

GOD IS OUR SALVATION – Nov. 13, 2016,

North Congregational Church, Rev. Dr. Mary E. Biedron

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 12:1-6(2) **Isaiah 12:1-6 (NRSV)**

UNISON: Revelation 21:1-5(a)

HYMNS: 1) #8 Praise to the Living God 2) #609 Now Is the Time Approaching 3) #21 God Reigns O'er All the Earth

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: Be glad and rejoice, for God is always creating us anew.

People: New peace, new love, new life—these are the promises of Christ.

L: Thank the Lord, and call upon God's name!

P: We will sing and shout with hope and joy, for God is with us here.

INVOCATION AND LORD'S PRAYER

O Holy God, be our strength and our shield, so that we may be your steadfast followers. Mold us to be courageous prophets of change and hope. Be our guide and our shepherd, so that we may walk this challenging journey open to your new creation, remaining true to your calling, and living out your teaching. We pray in Jesus' name: "Our Father..."

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THE SERMON – "God is Our Salvation"

The singing of the Battle Hymn of the Republic as our anthem today, and the solo which also dates to the Civil War, are an important reminder that this is not the first time that we've felt like such a divided nation.

Quite a lot has happen this week! What had been an ugly ordeal of a Presidential campaign has now become an axial time—whatever your vote, whichever candidate had won, CHANGE is at hand, for all of us. In the swirl of change, we may be a divided nation, but we are NOT a divided church, even though our differences have at times left us feeling a little battered.

So what do we do now? That's the question for today. And as I considered this sermon, my mind kept going back to the Biblical story of Esther. It's set during the Persian period, when many of the Jews who had been exiled were still living in Babylon, now controlled by the Persians. Esther, a lovely young Jewish woman, has been taken into the king's harem, and made

a queen. The bad guy of the story, Haman, has taken offense at Esther's uncle Mordecai, who won't bow to Haman because he bows only to the God of Abraham. Haman plots to have all the Jews killed in retribution, beginning with Mordecai, who goes to Esther and asks her to persuade the king to change his support of this terrible act. She is afraid. She is not sure she can do this. And Mordecai says to her,

"For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. **Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.**" (Esther 4:14) And ultimately, Esther is successful in reversing the slaughter.

This question is a question for us too, for the church: **Who knows? Maybe the church has been formed for such a time as this!** And we HAVE been. We have been gathered by GOD for our times. The church is formed to be a community of reconciliation, justice, compassion, and peace.

So what now? The sun came up on Wednesday morning just as it always has. And the needs of the world, and the call of God to Christ's church is still the same as it has always been. And what is that calling? You know. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Today's texts from Isaiah, Esther, and Revelation all come from times of exile. Times when God's people have not been in ascendency, when they have been removed from their place of power, and are not at home, not the dominant order. Instead, in these stories, God's people have been an embodiment of the Kingdom of God, God's people wherever they might be—charged particularly to listen to God above all else and care for the last and the least of the world. So every day, no matter what is happening in the world, the sun rises, and God's people have God's work to do.

I can think of several examples to illustrate the importance of this work. The first is Mother Teresa, now St. Teresa of Calcutta, a nun from Albania who found herself, and her calling, in India ministering to the people literally dying in the streets, with nobody to care for them, neglected and ignored. She was not a perfect person, but she was faithful, and an example of love for the "other"—persons who were not of her faith, of her culture, of her status.

Two local efforts that we support at Thanksgiving—and throughout the year—also show this sense of action no matter what. The first is SOUL—Source of Universal Love, which expresses love and fulfills needs in our area when and where the formal systems of aid can't. We'll be hosting that charity's ThanksForGiving Dinner, which they put on every year in our Fellowship Hall, and we have opportunities to provide for that meal and for those guests. The other is the Alexander's Food Pantry, formerly known as St. Alexander's, begun by the Catholic Church of

that name literally in a cupboard of the church in Farmington. It became a vital community ministry, relied upon by many, and when the church closed several years ago, the pantry went on. Now it has become a community food pantry, supported by the churches of Farmington and Farmington Hills, and it is becoming OUR ministry, as a partner organization, to help the elderly, disabled and hungry folks living in our area.

All of these efforts have survived and thrived even when logic, finances, and events suggest that they should not have. Kingdom work. When the cry is “someone should DO something” to help the poor, the sick, the lonely, the mentally ill, the homeless the helpless—that someone is the church. That someone is us.

And we do this by remembering, ALWAYS, who and whose we are. By seeing our wholeness as a gracious gift of God, unearned, freely offered, present NO MATTER WHAT our circumstances. Freeing us from existential worry and aimlessness. Freeing us from the idolatry of filling the empty places in our lives with distractions. Freeing us to take care of one another, which is our true purpose in life.

Incredibly, in two weeks it will be the first Sunday in Advent. Our time of renewed hopeful expectation. Our time to remind ourselves once again that God With Us – Emmanuel – Jesus – has come into the world and is ALWAYS coming into the world.

And so in the darkness we light lights. And so in the silence we sing songs of praise. And so in the empty places we gratefully offer what we can, for the sake of the world. And so in our own feeling of exile, not knowing what to do or how, we can discover that GOD IS ALWAYS WITH US, that God is our salvation, and that we have work to do in the world. Not to earn salvation, love, and meaning, but to celebrate what we already have received. To celebrate, no matter how dark, how challenging, how much unknown there is, because we have what it takes. We have the love of God. We have God with us. We have the resources of one another. We have enough to share with our whole world, joyfully and thankfully, no matter what happens around us. We have these things because we are the church, together, the Body of Christ, stretching hands and hearts of loving care to the world.

I want to conclude today with a prayer. I spent the middle of last week immersed in theology and reading prayers written by people of faith past and present—drawing on that resource of the Body of Christ. Finding words and ideas to respond to what is unfolding as we live into challenging times of change. One resource I really appreciated was the book [Guerillas of Grace](#) by Ted Loder, a collection of very modern, very relevant prayers. And so, with that statement of Mordecai’s ringing in our ears—Who knows? Maybe we were created for such a time as this!—I offer this prayer:

Go With Me in a New Exodus by Ted Loder (Guerillas of Grace, Augsburg Books, 1981, p. 117)

O God of fire and freedom,
deliver me from my bondage
to what can be counted
and go with me into a new exodus
toward what counts,
but can only be measured
in bread shared
and swords become plowshares;
in bodies healed
and minds liberated;
in songs sung
and justice done;
in laughter in the night
and joy in the morning;
in love through all seasons
and great gladness of heart;
in all people coming together
and a kingdom coming in glory;
in your name being praised
and my becoming an alleluia,
through Jesus the Christ.
Amen.