

*A New Creation*

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*United Church of Strafford, Vermont*

*June 13, 2021 Third Sunday after Pentecost*

*Psalm 130:1-2, 5-7; 2 Corinthians 4:16-18; 5:6a, 7, 16-17; Mark 3:20-35*

**Call to Worship:** Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Third Sunday after Pentecost.

Imagine the Bible not as dogma that you have to believe in order to go to heaven, but more like a ship's log or a family journal handed down from generation to generation as a record of progress and struggles and triumphs and setbacks and resurrections and through it all, growth in wisdom. Our ancestors journeyed over thousands of years always yearning toward the promised land, the realm of God on earth where people will be one with God and one another and the earth, living with compassion, justice and lovingkindness for all.

Think of the Bible as the voices of people who went through pandemics and social upheavals and natural disasters, times when they had to take in refugees or when they themselves were refugees, times when chaos or war or oppression descended upon them, and times when health returned, when peace came, when they had a sufficiency, when their gardens and orchards bore abundantly and were beautiful to behold, times when their sanctuaries were full again.

These were people like us, and they thought of us, just as we think of generations to come. They wanted us to know what got them through and what they learned. Over the years people added to the Bible their own music and poems and art and new spiritual teachings. We have a wealth of comfort, guidance and encouragement from the Spirit speaking through millennia of humans hearts.

Let us worship together full of gratitude for all the gifts that can help lead us through our own stretch of the journey toward the promised land...

*[the sermon begins on the next page]*

## *A New Creation*

We face challenges, changes and struggles in our lives as individuals, as a church, as a nation and as a planet. Changes seem to come faster and the stakes in our struggles seem higher, but we are not the first to face such challenges, and we are blessed that our ancestors have left us gifts to help us find our way through loss or feeling lost, so that we can emerge into the promised land of something more like God's realm on earth.

Today's Psalm says, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O God." That cry has been echoed in music and literature for three thousand years, and when it was written it was echoing a cry from the dawn of human consciousness.

I imagine it going back even farther, out of the depths of the ocean where the first living cells struggled to evolve, out of the depths of the solar nebula where the sun and earth passed through violent transformations, and out of the depths of time—the cry that our most sensitive radio telescopes hear from the birth of the universe.

Out of our depths we cry eternally, but at the end of that same Psalm we hear a beautiful response, and it is equally eternal. We know it is true because without the fact of it we would not exist. It says, "Hope in God! For with our God there is steadfast love, and great power to redeem."

Our ancestors experienced the Spirit that flows through all the universe and all time, that flows through our own hearts, and they recognized it as a source and a force of love and redemption.

The early followers of Christ were Jews who worshipped on Saturday, but they extended their worship into Sunday because it was the day of resurrection, celebrating the recurring triumph of love and redemption moving ever closer to the sacred way of the Holy Spirit.

The letters of the Apostle Paul cry out of the depths of prison, floggings, church conflicts, even the depths of the ocean in shipwrecks. The Corinthian church was a particular source of anguish to him. The main street of Corinth was lined with wine shops. The high hill over the city was the site of a temple to Aphrodite which historians say was served by a thousand sacred prostitutes. The city of Corinth was a center of decadence and commercial trade and cosmopolitan intellectual culture.

The church Paul founded there served like a spiritual 12 Step Group offering a way out of self-destructive material addictions, but the selfish pursuit of privilege and pleasure kept corrupting the egalitarian Golden Rule of compassionate love that Paul taught.

He wrote letters of tears, of rebuke, of frustration, calling the Corinthians back to the way of love, back to the spiritual dimension that permeates everything in the material realm, the unseen that lives within the seen.

He wrote in today's passage, "We do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.... So we are always confident...for we walk by faith and not by sight."

This is not dualistic. We do not have to choose between the spiritual and material realms, we do not have to reject the flesh. Our bodies are temples, Paul taught.

What we need to do in order to sanctify the material realm is focus our entire lives on the Spirit. Once we are in that Spirit that is in Christ, then, Paul says, "There is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

This spiritual focus is the golden thread that leads through the chaotic wilderness of challenges, changes and struggles to the promised land of a new creation, a new way of being.

Today's Gospel story shows how this thread led Jesus to find a new way to structure our lives and society to fulfill what the Spirit of the universe longs to create.

But imagine what it was like for Jesus' mother and the siblings he grew up with, to arrive essentially at the church door where he was preaching and attempt an intervention on the grounds that he was insane—essentially to institutionalize him by pulling him back into the family.

Imagine the pain of a mother terrified by what could happen to her son, and hurt by his refusal to conform. Imagine the pain of the son to see that the people who knew and loved him best not only did not support his life work but thought that the voice of the Spirit he heard was a delusion of madness.

Things got worse. Representatives of the governing religious and political authorities learned about Jesus and accused him of being Satanic. This was an extremely dangerous situation. Jesus could be declared an impure outcast or be imprisoned or executed. His family saw it coming and tried to restrain him.

You were nobody or worse than nobody if you no longer identified with your family and your Jewish culture. Yet Jesus insisted that he was not positioning himself outside, but at the true center of family and society. He insisted that the inside was what needed to change. He called people to stop blaspheming the Holy Spirit and start following it, no matter how foolish or revolutionary it looked. He called people to stop identifying themselves by pride of family or nation, and instead identify as one thing only—as doers of the word of God. That is the family, that is where we find true oneness, within the flow of the Spirit of love and redemption, because no one is left out of that flow, that family, that beloved community. The Spirit is in all beings and makes us one.

Jesus was making a huge change in his life, and he was asking his followers and family and society to change. He is calling us to change now and allow ourselves to be Spirit led, to dare to be different from what our culture is and what we have been.

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O God.” Imagine Mary praying that at night, so worried about her son. Imagine Jesus praying it up on the mountain, exhausted by his ministry, with his loving, wide-open heart wounded by the conflicts and attacks springing up around him.

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O God,” we may be praying ourselves, because of the challenges, changes and struggles we face. We have lost much, and we could easily feel lost in a world turned strange. And yet we also hear the answer to our cry: “Hope in God! For with our God there is steadfast love, and great power to redeem.”

“So we do not lose heart.... for we walk by faith and not by sight.”

If we follow the Spirit of Christ, we can rest assured we will find our way through the wilderness and reach the Promised Land. A new creation is coming to birth. “Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” We need to walk in that faith.

Let us pray in silence, asking the Holy Spirit for the courage that our challenges, changes and struggles require, and for the faith we need to follow the Spirit wherever it may lead...

***A Haiku by Herbert Goertz:***

The bear stood upright,  
his paws on the porch railing,  
sniffing the fuchsia.