

“Starting Strong in Challenging Times”  
August 20, 2023

Lamentations 3:21-24  
Acts 4:32-35

This is certainly one of the best Sundays of the year. We stand on the edge of a new school year. The campus and the downtown are filled with students ready to get going. Parking is once again at premium, but we hardly mind that inconvenience today as we welcome new students and returning students and look forward to the months ahead.

As we worship, we sing what one member calls, I believe, “the loud, pounding workers song”—that wonderful hymn for the beginning of the school year, “Earth and All Stars—in which loud boiling test tubes join with loud cheering people and the rest of the loud creation in singing loud praises to God. I recently read a brief article by a scholar who thinks the word “loud” is overused in this hymn, but a university can be a noisy place. Put on your earplugs and get to work!

If you are a student new to this loud and bustling university and new to Iowa City and this congregation, we are so glad you found us. We’ve been here in this building on this corner for 155 years waiting for you to show up! If you are a student who’s worshipped with us in other school years, we’re glad you are back. And the rest of you—professors, teachers, administrators, retirees—and everyone with no connection to the university whatsoever, we’re glad that you are here as well. Even those of us who are not a part of that vast educational enterprise know how the school year influences the lives of everyone in this community. It is another beginning of the year for all of us.

We come together once more after being dispersed all over Iowa and all over the United States. Certainly, there are many other ways to spend this time—from sleep to sports, from brunch to books, the options are almost limitless. But we know that what happens here in this Sunday morning hour can give shape to the rest of the week—and if we engage in worship on a regular basis, it will shape not only the semester, it will shape our lives.

Often enough, someone walks into this space and feels something that they don’t always feel in churches—a sense of *presence*. It has been described as the result of the 155 years of prayer in this place. It is felt on mornings such as this. It is felt in the late afternoon when the sunlight streams through the western stained glass—a feeling of the “holy”—of something beyond the usual. For some, looking at the Tiffany window creates a feeling of being taken from this sacred space into the world of natural beauty and creation’s wonder.

And then there is just that—nature’s beauty. The recent meteor shower, the super moons earlier in the month and later this same month, the vastness of the heavens, the wideness of the prairie—all these speak of the God who created and is creating still.

In this place, as a congregation, we affirm that we ultimately know this God in Jesus. All year long, really, we announce that strange Easter message that even death could not contain the crucified Jesus who was God with us. And if death cannot contain God, then we have the hope—the *confident* hope that God *will* be with us—in our joy and sorrow, in all that is a struggle, in all

that feels to us like a time of testing or trial, in all our fear about what we might lose in the future or grief over what we have lost in the past.

As a congregation, then, we are bold and courageous in seeking justice, in loving kindness, and in showing mercy, because the God who is not contained is the God who is present for us in all the places of our lives.

It is, I think, a matter of expectancy—of putting ourselves in those places where God might be encountered: places of prayer, places of action, places where simple human decency might be shown to our neighbors, known and unknown, places that give free reign to the imagination and to the creation of beauty, places of exacting science and open exploration of truth.

Here and there—in this sanctuary, in the world—God is present to us as we seek to make ourselves present before God.

So, I want to tell you something this morning. And I don't say this lightly. In recent months I've had a sense of the Spirit of God working in us and among us and through us here in this place—leading us into something new. Something *different* has been happening here since last spring. Those who have been around here know that I usually don't talk like this. And yet, you might be thinking something similar.

As Congregationalists, we are not quick to say “*This* is what God is doing.” We are not quick to say *just how* God is acting in our time.

But at Congregational UCC we maintain an open and receptive spirit. So, in these days that are often challenging, when despair seems to wait around the corner, I have a growing sense that God's mercies are indeed new every morning and God's faithfulness is great.

This is our tradition. We seek to be open to the new ways that God works among us. We are grateful for the past that we have. But we do not live in that past. We are not captive to what was or even to what is.

Gatherings such as this one have been so commonplace for so long that we often give them little thought. We can gather anytime, but we Christians gather especially, consciously, on this first day of the week to mark the resurrection. Each Sunday is for us a little Easter. When we meet together, we sing, we pray, we hear scripture read and proclaimed, we offer gifts, we sit in silence or surrounded by music, always surrounded by one another because Christ is risen—a phrase we're always trying to better understand. Despite our own worries and fears and trepidations about the days ahead, we will go forward into those days with a kind of confidence that we would not have had on our own, a kind of confidence that we know, really, by the grace of God. We call this faith in the power of the resurrection. It is a sense—sometimes quite strong, often shaky—that love triumphs over hate, that life conquers death, that we need not return evil for evil but that we are able, in all things, to seek the good.

Admittedly such a faith waxes and wanes, and we do those things we should not have done and we leave undone the things that we ought to have done. We need the deep forgiveness that comes from others, that comes from ourselves, and the forgiveness that comes from God.

So it is on Sunday, especially, that we gather because Sunday especially reminds us that Christ is risen indeed and that in the presence of one another we have received from God the power to begin anew.

I ask you to not take gatherings such as this for granted or diminish their importance. In places around the world, people of faith are kept from gathering. It might be Muslims in China or Jewish people or Black Christians in our own nation who worship with a sense of fear or uncertainty. Still, people keep meeting even with the risk because of our basic human need to be together, to support and care for one another even in the face of very real threats.

Shortly before the pandemic started, I read Douglas Rushkoff's book, *Team Human*. I came back to it recently as we are now, well, wherever we are in the pandemic. Rushkoff, who studies human autonomy in our digital age, points out that "Humans are defined not so much by our superior hunting ability so much as by our capacity to communicate, trust, and share."<sup>i</sup> We are social beings, he says, who also "enjoy exercising free will and independent choice,"<sup>ii</sup>—which sounds a lot like a description of Congregationalism and our valuing of both autonomy and connection.

According to Rushkoff, in our time, the biggest threat to our impulse to connect with one another is neither the force of governments nor the threat of violence but the new digital media landscape in which we live.

While television once brought us together even on a global scale, in our digital age, we are slowly coming to the awareness of how the internet in general and social media in particular work to "atomize and isolate us from one another." Our smartphones are keeping us in a "constant state of distraction," and FOMO—fear of missing out—keeps us tethered to our devices.<sup>iii</sup>

You know that computer programs ultimately reduce everything to a series of ones and zeros, on or off. And our society is ever moving toward the same binary choices: Rich or poor? Black or white? American or foreign? With us or against us? The middle ground seems to disappear beneath our feet. Rushkoff's disturbing conclusion is becoming more and more obvious: "The internet reinforces its core element. It makes us take sides."<sup>iv</sup>

How radical, even countercultural, then is a gathering such as this: people of different generations, backgrounds, economic statuses, and national origins come together for a common purpose, refusing to be simply on one side or the other.

That is the light that continues to shine brightly from this corner.

As a congregation, we understand the importance of our efforts to care for creation, to curb gun violence, to root out the racism that grows so deeply, to affirm all people in their sexual orientation. We are committed to welcoming the stranger, sheltering the homeless, feeding the hungry. We will continue to direct our energy, our resources, and our time toward these and other concrete expressions of the love of God in the world. We will follow the advice of the prophet, seeking justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God.

But *this*—our simple and profound gathering on the first day of the week, our coming together on the day of resurrection—*this* is what equips us for doing everything else. Our face-to-face

human contact, the global connections that we make through streaming our worship services, our embrace of all the differences and contradictions in this congregation, our honoring questions as the way of Jesus Christ continues to be made known to us—these are the foundation of our hope in the face of all that is atomizing and splintering humanity in this time. It is the gift the church in general and this congregation in particular has to offer to the larger community, our nation, and the world as well.

Again, if you are new here today or in recent weeks, welcome.

If you have returned after being away, welcome back.

I invite you to return again and again, to make worship here a part of your way through the coming months. The truth is, we need you. No, not in a desperate way. But we would rejoice if you would receive all that we have to offer and become a part of this generous gathering.

I invite all of you to receive this gift, to be a part of it, and to share it with others in the months ahead.

Together, I think we will discover anew that the mercies of God never come to an end.

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<sup>i</sup> Douglas Rushkoff, *Team Human*, pg. 17.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 20.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 82-83.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 85-86.