

In a recent survey of our UCC churches, the most prominent experience reported was “exhaustion. Endless needs and frustrations, less sleep. (Even last night, I was worrying if the heat would turn on this morning, so I went to the church, and sure enough, the thermostat was flashing “Lo Battery!” And yesterday, *after* the sound technician left, I turned one speaker off and started hearing a radio station coming clearly through the other speaker!!!) Heating problems, sound problems, but we stay faithful to spreading God’s word, and this Meetinghouse seems to be the safest, largest place to be right now, in order to spread God’s word, and not anything else!

So, you know the old saying: that a preacher’s role is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable (role of a pastor and a prophet), because the words about God in the Bible oscillate between comfort and challenge. Well, I think we need more of the COMFORT part these days. And where do we find Jesus in this morning’s story about a storm? Asleep in the back of a boat! One gospel writer specifically says asleep on a cushion. Probably before the winds and rain came, Jesus arranged cushions or pillows into a nice little place to have a nap! He was faced with endless needs, people in need of physical and emotional healing, so he needed some extra rest. We read about Jesus going away to quiet or lonely places for *prayer*, but in this case, it was just a basic nap! Yes, a little shut-eye, some rest, healing sleep!

We find encouragement to get off the treadmill of life, from many religious and literary sources. One of the best known, especially to people from Massachusetts, would be Henry David Thoreau. “I went to the WOODS to live deliberately, to front the essential facts of life.” He wrote a whole book entitled “Walking!” Many of us do love to walk around Walden Pond quietly, or in Maudslay Park for a meditative time. Even the rail trail can be solitary enough to be meditative. I’m not advocating escape from the world, but simply the rest and transcendence that helps create more focused action.

The Buddhists speak of “effortless motion.” The Hindus of TM speak of “relaxed awareness.” T.S. Eliot speaks of a “still point in a turning world.” We will always have plenty of projects and “To Do” lists, but a life of prayer and meditation will help us work and move with a quiet center, with purposeful action, with a focus on goodness, mercy and love in all that we do.

If the center of our being is bombarded and overwhelmed with stress and anxiety, (such as now with news from so many sources), the saying of the Psalm 127 is true: “It is in vain the you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for God gives to his beloved sleep.” Jesus echoed this truth with an invitation: “Come to me all who labor and are heavily burdened and I will give you REST!” Psalms 23 and 46 both speak of the value of stillness and quiet places (“He leads me beside still waters, and Be still and know that I am God.”) Many of you know that I chose to write a song about those three scripture verses, entitled simply: BE STILL. Again, this is not a formula for escapism or idleness; our cultural work ethic and commandment to love as action is too engrained in us all. Yet some large corporations have included exercise and meditation rooms and we are learning to get off the treadmill of “anxious toil,” to let go, and let God, to live with more trust and more patience.

Speaking of grace and letting go, I was enjoying one of Ken Medema’s living room concerts this past Thursday eve, and he told a story about going to a large national convention of music directors, (of colleges and churches, and prestigious choral societies). He muses that many in the room were undoubtedly comparing themselves to others.. “Gee, if I only had that kind of money and budget,” or “If I only had a choir that size, what wonders I could be doing” etc. Then he tells that the keynote speaker, some famous music director, came up to speak, and first went over to a piano and started plunking out the simple notes to “Sing!, Sing a Song,” a children’s favorite from Sesame Street!!! Part of the lyrics are:

“Make it simple to last your whole life long. Don’t worry that it’s not good enough for anyone else to hear, just Sing, sing a song! La la la la la, la la la la la la,” Then the keynote speaker said three most memorable words: YOU ARE ENOUGH, “you are enough!” These are words of GRACE, of letting go of competition and comparing ourselves with everyone else, just knowing that we are enough! It is reminiscent of the Jewish story of a Rabbi meeting God at the end of his life, all apologetic, saying he was sorry he did not do the things Moses did, and God’ response was: “I never asked you to be Moses; I only asked you to be Rabbi so and so!”

We can only do our best, with the specific gifts we have been given. Anna May Guyette says it all the time: “Just doing the best I can with every day, and being grateful.” Surely we all are experiencing some fatigue: compassion fatigue, covid fatigue, elections fatigue, numbers fatigue... too many numbers about deaths and votes, hard work to make sense of them all. Our UCC writers group offer good suggestions: Martha Spong writes about the pandemic uprooting all daily schedules, and how her early morning devotional time went by the wayside, and is now a late evening time with God. We need the “Quiet Time” even more than ever. Rachel Hackenberg is a writer I have enjoyed, so I will quote her exact words about the lengthening nights... as we move toward winter: “Noontime sun is casting long shadows...I’m grateful for the lengthening nights. Daily upheaval has an overwhelming intensity, election news, pandemic news. Meanwhile the moon is whispering a necessary truth: Here, for all, are the lengthening hours of the night, a gift for repentance and restoration, for quiet and calm, for dreaming and releasing. We need the moonlit hours, as much if not more than the sunlit hours, for the work at hand. Because what will be the value of virtuous victory under the sun if we kill ourselves (and others) in the process? Here is the sun willingly waning, so that our agitated spirits might do the same. O God, give us this day our daily rest!

We all need the gift of the moonlit hours, the longer evening hours to stay indoors quietly (curfew or no curfew). We can use more time at home to find quiet times. quiet times to listen for that “still small voice” that the prophet called the Presence of God, or that Simon and Garfunkel called the “Sound of Silence.” (*Hello darkness my old friend, I’ve come to talk with you again. Because a vision softly creeping, left its seeds while I was sleeping. And the vision that was planted in my brain, still remains, within the sound of silence.*)

Quiet times with less TV, less radio, less news,
Quiet times... even if no voice or vision comes... just quiet times of sheer rest, extra sleep, deep rest.

I’d like to play now my song, that many of you know, for one kind of prayer or meditation, or rest. I hope you can relax into it, maybe close your eyes, maybe hum or sing along, as a restful meditation. Based on Psalm 23 and 46 and Jesus own words, it is simply called “Be Still.”

Be still and know that I am God (3x), Be Still.

Follow me beside the waters still (3x), Follow me.

Come to me and I will give you rest (3x), Come to me.

Live in me, and I will live in you (3x), Live in me.

Be still and know that I am God...

Be still and know...

Be still.....

just Be.

Thanks be to God for the gift of quiet rest, Amen.