how we make a difference in our community, the world.

That's why Stewardship Sunday happens each year. It's our chance to remember who and whose we are, why we do what we do, and how we are able to do it. Stewardship Sunday is about how we, in our beloved church, proclaim our faith in this amazing God “whose almighty hand leads forth in beauty all the starry band.” The starry band? That's us – that's you and me, transformed by our faith in Jesus to be whoever it is God needs us to be in this time and place. Just like the Psalmist says, “If I say, ‘surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.” God is our light in the midst of the darkest times in our lives and in 2020 it sure feels like there have been a lot of those. But, dear ones, it will not stay that way. We know this because our God does not become trapped, mired, enmeshed, overwhelmed, covered up or hidden by the darkness. No, our God is a God who transcends the darkness because even the darkest night is as light to God.

Dear ones, never forget that we are God's starry band destined to bring light and love to the world in whatever ways we can. Sometimes that's a pop-bazaar bringing a smile to people sick of a pandemic. Sometimes it's a simple worship service broadcast on Facebook because it's not safe to be together in the building. Sometimes it's through assistance we provide to people who are cold and hungry with no place to go. Sometimes it's through prayers for people we love and people we don't even know. All the time it's because we gladly claim that we are the beloved people of God in this place where the light will never, ever be overcome by the darkness. Dear ones, let there be light – and let it be us. Amen.