

## ***Celebrating our Fears***

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

September 10, 2023 – Sunday Morning Worship

1<sup>st</sup> Sermon in the Series: *The church as ....*

Text: Exodus 12:1-14

I'm reading this great book right now, *The Flag, the Cross and the Station Wagon* by Bill McKibben. McKibben is a scholar, writer and activist known for his work in the area of climate change. One of his earlier books, *The End of Nature*, published in 1989, is widely regarded as the first book to warn the general public about the sweeping dangers of climate change. I confess, I didn't read that one because like so many of us, I could not wrap my head around the entire notion that climate change could possibly be as catastrophic as McKibben and others like him were proclaiming. Today, with the news filled with record breaking heat waves, impending hurricanes, glacial ice melt and catastrophic rainfalls in normally dry desserts, I'm wishing I had taken the whole notion of climate change much more seriously much earlier. Of course, even more importantly, I wish that people who were, and remain, in positions of power and authority where they actually could have done something about it, actually did something about it. Alas, they didn't ... and here we are.

I must say McKibben's newest book – *The Flag, the Cross and the Station Wagon* – has proven to be that unique combination of enjoyable, informative, and scary all at the same time. I love it and am considering doing a book study on it if anyone would be interested! See me after if you are. 😊 His subtitle says it all when it comes to what the book is about: *A Graying American Looks at His Suburban Boyhood and Wonders What the Hell Happened*. The subtitle is why I bought the book as soon as I saw it because as a graying American, I often find myself wondering what the hell

happened to the America I experienced as a child and a young woman. I think many of us of a certain age have the same feeling! We look around at the world we inhabit each day and realize it's nothing like we remember or expected. I grew up in a neighborhood not unlike the one McKibben describes from his childhood in Lexington, MA. The house I grew up in was built by my grandparents just outside the city limits of Pittsburgh, in a neighborhood where proud and sturdy older brick homes lined the hilly street, many of them originally built by my mother's relatives. I remember walking to school and coming home for lunch until I was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade! I remember having my mom's friends from Women's Club or church as my teachers. I remember shopping with my mom on her rounds which took us from the local butcher shop (George's) to the local bakery (Graham's) and to whichever of the local grocery chains offered the best coupon deals that week. I remember doing my weekly chores if I expected to get my allowance and I remember having so many schoolbooks to carry around that my book bag couldn't hold them all. But no one complained because that's just the way things were. In many respects I, like McKibben and perhaps many of you, had what I look back on as an idyllic childhood that bears almost no resemblance to the childhood my 5 year old grandson is now living.

The simple truth is that the world we are leaving to our children and grandchildren bears little resemblance to the world in which we grew up. Our parents never sent us off to school battling back fears about school shootings. Snowy winters were the norm and a delight. We did our back to school shopping in person with our biggest worry being whether or not what we wanted would come in our sizes. We went to church each Sunday and didn't expect to be entertained, although my mom's supply of lifesaver mints is the only way I survived Rev. Mahard's 45 minute long sermons each week. And

computers of all sizes in every corner of our lives? No. Not even in our wildest dreams. We lived a blissful, snow globe like existence with without knowing it. But it was. Or was it?

The older I get, the more I know it was never real. Oh, my memories are accurate. Just yesterday I talked with Jack and Peter over breakfast about my mom's love of gardening and her love of canning. I know those memories and experiences of my mom were real. I lived them. I also know that not everything happening around me was happy or blissful. For example, there were no black families in my neighborhood, and I never even heard the term "Latina/o" until I was in college. Not that I went to college with any Latinos, but at least I read about them in a class I took. But even with no people of color around, my mother was still restrictive of who I was allowed to play with. She was quick to label people, bless her heart. Any families who were poor or came from the wrong side of the tracks – an actual thing with real tracks in my town – were not welcome in her home. Funny thing was, they were usually the kids I most enjoyed spending time with.

So too, our house was not the idyllic place it looked to be from the outside. I grew up in a loving and safe home, but my mom was miserable having always wanted to "be something." A nurse, a teacher, a singer, a writer – she was all these things, but in her capacity as a stay at home mom. Not the professional role she longed for but could never pursue. Although when I entered 5<sup>th</sup> grade, she decided to go back to work at the local department store where she was immediately successful and rapidly promoted. She loved it. My dad wasn't so happy though. So, he convinced her to make a business out of her lifelong hobby of antiques and that's how they both became antique dealers. As much as my mom loved that business and as good as she was at it, I know it never pushed her dreams of "being

something” away. I know because in her later years when the dementia had a firm hold, she convinced everyone in the nursing home she’d had a long and successful career as a nurse. I’m grateful that Alzheimer’s was able to gift her with a dream fulfilled, if only in her mind.

And that’s the thing with life these days for all of us. If we are of a certain age, we *know* how much the world has changed from the world we grew up in. Some of those changes are wonderful. Others not so much. Even for our grown children, the world they are living in is not the one they grew up in. We are all witnessing the climate change McKibben warned us about more than 30 years ago only now it’s here. We’re experiencing haywire weather and seasons that can’t make up their minds about being warm or cold. On hot days the sun actually feels hostile and the humidity on muggy days is more than oppressive. And as if that weren’t enough, every day the news has yet something more awful to make sure we know about: the latest food recall, the latest political debacle, the latest news about yet something more horrible one church or school or whatever has hidden for years. And the violence is everywhere! Just this past week a nurse at Rhode Island Hospital was assaulted at work in the hospital on the psych floor. He is currently in critical condition in the hospital where he reported to work as usual on Thursday. And I remember vividly the last times I have gone into the hospitals in Providence that there are signs up throughout the buildings warning visitors that guns are prohibited, and threatening language and behavior would not be tolerated. I admit, I was unnerved by these signs. They weren’t present when I worked at the same hospital back in 2010. They are there now, and security guards are everywhere in the buildings. Yet, still a nurse was assaulted. My heart is breaking.

So, I imagine, is yours. Dear ones, you know as well as I do that this world in which we live each day is downright scary. Violence, or the potential for it, feels like it's lurking just out of sight. The weather too feels more like an angry visitor than an anticipated friend as weather events turn deadly more and more. And the political upheaval and divisiveness has crept into everything, or so it feels. The letters to the editor in *The Westerly Sun* are sometimes so nasty I have trouble understanding why the editor, someone I know and respect, would print. But then, I know why. If he doesn't, I have no doubt someone would sue. And maybe win. And then what. There is so much anger, so much fear abroad in our lives these days we can almost touch it when we step outside our homes each morning. We can almost taste it in our morning coffee. We feel it most definitely, way down deep in our souls, leaving us wondering what to do, how to move beyond.

This deeply held desire to move beyond pain and fear, to transcend the daily life which can be so challenging is an ancient human experience. So, it can be no surprise that it turns up so often in the Scriptures. Today we read one of the texts which most reflects this all too human desire to find escape from the world in which we feel trapped. I'm sure it sounded familiar. This is part of the original story of the escape of the Hebrews from Egypt after their sojourn of 400 years there. Originally Joseph and his family were welcomed into Egypt. Joseph was a high ranking official in the government. But, over the years, the pharaohs changed and fear of the others, the non-Egyptians, took over and the Hebrews were now seen as a threat. Forced into slavery, they cried to God to save them and finally God sent them Moses who, along with his brother Aaron, made their case for release to Pharaoh who was having none of it. The plagues came and still Pharaoh refused to let the people go. So, God decided on a

final plague which would be so horrible that Pharoah would be left with no choice but to release the people. This was the visit of the angel of death to all the households of Egypt which would see the deaths of all its firstborns.

Yikes! This is definitely one of those stories that folks read in the bible and think what kind of God would do such a thing! What kind of God would kill some people and animals just to force a particular desired response? Does this kind of action really describe a God of love? No, obviously it doesn't. But it's important to remember that a God of love was not at all the point here. What these writings reflect is what the people imagined God to be at this moment when they needed God most. They needed and they describe here a God of incredible power, a God whose power was far greater than Pharoah's who was seen by the Egyptians as a god. This horrible brutal action by the God we learned about from Jesus in Sunday School is totally reflective of the time and context in which it was written, a time when brutality was the ultimate arbiter of reality. If God needed to make the case that God was the one and only God, this was certainly one way to do it. And, as the text itself makes clear, it is a story that would stand the test of time, remembered and celebrated always as the moment when God did the unthinkable in order to free God's people from the oppression they could no longer bear.

This story we read today is the foundation of the Passover celebration from which our own sacrament of Communion which occurred for the first time during Jesus' final celebration of the Passover with the disciples. In today's text we see the original and very detailed instructions God gave to the people about how they were to prepare for this final plague if they themselves were to survive it. In effect, we are reading about how the Passover celebration came to be. We also need to note that this original "Passover" of the angel of

death, and what the faithful Hebrews needed to do to escape it was also a test for them about listening, trusting and doing as God instructs. In order to be worthy of escaping captivity in Egypt and the new life as God's people in the promised land, the Hebrews had to prove they would be who God expected them to be. This means they had to confront their fears about what was going to happen as the angel of death passed over and move beyond them. They had to trust that the new life God promised was on the other side of this horrible, terrifying experience they were about to go through. So, they did as God instructed. And they survived.

Interesting to note is that the instructions for remembering this event, celebrating it in years to come, was part of the original instructions. This celebration of surviving a terrifying experience, being both the slavery in Egypt and the plagues including this last one, was always part of the plan. That is stated quite clearly in verse 14: "This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance." This is really quite extraordinary. Celebrating fear, and overcoming it, was always part of God's plan for this moment, a seminal event in the history of the world. Still today these ancient lands where the story of Exodus played out are in the headlines as places where justice is elusive and fear is rampant. Nothing has changed and yet everything has changed since the night of the first Passover. Life goes on, despite the fears and the changes, despite the wars and the plagues, despite all the bad things that have been happening to humans for millennia. Sometimes those bad things just happen and sometimes we humans create those bad things and then stand aside to let them do what they will. The thing is, though, that God is in the middle of all of it, if we are willing to look for God in the unthinkable.

Dear ones, that is part of what we do here in the church. At its best, the church should be a place where one's fears can be confronted in the safety of a loving community. This happens every time we pray for folks going through tough times, every time we reach out to church family members who have received unthinkable news. The church should also be a place where we can explore those fears confronting ourselves, our families and our communities. And, let's be honest, fears are everywhere around us. People are angry and hurting. People are afraid, desperate to change things with no clue how to even begin. This is where the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – our church – can have such a vital role. Our little church can be and has already been a place where we organize to confront the injustice and inequities we encounter everywhere. It can be and has already been a place where we bring gifts of food and clothing and hope for the people who need it most when society has turned its back on them. In other words, dear ones, the church can and should be a place where fear is not so fearful that it disempowers. Rather the church must be a place where fear is accepted, understood and even celebrated as it is every time we gather around the Communion table. That is our call from God and our challenge from our community.

I'd like to end this morning with an observation from Bill McKibben about just what the church's role might be as our world becomes ever more different and fearful than we have known it to be. He writes,

“... so it's worth imagining (at least if you are part of the dwindling band still interested in the cross) what a nimbler small-c church might look like. Whether, to stretch the analogy, there's a possibility of a (nonviolent) Minuteman Christianity arising, one that's more flexible, more rooted and *more dangerous* in the best sense of the word. A Christianity that might – in the new justice moment, the opening that appeared after the murder of



George Floyd and as the planet overheats – play a useful role. Not a decisive role, but a useful role.”<sup>1</sup>

Now that sounds promising! A useful role is what every church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is striving for. A useful role is within our reach. I think we got this. Do you? Let’s consider the possibilities together. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Bill McKibben, *The Flag, the Cross and the Station Wagon*, ©2022, Henry Holt and Company Publishers, p. 128.