

Worship transcription – Pastor Brent’s 10th anniversary February 12, 2023

CALL TO WORSHIP

Speaking God, speaking people

Charlotte Rodgers

One: Now is the time to worship our God. Now is the time to raise our voices in thanksgiving, and in praise, and in prayer.

All: And let us say, together, “Amen!”

One: Let us delight in our Savior, who took human form to live among us.

All: And let us say, with the angels, “Alleluia!”

One: Let us honor our Savior, who entered the Holy City in triumph.

All: And let us say, with the people of Jerusalem, “Hosanna!”

One: Let us cry out to our God upon whom we call in times of trouble.

All: And let us say, with the Psalmist, “Lord, have mercy.”

One: Let us imitate our Savior, who thanked God when he broke bread with his disciples.

All: And let us say, with Jesus, “Thanks be to God.”

One: Let us speak with our own voices, saying:

All: Alleluia! Hosanna! Lord, have mercy! Thanks be to God! Amen!

FRAMING WORDS, Miles Wheat:

Good Morning! My name is Miles Wheat, one of the deacons of this church. We come this morning to seek grace through worship and song as we do every week. We come this morning to celebrate ten years of our Pastor Brent Damrow sharing his ministry with us. We come this morning from lives lived in a world both beautiful and broken, to hear again the Good News of Christ’s love, and to share this fellowship. I invite you now into our time of worship.

PASSING THE PEACE, Ted Randolph:

For over ten years, Brent has been inviting us to share the peace of Christ with one another. If you allow for a few vacations and a sabbatical, that’s still getting close to five hundred Sundays of keeping it fresh, keeping it meaningful, never letting it get lost in rote liturgy, and inspiring us to rise to the occasion.

From the pre-pandemic, out-of-the-pews-peace-passing parties in the aisle – you remember those? On a good morning I can remember thinking if I can just make it from my corner over here all the way over to where Jeremy and Megan hang out, I’d be doing pretty good! From those pre-pandemic days to this safer soothing stay-in-your-seat signing of serenity, it’s a part of the service I’ve always looked forward to.

But there are so many things that get in the way of peace: fear, worry, resentment, depression, just to name a few. And as Brent mentioned two weeks ago, even forgetting. Not remembering that we belong to one another. This is an obstacle to peace. And so, it is every week that we do what we do to receive peace and pass it along.

Since March 15, 2020, we have been using sign language to do this. We all know that basic signing vocabulary by now (peace be with you, and also with you). But every once in a while Brent has added a new sign to our glossary. And today there will be a quiz. (Does that inspire peace? Just kidding.) We’re going to have a quick review, and I want to incorporate about three of those bonus words into this morning’s passing of the peace.

First bonus word: “Come and see!” The second bonus is: I remember you. Finally: Grace and peace be with you. Let’s put it all together: “Come and see. I remember you. Grace and Peace be with you.” Now share it with one another (“and also with you”).

When you have shared enough peace, you may be seated.

WELCOME, Miles Wheat:

Good Morning again and welcome. At this point in a typical service Brent would expand on that word “welcome” with a clever and humorous poem which would serve to let everyone know that everyone is welcome, really everyone. God’s grace will find you, and you are welcome here. I’m not going to try to do that! But I will say this, our joy is increased by your presence and I am grateful to see you all here. Welcome to everyone here in this room and welcome also to those joining us online. Welcome, everybody! It is good to have you here.

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 32:24-32, Elizabeth Young

This is the story of Jacob wrestling with God, from “The Message” paraphrase: “But Jacob stayed behind by himself, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he couldn’t get the best of Jacob as they wrestled, he deliberately threw Jacob’s hip out of joint. The man said, “Let me go; it’s daybreak.” Jacob said, “I’m not letting you go ‘til you bless me.” The man said, “What’s your name?” He answered, “Jacob.” The man said, “But no longer. Your name is no longer Jacob. From now on it’s Israel (God-Wrestler); you’ve wrestled with God and you’ve come through.” Jacob asked, “And what’s your name?” The man said, “Why do you want to know my name?” And then, right then and there, he blessed him. Jacob named the place Peniel (God’s Face) because, he said, “I saw God face-to-face and lived to tell the story!” The sun came up as he left Peniel, limping because of his hip. (This is why Israelites to this day don’t eat the hip muscle; because Jacob’s hip was thrown out of joint.)”

TIME WITH CHILDREN, Elizabeth Young:

We’re going to talk about wrestling with God. And I hope you’ll all help demonstrate wrestling with God. You may know that wrestling is an old sport, and that one of the things that happens in a wrestling match is that each of the two people tries to pin the other to the ground. We are going to pretend that you are wrestling with God. I’d like each of you to get in the position of being pinned. Lie on your back with your shoulders on the floor. And now the challenge is to get up without using your shoulders. Because when you’re wrestling, your opponent – God – may be holding your shoulders to the floor. So let’s give it a try, using your lower body. Excellent! So what did you learn from this? It’s hard! It’s really hard to wrestle with God. I bet that God has not really ever wrestled you to the ground. But I bet that you have wrestled with God already, and we do this throughout our lives in a spiritual way, in our heads and hearts. Have you ever had times when you thought you knew what was right, but you wanted to do something else? Sometimes it’s really hard work to decide we’re not going to do it, because it’s not what God would want. So when you think about wrestling with God, think about how hard it is sometimes to do what God wants us to do. But with work and practice, and a lot of faith in God, we can do it.

CALL TO THE OFFERING, David Anderegg:

If you have children or grandchildren, you may know a wonderful book by Jan Brett called “Cozy.” It’s a book about a musk ox who is just standing there, as they do all winter. And one by one, animals come along and shelter in the warm, furry embrace of this ox: rabbits and owls, weasels and wolverines, and all sorts of animals that don’t usually get along all shelter under this enormous furry canopy, all winter long. And they get along, they’re nurtured, sheltered from the

cold. I tell you that because sometimes I think about our church being like a big furry spacious organism that shelters us and keeps us warm. And not just our church family, but also people who meet here for twelve step meetings, people who use our space for all sorts of things, are sheltered. And the people in the community that we care for are sheltered in our furry embrace. So this shaggy beast needs to be fed once in a while, and now is the time! As you give your morning offering, please be generous and be mindful of all the ways in which we are sheltered, and all the ways that we provide shelter in our community.

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 15:21-28, Jo Ann Levitt

This scripture reading tells the story of a woman who challenged Jesus when he turned her away. Listen to this story of courage and faith, from the “New International Version” translation. “Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.” Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said. He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” “Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment.

REFLECTION, David Anderegg:

Good morning! You may have noticed there is no sermon today. Instead, there are four reflections on our time together with Pastor Brent. Since our theme today is “call and response” with an emphasis on the response, we decided to let each speaker find his or her own voice. I don’t know what they plan to say; we each might say quite different things, or perhaps the same thing four times, in which case you will know it well by the time we are finished. God be with us all!

And now, people of Christ, will you pray with me? May the words of our mouths and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O lord our rock and our Redeemer. And let the people say “Amen!”

Can I have another amen? (Amen!) I do not plan to enumerate everything Brent has done with us in the last ten years. I plan to focus on one thing, and that is that “Amen!” For those of us who were here when Brent took the pulpit, one of the most immediate things we noticed was his love of call and response. “Can I get an Amen?” was something I had never heard from this pulpit before Brent arrived. But since then, he has called for Amens and “alleluias” and “praise the Lords” and “blessing of the bread in the ancient sign of blessing”...He has called on us to respond in all kinds of ways. Before Brent, there was very little “call and response” here; it was more like “call and then observe a respectful silence.” But Brent has called us, and called on us, in worship and outside of worship; he has invited us to be active partners in our worship lives.

Before I go further, I want you to know that I know (and Brent knows) that he is not God, and he is not Christ; he is not an angel, and he is not a prophet. But he is our minister, our rabbi, and so he does call us to spiritual life, and God speaks through him, as God speaks through all of us at times. So when I talk about our response to God’s call, and God’s call as spoken by our rabbi, please bear with me.

Bearing that in mind, I want to ask you to think about today's readings. Brent spoke a few weeks back about Jesus calling the first disciples; in that beautiful story, Jesus called, and they went. Immediate obedience is certainly one response that we find throughout the Bible: Abraham's willing obedience in the story of the binding of Isaac, Mary's more doubtful but eventual obedience in the story of the annunciation, etc. But in today's readings, we find a different kind of response: a response we might call challenging, restive, insistent: anything but obedient.

In the passage from Genesis, Jacob wants a blessing from a stranger who does not seem inclined to give it. But Jacob does not say, "Oh. Okay, I'll ask someone else. Let it be according to Thy word." He wrestles with the angel all night long to get that blessing. In so doing, he sees God face to face, because of his fierce conviction that he will get that blessing from that guy no matter what. Perhaps God wanted to find a tough guy, and He did indeed find one in Jacob.

In the story of the Canaanite woman, this unnamed woman also does not take "no" for an answer. She wants healing for her daughter, and when Jesus tries to brush her off, she does not say "Let it be according to Thy word." She matches wits with Jesus, and he is impressed with her faith; after all, she implies that healing a possessed child is like a crumb from the table...no big deal for a man like Jesus. So she gets what she wants after not taking "no" for an answer.

I suggest that we emulate these pugnacious people in our spiritual life. Indeed, I suggest that we celebrate Brent's constant prodding for a response from us over these last ten years with a vigorous response. No minister wants passive obedience as a response to his ministry. I know (because he has recently said so) that Brent is not over-fond of us doing things because "it will make Brent happy." I suggest we respond to his calls with vigorous responses of our own, even if we are as pugnacious as Jacob or as sharp-tongued as the Canaanite woman.

Of course, this means we need to know what we want. Jacob wanted blessing; the Canaanite woman wanted healing. What do we want? Do we want peace? Let's demand peace. Do we want healing? Let's demand healing. Do we want to see the Kingdom of God, now and forever? If that's what we want, let's demand it of ourselves, and of our pastor. I suggest our commitment to the wrestling match would be the greatest way for us to celebrate Brent's service here and make the next ten years even better, even if we all get a little tired.

Can I get an Amen? (Amen!) Can I get an Alleluia? (Alleluia!) Can I get a Hosanna? (Hosanna!) Can I get a Lord, have mercy? (Lord, have mercy!) Can I get a thanks be to God? (Thanks be to God!) Can I get an Amen? (Amen!)

REFLECTION, Cathy Clark:

I had been singing with the Stockbridge Festival Chorus for a number of years when just about ten years ago I ran into fellow-chorister, Gege Kingston, in the check-out line at Price Chopper. "Have you tried out the new pastor at the Stockbridge Congo church?" she said. "No" said I. "Give him a try," said she. So the next Sunday I did.

It was a pivotal experience in my life, as it turned out. I loved the simple beauty of the sanctuary and (of course) I loved the music. But the sermon was something else. I can't remember now what it was about, but I remember how it made me feel—elated, inspired and curious. After the service, I introduced myself to the pastor (referencing something I particularly liked) and chewed on the sermon for much of the following week. Next Sunday I was back, and the pastor greeted me by name. Wow, I thought. This guy is not only great with message, but has impressive interpersonal skills, too.

I came to look forward to Pastor Brent's "framing words" when he told me that I was welcome no matter where I was on life's journey, or that this church didn't care whether I believed a lot, or a little, or didn't know what I believed. "That's me," I thought; maybe this church can be part of my life's journey. And that has turned out to be the case.

I have to say that for some time, my relationship with the church was really all about me—how it made ME feel; how it impacted MY life. But gradually I noticed a more communal feeling creeping into the relationship and what we did together took on a more prominent role for me.

We have come together so many times and in so many ways over the last ten years—often at Pastor Brent's nudging. We gather together a dozen times a year to wrestle with the Bible, discuss important books written by the likes of David Brooks or the Pope, or enjoy the joyful banter of Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. We have come together to celebrate weddings, baptisms and new members, and to grieve for those who have died, like Joyce Hovey Max Stackhouse, Michele Gillette, and so many others, and rejoice in their well-lived lives. We have gathered around bonfires on a chilly Ash Wednesday in comfortable, communal silence, and sung Silent Night together on a frigid December 24th amongst an illuminated 40-foot Advent wreath.

We have used our handyperson skills to help renovate a home for Habitat for Humanity, and taken our turn at hosting Fellowship Time after Sunday's service. Together we have written a book on hope, and shared our stories. We have come together to raise (so far) almost a million dollars in a Capital Campaign to Restore, Renew and Rejoice in this place we call home. We have come together to discuss and pass budgets that both live up to our promises and possibilities but also live within our means, and to revise our bylaws (at least every five years). We are engaging our past through the exploration of a Justice Task Force, and exploring a Behavioral Covenant to describe how we treat those among us who we love but do not see eye-to-eye with on everything.

Together we lift our joys and concerns; our thanksgivings and challenges; our burdens and confessions. And around the Council table we virtually blessed the good work that Cary Quigley does through Hospice. We have sung with exultation and broken bread together.

And we have shared the peace with each other in any way we can—may the peace of Christ be with you. Amen?

PRAYERS, Jeremy Ridenour:

Dear loving and holy Triune God,

We give you thanks you for our time together and the opportunity to reflect on our partnership over the last ten years. We ask that you continue to lead us follow the Way, the Truth, and the Life, as we move into the future as a church. We give you thanks for the Gospel of Jesus Christ – his life, death, and resurrection.

Today, we pray for the state of our world. We lift up the people in Turkey and Syria who are experiencing the devastating fallout of earthquake. We give you thanks for those who are offering aid and offer a prayer of lament for those stricken with grief. We also pray for the people of Ukraine who continue to face the ravages of war. We pray for the people of this country who are confronting the challenge of ecological catastrophe, economic insecurity, and racial unrest. We ask that this country might be healed, and that justice might reach every shore. We pray for the people of Berkshire County, many of whom are struggling with substance use and housing issues. We ask for your Holy Spirit to comfort all those dwelling in the shadows.

Lord, we pray for our own lives. We pray for the healing of our bodies and for our loved ones who are afflicted by illness. We give thanks that Jesus is the Great Physician and that he not only conquered Sin and Evil but also Death itself. With the Prophet Isaiah, we look forward to a time when we will be: On this mountain where the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain God will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces.

We confess our sin, our waywardness, our petty self-involvement. We pray for the problems that we can't even name as such. We ask for forgiveness, for a grace that can only come from you. We confess that we cannot save ourselves or one another but we give thanks for your mercy that moves through us and allows us to be conduits of amazing grace.

Finally, Lord we lift up this congregation. We have much to be grateful for, blessings far too numerous to count. We give you thanks for Pastor Brent and his heart, his energy, and his desire to serve you. We are grateful for what we have accomplished together over the past decade through the power of the Holy Spirit, as we strive to become a congregation that proclaims and enacts the Gospel. We ask for prayers for the Justice Task Force, as it grapples with important issues about our history and the future we are trying to create.

We also recognize our shortcomings and failures to follow your will. We ask that you continue to guide us into the future that we might be a community of character, a place where the glory of the God, the peace of Christ, and the love of the Holy Spirit are known.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

REFLECTION, Cindy Brown:

The story goes, as I remember it, that Brent was sitting on a park bench while on a trip to Russia, when he heard God calling him to the ministry. God calling him, eventually, to us. Like Hagar, naming the well where God saw her, "The God who sees me," like Jacob, naming the place where he wrestled with God, "The Face of God," we could go back and name that bench in Russia, "God calling Brent to us."

Brent is enthusiastic, passionate, articulate, a wordmeister, a storyteller. Week after week, he tells us stories, of people in the Bible, and of present-day people, who hear God's call and respond to it. Stories that inspire us, as we sit on these sanctuary benches, or on folding chairs in committee meetings or Bible studies, stories that inspire us to listen for God's call to us. In sermons from the pulpit, in mini-sermons in each monthly newsletter and each Thursday emailing, Brent encourages us to listen for God's voice, invites us to come and see.

Brent's sermons are delivered to us with intelligence and emotion. We leave re-oriented, encouraged to do what God requires of us – to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Brent lives his life with deep personal authenticity and conviction. He takes his faith seriously. He immerses himself in study, research, books by the great writers and thinkers of the faith. And he balances his serious intellectual temperament with a strong emotional response to what he believes.

Brent is extremely committed to our congregation. He gives us his all. He's demanding of himself, and becomes a model for the rest of us to up our game.

Brent is an idea man. He's full of ideas for our church's ministry, so many ideas, more than we can keep up with! He sees both the big picture -- the goal -- and so many ways we could work toward it.

There's a joke among other mainline churches that UCC stands for Unitarians Considering Christ! But here in this United Church of Christ congregation, Brent constantly calls us to follow Jesus.

He challenges us to go out and respond to that call, here in our church family, in our homes, in our community, and out in the world, to live in love, to help the needy. To feed the hungry with physical as well as spiritual food.

Sunday after Sunday, meeting after meeting, study after study, Brent encourages us to listen to our still-speaking God and to live our life accordingly.

For the past 10 years, God has given us a great blessing in Brent. May we continue for many, many years more to be blessed by Brent's presence here. And at Brent's urging, to listen to Jesus calling us to follow his way. May we continue to respond.

And let the people say: Amen!

REFLECTION, Joshua Hall:

Ministry. Past, present, future. Life. Love. Death. Ten years! One decade! Half of a generation! 3,650 days! Roughly 1/3 of the lifespan of Jesus.

Ten years ago, the Rev. Brent Damrow came to the small, quiet community of Stockbridge, Massachusetts. He and Jon came to our church "nestled in the wilderness." To a place of nature, of nurture, of art, of music, of history, of warm, sleepy summer days, cool, brisk autumnal afternoons, and cold, dark winter mornings.

Brent came to us following what we might call a "rough patch." And when someone new arrives in your community you welcome them with open arms, though guarded. You feed them, you educate them on what they should know (or at least what YOU think they should know). You feed them some more. And you wait to see what is going to happen.

And like a flock, we follow our shepherd, and he has followed us. Change is a very difficult thing for people to adapt to or accept. We know it is inevitable, and we know that the good Lord presents it to us so that we can have a clearer understanding of what is going on, how we fit into the larger picture, of how it betters our communities both religious and secular, and yet we still resist.

As a member of the diaconate (a couple of times), there is a way that the service is supposed to run. There is a clearly outlined progress that has been in use since days of old – I've seen it in the first church bulletin I ever received in 1982.

And I can remember clearly the first time sitting down with Brent on a Sunday at 9:30 and hearing him say that today's service will be a normal service...except...and then "This is how we are going to make just a little change." Moving things around in the order of the service?! Rhyming welcomes and framing words?! Adding new music?! Dancing in the aisles?! Coats on the floor for Palm Sunday?! Streamers and rose petals (which we still find every once in a while) for Pentecost?! Open Tables?! Walking the Stations of the Cross at the Marian Fathers on Good Friday?! Giant tree advent wreaths on the village green?! Concerts?! Communion by intinction?! Taize?! Outbursts of praise and clapping in church!?!?

Wait a minute! What is going on here? Are we now Broadway?! No. We are the congregation of the First Congregational Church of Stockbridge. We are the flock, and our shepherd is the Rev. Brent Damrow. And for ten years he has shown us the way of God, the way of Jesus. He has told us the timeless story of our ancestors. He has laughed with us. He has cried with us. He has felt the joy that a parent feels when their child is welcomed into this loving community. He has baptized us, married us, and buried us. He has reminded us that only God

knows where we will end up, but that by loving each other, by helping preserve our history, by being disciples of change, and by growing in our knowledge of Christ and his church, we will remain.

Brent, our journey together is not complete. You still have many paths to lead us on, new adventures to bring to us, more lessons to teach. We, your flock, are grateful – grateful for your spiritual guidance, for your love, for your challenges, and for you alone.

May God bless you and keep you, may he make his countenance shine upon you, and may he grant you peace. Amen.

BENEDICTION, Miles Wheat:

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make their face shine upon you and be gracious to you,

The Lord turn their face to you and give you peace.

Amen.