



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

July 16, 2023 ♦ 7th Sunday after Pentecost



This bulletin is designed to assist you as you watch our livestreamed worship service, whether you follow along live or view it at a later time. The stream can be found on our YouTube channel at this location:

<https://www.youtube.com/@AnokaUCC>

Welcome & Announcements

If you would like to join our mailing list, email office@uccanoka.org and ask to be added.

Prelude

Gideon Scheeler

The Church Bell Rings

* Opening Hymn

“O God, Our Help in Ages Past” #25

**O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home.**

**Under the shadow of your throne your saints have dwelt secure;
sufficient is your arm alone, and our defense is sure.**

**Before the hills in order stood or earth received its frame,
from everlasting you are God, to endless years the same.**

**A thousand ages in your sight are like an evening gone,
short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun.**

**Time, like an ever-flowing stream, soon bears us all away;
we fly forgotten, as a dream fades at the opening day.**

**O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
still be our God while troubles last, and our eternal home!**

* Call to Worship and Opening Prayer (adapted from Psalm 90)

One: Holy One, you have been our home in all generations.

**Many: Before the mountains rose or the seas covered the earth, you were
Sovereign.**

One: You are eternal, loving us from before the beginning of all things.

Many: A thousand years pass by for you like a day!

One: Teach us to count our days with wisdom and care, God.

Many: Steady us with your endless love, that we may rejoice in gratitude all our days!

One: Let your favor be upon us, Architect of Heaven;

Many: Show us how to live long and prosper!

One: Let us pray.

Many: Gracious One, our lives are so often filled with turmoil and strain; it makes us want to skip to the end of the story and read the ending! But we affirm that all things must end in Love, for you are sovereign and Love is your truth and being. Help us to trust that and you. Assure us again that even during the long days and night of worry and anxiety we are not alone; the floods will always subside. We pray this in your holy name and out of our love for your child, Jesus. Amen.

A Time for Children (10:30)

ADVISORY: The livestream of the service continues during the Children's Time; if your child sits facing the Pastor their face shouldn't appear on camera.

Prayer of Preparation

“Pour Out Your Spirit”

C. Grundy

From the sac - red__ wa - ters__ of__ my__ birth
to the sac - red__ wa - ters__ of__ this__ hour,
I have leaned up-on__ You__ who knit me__ in__ my__
moth-er's womb. O pour out Your Spir - it now._____

Special Music

“The Wood Song”

Ray/Saliers

*Kari Johnson, Mike Benz, and Alice and Randy Getchell
Original song by The Indigo Girls*

*The thin horizon of a plan is almost clear / My friends and I have had a tough time
Bruising our brains hard up against change; / All the old dogs and the magician
Now I see we're in the boat in two-by-twos, / Only the heart that we have for a tool we could use
And the very close quarters are hard to get used to; / Love weighs the hull down with its weight*

*(Chorus) But the wood is tired, and the wood is old, / And we'll make it fine, if the weather holds.
But if the weather holds, we'll have missed the point; / That's where I need to go.*

*No way construction of this tricky plan / Was built by other than a greater hand
With a love that passes all our understanding / Watching closely over the journey, yeah.
But what it takes to cross the great divide / Seems more than all the courage I can muster up inside.
But we get to have some answers when we reach the other side / The prize is always worth the rocky ride.*

*Sometimes I ask to sneak a closer look; / Skip to the final chapter of the book
And then maybe steer us clear from some of the pain it took / To get us where we are this far.
But the question drowns in its futility, / Even I have got to laugh at me.
No one gets to miss the storm of what will be / Just holding on for the ride.*

<p><i>Children ages 3 and up may depart at this time for faith formation activities. Activity bags are available in the back of the sanctuary for those who might enjoy them.</i></p>

Scripture Reading – Genesis 7:17-24

The flood continued forty days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. ¹⁸ The waters swelled and increased greatly on the earth; and the ark floated on the face of the waters. ¹⁹ The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered; ²⁰ the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep. ²¹ And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings; ²² everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. ²³ He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark. ²⁴ And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days.

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Many: Thanks be to God.

Hymn

“God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale” #32

**God of the sparrow, God of the whale, God of the swirling stars:
how does the creature say Awe? How does the creature say Praise?**

**God of the earthquake, God of the storm, God of the trumpet blast:
how does the creature cry Woe? How does the creature cry Save?**

**God of the rainbow, God of the cross, God of the empty grave:
how does the creature say Grace? How does the creature say Thanks?**

**God of the hungry, God of the sick, God of the prodigal:
how does the creature say Care? How does the creature say Life?**

**God of the neighbor, God of the foe, God of the pruning hook:
how does the creature say Love? How does the creature say Peace?**

**God of the ages, God near at hand, God of the loving heart:
how do your children say Joy? How do your children say Home?**

Acts of Prayer

*If you wish to share a prayer with the congregation (joy, concern, hope, worry, or anything at all),
you may write it upon the supplied index card and give it to a Deacon during the Interlude.
Write “SILENT” on the card if you want the Pastor to see it but not say it aloud.*

Offering

Text-to-Give: [844-334-1477](tel:844-334-1477)

Thank you for your gifts to our ministries!

*You may also set up online giving at uccanoka.org or text your gift to the church using
the Text-to-Give number above; both services are provided by Vanco. Thank you!*

Interlude

Gideon Scheeler

Prayers of the People

*The Pastor will read aloud the prayers of the congregation, occasionally including the call/response:
God in your love // **Hear our prayer.** Prayers marked “SILENT” will not be read aloud.*

Prayer of Our Savior (unison)

*The Prayer has many versions; pray whichever you desire (debts, sins, trespasses, etc.).
We affirm that God has many names, so use one of the suggested or another of your choosing.*

**Our Father/Mother/Creator, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy
kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our**

daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Benediction

Congregational Blessing “God Be With You” (#809) Dorsey/Hutchins

**God be with you. God be with you. God be with you ‘til we meet again.
O God be with you. God be with you. God be with you ‘til we meet again.**

Postlude

Gideon Scheeler

You may be seated as you listen to the Postlude. If you choose to depart at this time, please speak gently as you exit out of respect for those who choose to listen.

COFFEE HOUR IS SERVED AFTER WORSHIP!

Those who would like to talk about membership are invited to join Pastor Chris during Coffee Hour today for a time of conversation and story-sharing.

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

If we dive deeply into the story, it’s not hard to start wondering how Noah and his family tolerated their months-long sequestration inside the ark. I mean, for starters you know it had to stink in there, and not the kind of stink you get used to over time. I mean, that place would have been funktastic. The Bible doesn’t say it, but they had to have constructed the stable-chambers inside that boat with drainage holes. They’d spend almost their entire time mucking out manure. They would have needed to bring in extra meat for the carnivores, lest they start looking at their neighbors as prey. No lion is going to lay down with the lamb in that boat. And the noise? Oh, the noise would have been tremendous. Even just that male lion alone would have been unearthly with its echoing call, not to mention the elephants.

But of course the story is a metaphor, and one that feels so real. Who hasn’t felt at some point like the very close quarters are hard to get used to? Chicago sang it well: **“Everybody needs a little time away, I heard her say, from each other...”** The deeps just get deeper if we expand that into life. We’re so bombarded nowadays with bad news that it feels like we’re hemmed in on all sides. Russia continuing to

bombard Ukraine with missile strikes. Rampant misinformation and corruption among elected officials. Homophobic citizens flooding school board chambers with false and cruel claims about our LGBTQ+ students and the best ways to love them into safety. The seven hottest days ever recorded on earth all happening this month. These very close quarters are hard to get used to.

It's funny to me that when I went online looking for more information about "The Wood Song" I kept finding bloggers who said that the song was about nature and finding spirituality and inspiration in the natural world. I mean, I'm all for everyone hearing a song or sermon in their own way, but the crotchety old pastor in me wants to call out, "Uh, did you actually read the lyrics?" It's about the ark! It's about wondering if God has a plan for us in this life that is so filled with fear and misery! It's about a changing world where we just keep bruising our brains trying to make sense of it all! It's the same ancient question that people have been asking for millennia. Is there a plan, or even the thin horizon of one? Is God really in charge? What does that even mean? Why does awful crap keep happening?

I don't know how well it's known that Emily Saliers of The Indigo Girls is a woman of faith. Her dad, the Rev. Dr. Don Saliers, was the longtime chair of the sacred music program at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. He's a widely published and sought-out speaker on all things music and church, and sometimes his daughter joins him at his speaking engagements. In one year when I still lived in Nebraska, he was the keynote speaker at Eden Seminary's annual convocation AND the keynoter for the Nebraska Conference Annual Meeting. It might be that a lot of the Indigo Girls' fans aren't themselves terribly religious, and so they don't recognize the overt Biblical imagery in this song. The song simply hits them in a different place.

But me? It's all about those ancient questions.

That was the struggle that Israel faced whenever foreign empires came stomping through Palestine, destroying, capturing, and pillaging along the way. The foremost event was the Babylonian Conquest in the early 500's BCE, followed closely by the Assyrian conquest of the north a century or two before that. How could these happen? How could a loving God allow God's own people to be conquered and captured and brought into bondage? How could the people who guarded God's very presence on earth in Jerusalem possibly be defeated? They struggled to even see the thin horizon of a tricky plan. They wanted to sneak a closer look at the final chapter of the book, but of course that wouldn't work. The ways of God are mysterious, yeah?

Despite that, ancient people of faith came to certain conclusions. The most earthly and accurate analysis held that Israel and Judah's kings had fallen to corruption and stopped protecting their people. This paved the way for conquest. At one point, King Josiah, remembered as positively as any king in the Hebrew Bible, actually took to the field of battle with Judah's forces to try and throw a wrench into a conflict between Egypt to the southwest and the failing Assyrian Empire to the northeast. He thought he could reclaim some of the Northern Kingdom for Judah, but all he got for his trouble was an arrow to the chest. His successors were weak, and that was that. Judah fell to Babylon within a generation or two.

Beyond those earthly reasons, Judah struggled to discern where God was in all of it, and they ultimately decided that God was still in control, even if they didn't always grasp why these bad things kept happening. (When your theology includes a punishing God, these things happen.) Maybe that's when we picked up phrases like "a love that passes all our understanding." This includes trying to wrap our brains around what love looks like when it includes violence! All of this informs the Flood Story.

You recall it; it's one of the most common stories kids learn in church. The people have grown wicked and out of control, and God gets so fed up with it that he decides to just wipe the slate clean and

start over. Genocide. But of all the people, there's one righteous man to be found—Noah (and his family)—and God decides to start over with that family, with Noah and his nameless wife taking over as the new Adam and Eve. It's a thing, and God even offered to start over with Moses, too, after the golden calf. So God instructs Noah to build this big ark to save all of the air-breathing creatures of earth; God needs to preserve the gene pool, you see. Easier than starting from scratch at the atomic level. And once that job is done and the entry hatch is sealed, God releases all of that pent up anger, frustration, disappointment, dismay, and despair and floods the world. And while it says in the story that God told Noah it would last forty days, I think it's reasonable to read the story as God getting way out of hand with the storms. Forty's not a specific number, after all. It's a symbol for “completeness” or “in the fullness of time.”

We love to remember the rainbow-covenant-promise at the end of the story, but the real moment of grace upon which the whole story turns is at the beginning of Chapter 8 when the author writes, “But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark.” It's only then, when God remembers, that God breathes away the clouds of doom and lets the sun shine again, drying the earth while the waters recede. That right there is the statement of faith that we can grasp and carry. *God remembers*. God will not abandon or forsake. God will re-member. God will re-connect the umbilical of love that feeds us and protects us as if within a womb. God's faithfulness knows no limit, a love that truly passes our limited, human understanding.

The Indigo Girls give us the assurance of that grace in the chorus: “but the wood is tired, and the wood is old, and we'll make it fine.” That's a statement of trust that the ark is strong enough to carry us through the storms of life. God's love is strong enough to carry us. God will remember. And though we'd like the weather to hold, we also embrace the assurance that the bad weather's going to come whether we like it or not. We aren't in control of it. We don't get to miss the storm of what will be. We just have to hold on for the ride.

But see, we need a ride. An ark. A vessel of love that will keep us sheltered amidst the storm. And that's when we remember: God's still building arks today; it's just that we are the wood. We might be tired. We might be old. But if we join our edges together with care and love that wood's gonna hold. We build an ark of salvation whenever we pool our gifts to protect the weakest among us. When we house the homeless and feed the hungry. When we draw a line in the sand and say, “Our LGBTQ+ neighbors are FULLY formed in the image of God and your hate and fear cannot change that.” When we stop pillaging the earth for short-term gain and start restoring it for long-term stability and health. WE are the ark. WE are the carpenters. WE are the shipwrights who help God navigate the arc of the moral universe toward healing and love. And we do it together, because it's too scary to go it alone.

Jesus once said, “You'll always have the poor with you” (Matthew 26:11a), but that's only if we refuse to be ark-builders. And though the voyage will be rocky, we know there's a prize at the end that makes it all worthwhile: the Beloved Community when the planet flourishes, when war will be no more, when war and anguish and pain will be no more, when each person is loved and embraced by their neighbors just as much as God already loves them.

That's where we need to go.

Amen.

♦ **First Congregational Church UCC, Anoka, MN** ♦

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First Congregational Church, UCC of Anoka is an Open and Affirming Christian Community for all. We affirm that the image of God is most fully reflected in diversity. We invite all people to share their energy and talents in full participation with our community. We welcome all individuals and families of any sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, gender expression, relationship status, race, national origin, socioeconomic status, age, mental and physical health or ability, or belief. Together, we celebrate these and all other facets of one's essential being.