

**Rev. Dr. David Holyan**  
**“We Live to the Lord”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, September 13, 2020**

**Psalm 114**

*When Israel went out from Egypt,  
the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,  
Judah became God’s sanctuary,  
Israel his dominion.  
The sea looked and fled;  
Jordan turned back.  
The mountains skipped like rams,  
the hills like lambs.  
Why is it, O sea, that you flee?  
O Jordan, that you turn back?  
O mountains, that you skip like rams?  
O hills, like lambs?  
Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the LORD,  
at the presence of the God of Jacob,  
who turns the rock into a pool of water,  
the flint into a spring of water.*

**Romans 14:1-12**

*Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.*

*Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.*

*We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.*

*Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.' So then, each of us will be accountable to God.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words we offer today, the words that we've heard read from scripture, the words that are in our hearts and minds. Touch, bless, and transform these words, as well as those words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share, so that all of them become the living word of Jesus Christ. And let Christ's words speak to all of us. Let it comfort us, strengthen us, challenge us, live within us, and go forth in us in what we say and in what we do in the days ahead. Bless us all as we seek to be faithful to you and to love one another in Christ's name. Amen. The timing of my resignation decision and when I was going to leave was talked about in conversation among several parties that had interests in it. And I wasn't really sure when the timing was going to work out. I was hoping for a little bit more time between the decision and the departure. While the presbytery counseled, "Once the decision is made, just be done and move on." And I honor that decision and the wisdom that they shared and in helping me realize that. Not knowing when the timing would work out, I was tasked with finding the theme verse for this coming stewardship season which essentially begins today or next week. But at this time of year, we enter into stewardship for the 2021 church year. And I chose Isaiah 43:19 as that theme, where the prophet says, or speaking for God, "I am about to do a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." I chose this passage primarily because of COVID and the strangeness that the COVID pandemic has created for all of us. But especially us here in this church where, since it seems like years ago now, we have not been together. And the thought of not meeting together again possibly until some time next year, or whenever the reopening task force decides that it's safe to do, is daunting. No one ever imagined that we would need to be separated for this long. And so I was thinking that the year 2021 would be a time where God does a new thing, where vaccines would be available, people would be immunized, there'd be greater resistance, there'd be more adherence to following the rules about distancing and washing hands and keeping everybody safe; and that we would be able to all come back together as a congregation at some point in 2021 feeling as if God had finally made a way in the wilderness or rivers in the desert. At the time that I picked it, I really didn't have a deep appreciation that part of the new thing that God would be springing forth would be finding you a new pastor or having me find time to do the rehabilitative work that I need to do. But I trust in this passage because God continually needs to do a new thing. God continually needs to make a way where right now there doesn't seem to appear to be a way. Often in the Bible this is called the wilderness. And God brings rivers to the desert, to that barren place where there isn't life or very much of it, and if there is, it seems to be hanging on at the edges. Instead of that kind of desperate existence, God provides water in the middle of those situations so that lush, growth, and richness can abound beyond our expectations. This is my prayer not only for stewardship, but for all of us in the year ahead. And it's not easy, especially at this time of pandemic.

I ran across an article that was posted online at the American Journal of Managed Care which noted the increases in stress and anxiety among Americans due to the pandemic. For those that were working, seven out of ten employees indicated in the survey that the pandemic is the most stressful time of their professional career. And this increase in stress is aligned with an increase in new prescriptions for people for anti-depressants, anti-anxiety medicine, and anti-insomnia pills. 70% of the people that are working are the most stressed in their lives because of the pandemic. And as a result, more and more people are seeking the help that they need to deal with that stress. In a survey done by Express Scripts, they noted that the prescriptions filled in the week between February 16th and March 15th, that month between mid-February and mid-March, anti-depressants, anti-anxiety, and anti-insomnia medications went up by 21%. And 78% of all of those prescriptions filled were for new prescriptions, from people who did not have anxiety or insomnia or depression before the pandemic.

All of this is as a follow up to what had been years of steady decline, the last four years. A steady decline in anxiety and depression related illnesses. So, this is a stressful time for all of us. And it is in the mind of that pandemic and what lies ahead for us that I turn to Paul's letter to the Romans because in Paul's letter he seems to be hammering on the issue of passing judgment or judging someone. It says it at the beginning about whether you eat all stuff or just vegetables, whether someone's weak in the faith or not, on and on he's just hammering this idea of passing judgment. And I realized that in this heightened of stress and anxiety about what the future holds for all of us, it is easy to let our anxiety or our questioning, depression, our lack of sleep, all of that, come to play in our personal judgments and discernments about ourselves and about other people. And I realize that sometimes our perception is skewed by our needing to be right, our needing to have a judgment about what's happening in the life of another. And God here clearly says, "Don't do that. Don't judge one against another. If you eat everything, do not judge those who eat only vegetables. If you observe one day of the week as sacred while others observe every day as the same, they're all equally sacred. Do not judge those that have a different view than you. Do not, Democrats, judge the Republicans who are advocating that the presidency of Donald Trump continues for another four years. Do not judge them," is what the Lord says. And we know how hard that is to embrace in everyday life. Because if you're a Democrat who's looking at a Republican, I can only speak for one, you are judging all the time. And you're still wondering who stole your Biden yard sign. Because it just seems wrong. And the relationship goes both ways. It's not just Democrats who judge Republicans; Republicans judge Democrats. Certain people of any question on either side judge the other as somehow inferior. And God says, "Stop." Because what we don't realize is that when we judge others, we put ourselves in prison, that our sense of righteousness or our indignation or our contempt imprisons within us the spirit of God; that we preach about and teach about and know from history and really know from our deepest desires that God wants to unleash within us so that all people will be blessed. In a sense, God is saying to us, "Don't judge. Live in freedom." Paul goes on, "We do not live to ourselves. We do not die to ourselves. For if we live, we live to the Lord. And if we die, we die to the Lord. So then whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." I believe this is one of the best passages ever for a creative approach to interpretation. Because it fits so many situations in our lives. Whether we live with cancer or whether cancer takes our lives, if we live, we live to the Lord. If cancer takes our lives, then we die to the Lord. So that whether we live or die, we live to the Lord. If we live without getting COVID or if we get it, we live to the Lord. If we do get it, we live to the Lord, so then whether we get COVID or we don't get it, we are the Lord's.

Or as I've translated this week, I do not live to pastor, and I do not resign for myself, for if I pastor, I pastor trusting in the Lord. And if I resign, I resign in the trust of the Lord. So, whether I pastor or resign, I am the Lord's. And I

hope you can take that passage from Romans and apply it to your life situation again and again and again. Because when you do, you realize at the base of who you are at the very essence at your core at that spot that is most sacred and valuable within you, you are the Lord's.

You are loved. You are forgiven and set free. You are the Lord's, and so gratitude can become your response. Instead of anxiety or stress or depression or insomnia, you can have gratitude be your response to that life situation that used to drive you crazy or that life situation that seems right and yet somehow also seems a little bit scary. Through it all, you can trust that you are the Lord's. And because of that, you can have that gratitude of the spirit that just rises up from a mysterious place and be thankful for so many things for things which used to annoy you and especially for things that have blessed you.

And so, I'd like to offer a few things that I'm thankful for in my time as your pastor. I am thankful for the moment that I stood just inside the door of my office talking to Bill about whether or not we needed to get a new pipe organ. And when I asked the question, he simply said, "Yes." Because in that moment, I could feel the spirit saying, "Yes" through him and in a sense, the decision was made. Along those lines, I remember visiting John and Carol Bickel who I didn't know at all. As I went and made visits to folks and asked them if they would contribute to paying for the pipe organ. As I sat in their kitchen talking to John, Carol was kind of moving about. I commented on all the artwork that was clearly her passion and John said to me, "David, do you know our story and what we've done already?" And I said, "No, John, I don't know anything. I'm just here to ask if you'll participate." And John told me about how faithful he and Carol had been to the life of the church, to the new building, and how much joy that gave them and that they would gladly participate in helping to bring a new pipe organ to First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood. I remember leaving that meeting and getting in my car and thinking to myself, "Wow. I hope I can be that faithful someday."

I'm thankful for a rainy wedding. Out in the middle of nowhere or at least that's how it seemed to me as Joe and Rebecca stood before each other and exchanged their vows. It was one of the first acts that I did as pastor. And now to see them and their life together with Anna, Henry, and Lolo it just fills me with gratitude for what God can do in the midst of all of us. I think about that Easter afternoon standing with Lynne, Jeff, and Judy at St. Luke's in the ICU after they had made the decision to stop treatment for Tom. For the feeling of being welcomed there, in a sense needed there. It was a powerful moment and I am grateful for the privilege of having had that moment with them and with several others in the congregation. It is one of the things that I love most about being a pastor, is being invited into those moments that most people never get to see until it comes to their family or their lives. And to simply remind people that God is here. And that we are loved.

And I'm also thankful for an encounter that I had during a shopping trip at Schnuck's when out of nowhere Tom McCarthy and I ran into each other and he shared with me an utter joy about what it meant for he and his wife Missy to transfer their membership to this congregation. They were so incredibly grateful and still are for all that God has given to them, how God has supported and loved them through the Ministry of all of us together. And so, it is somewhat strange for me to preach on this last Sunday where I will be together with all of you. Because so much of my ministry has been built on the idea of having folks realize that the church is made up of the people of God. The church is not a building or a stained window or a cross hanging from on high. It is the people of God gathering and loving and caring for one another and their neighbors in need. And as I remove myself from that togetherness

intentionally to set aside a time for my rehabilitation and care, I do so trusting that you all will continue on being the kind of people that God is making you to be, people that are friendly, supportive, generous, who worship with joy and who are unafraid to do what needs being done.

And so, I'd like to conclude this sermon with a passage from I John, because in our time here in Kirkwood, Jani and I and our children, Anna and Sam, have felt so much of your love and your care. And our hope now as Anna is married and Sam as well and their families are starting to grow roots here in this area, our hope is that you have felt our love for all of you. John writes, "God is love. And those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this. That we may have boldness on the day of judgment because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear and love. The perfect love casts out fear and fear has to do with punishment. And whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because God first loved us. Those who say I love God and hate their brothers and sisters are liars. And those who do not love a brother or a sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from Him is this--Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

So, I speak for my family when I thank you for the love that you have shared with us. We are grateful for your support in the ministry and especially in these last four-plus years of my dealing with pain and the challenges of my medical situation. It is not easy to lay aside the call to be your pastor. But I do so in love, in gratitude, and in freedom. And so, I would ask that you return with me to the prophet Isaiah and hear again these words from our God, "I am about to do a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." So, as we all continue to wait and watch for what new thing God is doing in our lives, let us do so with the freedom that comes from forgiving, with gratitude overflowing in our hearts, and with love that supports all of us. In the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.