

01/04/2015 ~ Second Sunday after Christmas Day ~ Jeremiah 31:7-14 or Sirach 24:1-12; Psalm 147:12-20 or Wisdom of Solomon 10:15-21; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:(1-9), 10-18 ~ Un-decorate the Church and a Soup Coffee Hour ~ A Blessing of the Stuffed Animals; Communion Sunday.

### *Your People*

“Thus says *Yahweh*, God: / Sing aloud with gladness, joy for Jacob, / and raise shouts for the chief of nations; / proclaim, make your praise heard, and say, / ‘Save, O God, your people, / the remnant of Israel.’” — Jeremiah 30:7.

So, who here this morning, who here today, is a morning person? I see that’s about less than half. I don’t find that surprising.

My late mother was *not* a morning person. It would annoy her no end that when I was about 13 or 14, I would arrive at the breakfast table and do shtick, tell jokes. I think she eventually took that annoying habit as a foretelling of my destiny, since I did wind up working as a writer in professional theater projects.

Whatever success I had in that profession my mother did not think of me as successful until the day I told her I had met the actor Cyril Ritchard. By the time I met him, he was quite elderly. And for those of you who do not know the name Cyril Ritchard, he was Captain Hook to Mary Martin’s Peter Pan.

Therefore, he was Captain Hook for my Mother’s generation. And, being Captain Hook for my Mother’s generation, my mother took the fact that I had even met this actor as a sure sign of my success.

Now, you may or may not you think of Cyril Ritchard as noteworthy as did my mother. And yes, over time, because of bring in professional theater I rubbed elbows with both the infamous and famous. Among the famous was the composer Stephen Sondheim. Twice I was privileged to be a member of master classes he taught on writing musicals.

Hence, when the movie version of Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Into the Woods* (certainly one of my favorites) opened last week as a movie, Bonnie and I went to see it. And did we like the film?

Well, when some friends said they wanted to see it after we have already seen it, we joined them and saw it again. Please note: I am not recommending anyone here see it. You may hate musicals!

However, if you unfamiliar with this work, it takes several fairy tales— *The Baker and His Wife*, *Rapunzel*, *Cinderella*, *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *Little Red Riding Hood*— and weaves all the stories together. Each of the main characters clearly has a wish they want fulfilled.

In order to get that wish to become a reality they need go off, into the woods, in pursuit of fulfilling that wish. Hence, the title: *Into the Woods*.

As might be obvious based on this description, the woods are not woods. They are merely a metaphor for real life. Indeed, we must all go into the woods. We must all face real life— real life with its joys, its dangers, its pain, its triumphs.

And in real life sometimes we get what we need. Sometimes we get what we want. Sometimes what we want and what we, therefore, get is not exactly what we really needed. Sometimes we get what we want but it turns out to be we did not need it. And, you know, that sounds like real life.

And Sondheim's show reflects that. Or, as Stephen's lyric implies, we set off each day on a new journey in life, the good, the bad, the indifferent. (Quote:) "Into the woods, / It's time to go, / I hate to leave, / I have to, though. / Into the woods— / It's time, and so / I must begin my journey."

"Into the woods / And down the dell, / The path is straight, / I know it well. / Into the woods, / And who can tell / What's waiting on the journey?"

"Into the woods, / It's time to go, / It may be all / In vain, you know. / Into the woods— / But even so, / I have to take the journey."

"The way is clear, / The light is good, / I have no fear, / Nor no one should. / The woods are just trees, / The trees are just wood. / No need to be afraid there— / There's something in the glade there..."

"Into the woods / Without regret, / The choice is made, / The task is set. / Into the woods, / But not forget— / Ting why I'm on the journey. / Into the woods / to get my wish, / I don't care how, / The time is now. / Into the woods, Then out of the woods, / And home before dark!" (Slight pause.)

These words are from the Scroll of the Prophet Jeremiah: "Thus says *Yahweh*, God: / Sing aloud with gladness, joy for Jacob, / and raise shouts for the chief of nations; / proclaim, make your praise heard, and say, / 'Save, O God, your people, / the remnant of

Israel.”” (Slight pause.)

The 30<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Jeremiah, taken as a whole, presents us with a picture of real life. I say it's a picture of real life because it presents a pictures of a time of exile. This is time which encompasses danger and pain, as real life often does.

But it also and even therefore presents pictures of joy and triumph. Jeremiah seems to inherently understand that no matter what real life brings God is to be praised because God is with us. God, it says, is with the people.

And, if God is with the people it certainly begs the question: who are the people of God? For Israel the answer was the members of the tribe. But that answers begs a second question: who really belongs to the tribe of God? (Slight pause.) My answer is simple: everyone— all of humanity, whole human race, belongs to the tribe of God.

And that is yet another reason I say The 30<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Jeremiah— and at your own leisure you should read the 30<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Jeremiah— that is yet another reason I say The 30<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Jeremiah taken as a whole presents us with a picture of real life. You see, if we simply break ourselves down into tribes, if we deteriorate into tribalism, then we've missed at least part of the point of the covenant God makes with humanity: to love neighbor.

And the part of the covenant which says love neighbor can also be said this way: we are all in this together. So, if we do not understand that the life of each of us is to be treasured, then we do not understand covenant.

If we do not understand that when we consider only ourselves, then we do not understand covenant. If we do not understand radical individualism does not satisfy the covenant of God that says we are called to be in relationship with others, then we do not understand covenant.

If we do not understand that together we need to work for the common good, then we do not understand covenant. So, this is the call of covenant: we are not alone. We need one another. We, together, need to be a community of faith, a community of God.

Will there be people in that community with whom we do not agree, with whom we do not get along? Yes. But we are, all of us, one people— the people of God. (Slight pause.)

Coming back to *Into the Woods*, we, each of us, goes into the woods daily to face the ups

and downs of life. In a real sense we face giants. In that musical Jack of *Jack and the Beanstalk* says (quote:) “There are Giants in the sky! / There are big, tall, terrible, awesome, scary, wonderful / Giants in the sky!” And yes, we must face them every day. And yes, that’s not easy.

On the other hand, in a lyric toward the end Cinderella says this to Red Riding Hood whose mother has died (quote:) “Mother cannot guide you. / Now you’re on your own. / Only me beside you. / Still, you’re not alone. / No one is alone.”

“Truly. / No one is alone. / Sometimes people leave you. / Halfway through the wood. / Others may deceive you. / You decide what’s good. / You decide alone. / But no one is alone.” (Slight pause.)

In a couple of minutes we shall bless stuffed animals. [1] Why? We frail humans sometimes attach ourselves to things. But we humans also sometimes need reminders that we are not alone.

And being frail, sometimes we substitute not people but things to remind us we are not alone. I believe there’s nothing wrong with that, as long as we are aware the solace we seek from something inanimate is a substitution for a reality— a reality we might think slightly beyond our reach. And if that reality is beyond our reach then, we naturally, try to make substitutions.

In fact, sometimes we even make substitutions for God— possessions! Power! Rules! Rules!— we have all kinds of idols, all kinds of substitutions for God. But, you see, God calls us not to seek idols but to seek community and to be in community. And in community everything— everything is possible.

How? We are not alone. In community we are surrounded by the people of God. And in community God is with us. And in community everything is possible because God *is* with us. Amen.

01/04/0215

United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, New York

**BENEDICTION:** Hear now this blessing from the words of the Prophet Isaiah in the 60th chapter (Isaiah 60:19-20a): The sun shall no longer be / your light by day, / nor for brightness shall the moon / give you light by night; /for *Yahweh*, God, will be your everlasting light, / and your glory. Amen.

[1] This is that ceremony.

## A BLESSING OF THE STUFFED ANIMALS

### **PASTOR:**

So, why bless stuffed animals? I take this as a given: We appreciate tenderness, trust and vulnerability. And it's likely we even are at times tender and trusting and vulnerable. And the world can be filled with lions and tigers and bears which are real. Therefore sometimes our hearts need healing. Strange as it seems, there are times a stuffed animal does the trick. Indeed, at another church which blessed the stuffed animals in the Fall, one of the congregants, an elderly gentleman whose wife needed full time care, brought to church for a blessing like this a teddy bear which had been given to his wife and kept her company in the facility in which she now lived. That bear was representative of the vow made to his wife of 58 years (quote): "in sickness and in health." All of which is to say stuffed animals can be as real as love and hope in that they sometimes represent the best of our spiritual lives. And so, yes, there is a reason to bless inanimate things. Anyone who wants to bring their stuffed animal to the table, please do so and stay here with me and hold your animal. And anyone else who wants to come forward, please do so and do bring your bulletins. (Pause.) Won't you join with us in the prayers and the hymn lyrics found in the bulletin.

### ONE:

God, you have done so many things! The earth is full of your creations!

### **PASTOR:**

Please join with us in the hymn *All Things Bright and Beautiful*.

### HYMN

*All Things Bright and Beautiful*, Refrain and v. 1

#### Refrain:

All things bright and beautiful,  
All creatures great and small,  
All things wise and wonderful:  
Our dear God made them all.

Each little flow'r that opens,  
Each little bird that sings,  
God made their glowing colors,  
God made their tiny wings.

**MANY:**

**The animals of God's creation, both real and stuffed, are placed in our care.**

**ONE:**

All these share in our human existence and have a part in our human lives.

**READING**

*Teddy Bears* by J. L. Allen

**READIER 1:**

This poem is *Teddy Bears* by J. L. Allen.

Teddy Bears are perfect pets.  
They never shed and never sweat.  
They don't talk back and hardly eat.  
Won't jump in bed with dirty feet.

They never argue, never fight.  
Whatever's said, you're always right.  
So if you need some love to share,  
Get yourself a Teddy Bear!

**HYMN**

*All Things Bright and Beautiful*, Refrain and v. 2

**Refrain:**

All things bright and beautiful,  
All creatures great and small,  
All things wise and wonderful:  
Our dear God made them all.

The purple-headed mountains,  
The river running by,  
The sunset and the morning  
That brightens up the sky.

**READING**

From *Winnie-The-Pooh*, by A.A. Milne.

**READIER 2:**

This is from *Winnie-The-Pooh*, by A. A. Milne.

“Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind.

Piglet whispered, ‘Pooh?’

Said Pooh, ‘Yes, Piglet?’

‘Oh, Nothing’ said Piglet, taking Pooh’s hand. ‘I just wanted to be sure of you.’

**MANY:**

**God, who gives life and breath to us, and often uses the service of animals both live and stuffed to give us comfort, we ask that you bless these, our friends.**

## HYMN

*All Things Bright and Beautiful*, Refrain, v. 3 and Refrain.

## Refrain:

All things bright and beautiful,

All creatures great and small,

All things wise and wonderful:

Our dear God made them all.

The teddy on the sofa,

The kitty in the bin,

The doggie’s paws, so nice and soft,

They sometimes feel like kin.

## Refrain:

All things bright and beautiful,

All creatures great and small,

All things wise and wonderful:

Our dear God made them all.

**MANY:**

**Sometimes the world is a scary place, but we are not alone. God is with us and surrounds us with love!**

## ONE:

May God, the Creator of all that is, God the Redeemer of all Creation, and God the life giving Spirit, bless you all, and bless these our friends now and forever. And the people said:

**MANY:**  
**Amen!**