“Wandering Home to God”
I Kings 8:22-30, Psalm 84, James 5:13-20, Matthew 22:12-16

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From the Pulpit
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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Proper 21, 26th Sunday of Ordinary Time, September 26, 2021, dedicated to my son Dan Robert Sitler Ahrens on his 31st Birthday, to Betsy Zahn on her 96th Birthday September 29th, to all our forebearers in faith at First Church, beginning with the 42 abolitionists (27 women and 15 men) who started it all on September 26, 1852 through today and always to the glory of God!

“Wandering Home to God”

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I wanted to share something that appeared on NPR this morning about the COVID-19 cases in Ohio. First, in the last week, more than 10,000 school children in Ohio tested positive for COVID-19. A staggering statistic was shared by one of the pediatric leaders in Ohio during the report. He said, that in the school districts that started this school year and continue to be masked, 8% of their students have tested positive since the beginning of the year in August. In districts that started unmasked, but switched to masked, the rate has been 32% positive rate. In school districts with no masks, the number is 59.5%. In the unmasked districts, we are basically sending our children to school to be sick – unto death in some cases. We can do better.

Last Sunday was the first time I have ever walked away from church in my 36 years of ministry. After spending six hours with
three of our grandchildren on Saturday, at 10:31 a.m. Sunday – between services – I received a text from my oldest son, Luke that our oldest grandson, Benton had tested positive for COVID-19. Within ten minutes, Mark, Emily and I caucused and it was decided that Emily would preach my sermon and they would split my parts in the 11 a.m. service and I needed to go into quarantine. Thank you for being so proactive.

I worked from quarantine all week and, along with Susan, had two negative COVID-19 tests. Benton is getting better and the whole family – battling through a bumpy week of quarantine – is coming along. I appreciated your concern and prayers for my entire family – especially Benton. Along with our daughter Thalia and her 4-month-old son Axel, COVID-19 has hit home this past month.

Benton called me last Sunday afternoon to tell me, “Pop Pop, I am sorry to tell you this but I got the sickness.” No child should have to say that.

COVID-19 is in fact a hitchhiker that hitches a ride on our love and good intentions and does what it wants to when it arrives. Again, thanks for all your love and prayers.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.
It is not every day that a person like James comes along. If you don’t believe me, ask his brother – Jesus of Nazareth. James’ gift to the church universal is a simple message – “talk is cheap and discipleship is costly.”

James grew up with Jesus and knew him better than anyone – except maybe their mother, Mary. Following Jesus’ death and resurrection, James begins to step into leadership in the church. He begins to embody for the followers of his brother that actions speak louder than words. Famously, he claims, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?... Faith without works is dead.” (James 2:14, 17). Put it another way, “God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense” (James 2:17, The Message).

In his short five-chapter letter, written to the church in Jerusalem, James is concerned with Christians being people of justice, being very practical, down to earth and “real” (James 2:1-26). He delivers some tough words for those in the Jerusalem Church who speak in uncontrolled language (James 3:1-12). He differentiates between earthly and heavenly wisdom. Earthly wisdom is often packed with envy, selfishness and is boastful and false to the truth. Heavenly wisdom is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits with no partiality toward anyone or never any hypocrisy (James 3:13-18). Earthly claims to be wise. Heavenly is wise.

He warns people to not follow their own plans and get caught up with their possessions. He encourages “Jesus people” to be patient with each other, to keep their promises to God and other people, to pray for each other and to believe that prayer heals the
sick and then to step into and give everything you’ve got to pray for the sick. And James says, always remain faithful to God – no matter what hard things come at you.

James is a “How to” kind of Christian. James follows the KIS principle - **Keep It Simple** (that’s KIS with one S). Confrontation, challenge and commitment meet you in his letter to the church.

As the last of his 107 verses in this short letter come to an end, James focuses on wandering away from the truth of God and being brought back again to God. He says, “*My dear friends, if you know people who have wandered off from God’s truth, don’t write them off. Go after them. Get them back and you will have rescued precious lives from destruction and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God*” (James 5:19-20, *The Message*).

Now most of our letters end with a closing that says, I love and miss you. I will see you soon. But he just ends it there.

This is truly fascinating…. Listen to this paraphrased version one more time: “*If you know people who have wandered off from God’s truth, don’t write them off. Go after them. Rescue their precious lives from destruction and prevent an epidemic of wandering away from God.*”

Well James, I hope you are listening to us this morning, because you are talking to the right people. We know a lot about wandering off – we are all good at it at certain times. We know also about the preciousness of life, the power of destruction and particularly – we know a lot about epidemics.

In fact, our epidemics, James, are so large they are now global in nature. They are epidemics that have grown into pandemics. Throughout the last 19 months, we have been dealing with
epidemics all around us. We have the epidemic of COVID-19 with multiple layers of health, political bad behavior and economic challenges. The epidemic of racism and its shadow side – the epidemic of lies about the very existence of racism – continue to rock us to the core. The epidemic of economic crisis in jobs and housing and of course, the pandemic of war, refugees, and immigrants AND global warming.

Yes, James we know a lot about epidemics. But, one thing you bring up is something new to us – maybe – the “epidemic of wandering off and away from God.”

Let’s consider the centrality of the wandering away from God epidemic. This 2000-year-old prophetic word calls us back to reality.

Wandering away from God has become such a rampant epidemic that the wandering is blessed and God ends up often getting condemned. Let me put it another way – God gets blamed for being God while people exalt themselves and their own spiritual powers, wisdom and expertise. In scripture, the authors of the 66 books are always pointing to a higher good, a greater power – the power and presence of God. In today’s world, the authors of the wandering away from God movement, point to themselves, to their empires, to their wisdom, to their ways, to their quick fixes, to their self-fed and their self-created spirituality. Essentially, this wander-lust is fed by a culture of Narcissism.

In 1979, Christopher Lasch wrote a book titled The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations. Lasch is prophetic – 32 years later he wrote that we have organized our society to live for the moment and to feed the ego of each of our
individual selves. I certainly see this sickness alive and well in the anti-masking, anti-vax movement. It’s all about MY freedom. Really, tell me about that. I am not real patient with that this week because that “freedom” got my grandsons sick – two of them in fact got COVID-19 (one in another family). So come hell or high water, you want to say its about freedom but that means you are caught up in the freedom of narcissism – which is not free at all.

I also see in this supposed “freedom” movement – taking the teachings around race and racism out of our schools. This is another sickness if you will.

In Christopher Lasch’s words: “To live for the moment is the prevailing passion—to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity. We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future.”

In this present moment, consider this simple action (which speaks louder than words after all): switch directions in our wandering. Instead of wandering away from God, or encouraging everybody to do just that – Let’s wander home to God. Let’s wander home to God. Instead of living for yourself, live for your ancestors, your predecessors, your posterity. Live for the future generations. Think about what legacy you will live and leave in this world.

**Live for God. That’s right – live for God!**

Let’s flip the script. And if you’re not sure where I come up with these crazy ideas, check out the history of First Congregational Church. It’s in our DNA. We started when 27 women and 15 men came home to God 169 years ago this day. (As an aside – it has
been my experience that women almost always outnumber men 2-1 in the work of social justice – as we saw with our forebearers.)

These 42 pioneers looked at their sickness, in their world – the sickness which was slavery and all its poisonous, venomous bi-products.

They acted rather than spoke. They got up and they moved. Their actions said, as white Abolitionist Christians – we will no longer abide in the union of Christian faith and a nation which embraces in any way, shape or form the existence of slaves and slave-owners. We can’t do that anymore and we won’t.

They were not just abolitionists. They were leaders in the underground railroad, too. Back in 1852, the only other congregations who were with them were African-American – mostly made of former slaves. Can you imagine what it must have been like the day before September 26, 1852 to be all alone in fighting for your freedom and liberation and then on the next day 42 white people say, “you are not alone anymore.” Can you imagine what it must have been like to know the next Sunday you go to church, there is going to be another church in town that believes slavery is wrong and says it loud and clear every Sunday in the pulpit? That would be very reassuring. At least you would know that at least some people were stepping forward with righteous and justice actions for your children, and for your spouse and for all your loved ones and relatives still caught in the sin of slavery.

They knew that on that Sunday, there were others and they were praising and worshiping a just and liberating and freedom loving God – a real FREEDOM LOVING GOD.
For one thing, our sisters and brothers in Black Columbus must not have felt so alone 169 years ago today in their battle for freedom. They came along beside us and in our first years, they were the only ones who would fellowship with us. Guess what happens when you do the right thing? Your former friends remain former friends. We found out that day – and in the weeks and years that followed – who our real friends were when we chose to be real friends ourselves.

So here we stand 169 years later, and we are still kicking! As you and I wander home to God, there will be those who wonder if we are truly and faithfully following Jesus. As we battle for racial and economic justice, for an end to the COVID-19 pandemic, for a planet which is saved from burning up from global warming, others will challenge us and ask if we still love Jesus. They will wonder if we are truly saved. (The answer is “yes” to both!) End of Conversation!

I remind you of the words of William Wilberforce, the great abolitionist and leader of liberation for all from slavery, when challenged by an ultra-evangelical woman. She asked if indeed his soul was saved. Wilberforce answered, “Madame, I have been so busy trying to save the souls and lives of others that I have had no time to think of my own.” Great answer! That is all you have to say.

I know James is shoulder to shoulder at this moment smiling from heaven with William Wilberforce. I am not sure where that ultra-evangelical lady is frowning from somewhere in eternity. But it doesn’t matter. That is not my problem. It is not our problem. Our problem is getting back on track and getting back to God.

We know that those who bring sunshine into the lives of others cannot keep sunshine from themselves. Most certainly we know that
those who bring the lives of others to God cannot keep God out of their own lives.

So, let’s do it. Let’s live in this present moment as those who honor our past and celebrate our spiritual ancestors. Let’s live for the future moment and protect and serve our neighbors and the generations of children yet to be born.

**Let’s live for God.**

And answer the question when you go out today, what will your legacy be? How will you be remembered? How will you be celebrated? Let’s take a page out of the letter of James to the church in Jerusalem, “*Faith without action is dead.*”

And who needs a dead faith?

Let’s get to work. Amen.