

Stories**Sunday, March 7, 2021 || 3rd Sunday of Lent || Pastor Christy Wright**

We invite you to light a candle at 9:30 AM and join us in prayer ONLINE or over the PHONE

Audio worship, including music, prayers, and the sermon is available at

<https://georgewhitefieldumc.weebly.com/worship-services>

Audio worship is also available at (978) 990-5000, access code 719365#. Just dial in, enter the access code on your keypad, and you will hear the service begin with music.

This Lenten Series is adapted from Marcia McFee's Holy Vessels curriculum.

Prelude *Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken/Mendelssohn's Consolation Op. 30, No. 3* *Melissa Quilitzsch*

Announcements**Opening Hymn**

Be Still, My Soul

UMH 534

1. *Be still, my soul: the Lord is on your side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
Leave to your God to order and provide;
In every change God faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: you best, your heavenly friend
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

3. *Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on
When we shall be forever with the Lord,
When disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
Sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past,
All safe and blessed we shall meet at last.*

2. *Be still, my soul: your God will undertake
To guide the future, as in ages past.
Your hope, your confidence let nothing shake;
All now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
The Christ who ruled them while he dwelt below.*

Introduction - Marcia McFee

Those who collect beach glass often become "archeologists"—seeking out any markings or clues as to the story of the original piece. It often takes much time to bring out the truth behind it. This week we acknowledge the power of truth-telling as a healing property. There are stories that have shaped our lives, leaving us without the ability to see who we truly are in the eyes of God and leaving us without the ability to speak the depth of our stories of struggle. We focus on the importance of recovery of mental health, reclaiming our sense of who we are and being able to proclaim new redemptive stories of divine worth.

Let us acknowledge our need to restore, repair, and renew our Holy Vessels, and that the health of our minds deeply affects our physical and spiritual health. Let us pray: Centering and Calming Divine Breath of God, You gifted us with amazing minds, capable of so many things. You gave us the ability to think and feel, imbuing us with discernment of thought and emotion. Like our physical bodies, sometimes this aspect of ourselves is beleaguered. We struggle under the strain of disappointment, despair, and delusion. Too often we hide this, afraid of what others might think of our difficulties in managing or moving forward, even in the face of devastating circumstances. Too often we perpetuate the stigma of a less-than-perfect state of mind by shaming ourselves and others. Millennia of misunderstanding compounds our fear. We label and belittle, all the while turning the hatred upon ourselves, for no one is immune from troubles of the mind at some point. People opened their lives to Jesus. We are drawn to the Healer—opening our hearts with honesty about our lives and finding assurance that offers peace. So many are suffering now, God, weary and distraught, grieving and at the end of their rope. We cannot fathom the proportions of loss and so we look away, sometimes even from the need in our own community. Help us, Healer. Show us our capacity for compassion. Forgive our inattention. Move us to move one step at a time toward greater care for one another. In this silence, we sense and acknowledge our yearning for wholeness.

Know this: You are accepted. No. Matter. What. Accepting the truth of our difficulties is part of the journey of recovery. Sharing our stories of difficulty can open the way for healing. For you, for me, for all. Take a deep breath in to let this truth fill you... and breathe out with the relief of assurance.

Vessels, holy and whole. Broken, needing the One. Open, body and soul. Healer, come.

Scripture Reading - Matthew 9:27-33

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, crying loudly, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to him, "Yes, Lord." Then he touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith let it be done to you." And their eyes were opened. Then Jesus sternly ordered them, "See that no one knows of this." But they went away and spread the news about him throughout that district. After they had gone away, a demoniac who was mute was brought to him. And when the demon had been cast out, the one who had been mute spoke; and the crowds were amazed and said, "Never has anything like this been seen in Israel."

Sermon - Pastor Christy Wright

When I was in college, I got my first true sense of what I'm calling "toxic empathy." For those who know me well, they know that I have an empathetic presence, but most don't know how much of a struggle that can be sometimes. In college, I lived and went to school with friends and colleagues who were all dealing with a lot, too much for any one friend to be able to solve or make better, regardless of how hard I tried. And as an empathetic person, I always struggled with how to best be present for them. If someone was crying, my response would always be tears. If someone was angry, I would be right there with them. But to mirror someone's emotions, and to carry them as though they were my own - is that really the healthiest thing to do? It got to a point where I wasn't sure which emotions belonged to me, and which didn't. My own empathy had become toxic.

When explaining this to one of my chaplains, he was very supportive and said that this was a good thing; it showed that I cared a lot about my friends and, in fact, all those I encountered. But he also suggested that there might be better ways to show up for people who needed help, and better ways to care for my own mental and emotional health, so he gave me the contact information for our on-campus counselor. Though at first apprehensive, I agreed to make an appointment. And, to be honest, it didn't go well. When I explained the situation, the therapist seemed dismissive - if I wasn't in crisis, why was I there? Eventually I just dropped it and instead tried to create better boundaries.

It wasn't until seminary when I tried counseling again, and the difference was like night and day. Counseling isn't just something we should tap into when we're in crisis mode - though it can be extremely helpful then too. No, counseling can be something so life-giving, regardless of our current circumstances. You see, it was here where I found absolute freedom - freedom to be able to explore my emotions with someone I trusted. It helped me to get a better handle on my identity as an empath and how to best use my gifts for myself and for others. And again, during the throes of the pandemic, I sought out counseling to create a toolbox of techniques for how best to care for myself and others, because y'all, sometimes we just need a little extra help.

In this morning's scripture reading, we hear of a story of two blind men who followed Jesus and begged for his healing. It can be assumed that these men had been blind from birth; they had never known anything different from their current experience. But there was something so compelling about Jesus, something so mysterious, that somehow they knew where Jesus was, and who he was. They had the faith to believe that Jesus would heal them, but I can guarantee you that these blind men didn't get to Jesus all by themselves. It's interesting that there was a mute man in their midst too. I wonder, had it been him who led the blind men to Jesus?

In their faith, these blind men followed Jesus into the house (or were led by the mute man), and by their faith, they were healed. Their eyes were opened. And everything was new. Everything was different, and they rejoiced and told all who would listen about Jesus' great healing power.

Several years ago, my eyes were opened to the importance of normalizing conversations about mental health. For some reason, we want to hide behind our emotions and pretend everything is okay. One of my good friends, who is a pastor, said this a few months ago: "With God, it's always okay to not be okay." With God, we can find healing. But sometimes God also presents other people in our lives to help us along the way, like counselors and therapists - and like the mute man who helped the two blind men get to Jesus. God wants the best for us; but sometimes that requires a leap of faith, allowing ourselves to get the help we need toward healing and wholeness. We are not meant to journey alone. Praise be to God that we don't have to.

As we close this morning, I want you to know that I am present for you in whatever ways I can be. I am not a licensed therapist or counselor, but I can pray with and for you, and I can be a listening ear. If you would like information about counseling or therapy in our area, I'm more than happy to pass along some resources. It has been a long year. A difficult year. But we are not alone, and we know healing is right around the corner. My hope and prayer is that we find the

freedom for which we've been searching, as we close with this blessing from John O'Donohue: *As a bird soars high in the free holding of the wind, clear of the certainty of ground, opening the imagination of wings into the grace of emptiness to fulfill new voyagings, may your life awaken to the call of its freedom. As the ocean absolves itself of the expectation of land, approaching only in the form of waves that fill and pleat and fall with such gradual elegance as to make of the limit a sonorous threshold whose music echoes back along the give and strain of memory, thus may your heart know the patience that can draw infinity from limitation. As the embrace of the earth welcomes all we call death, taking deep into itself the tight solitude of a seed, allowing it time to shed the grip of former form and give way to a deeper generosity that will one day send it forth, a tree into springtime, may all that holds you fall from its hungry ledge into the fecund surge of your heart. Amen.*

Hymn of Meditation

It is Well With My Soul

UMH 377

1. *When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

3. *My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!*

Refrain: It is well with my soul; it is well, it is well with my soul.

2. *Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed his own blood for my soul.*

4. *And, Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.*

Prayer of Meditation - Marcia McFee

Healer of our every ill, especially our malady of stigmatized fear of mental illness, we come before you to make our petitions known. Hear our cries for healing of body, mind, and spirit. We know that already you are at work among us, showing us the way to recovery from the toxicities and grief of our time. You have stamped each one of us as "worthy." We give you thanks that your mercy is wide and your faithfulness to us not depend upon having our feelings sorted out or our sense of well-being secure. You are not waiting for us to "get our act together" before offering us your love and grace. We pray especially for those who have experienced heightened and acute mental and emotional difficulties as a result of this past year of isolation and fear. We pray for those who feel far from hope and we mourn those who could not find a lifeline to survive this hardship. We pray for those who find themselves without access to adequate care, someone to talk to, or appropriate resources to steady their hearts and minds. We give thanks for those who are telling their stories, showing us how to open our hearts to help others and offering ripples of healing in the community. We pray grateful thanks for progress toward holistic healthcare and the efforts of all who are working to de-stigmatize mental illness, making it easier to ask for, and get, the help so desperately needed. We ask for courage and encouragement to re-evaluate how we as a church can help now and into the future. We pray this day for...

In Our Prayers. Thanksgiving for: the gifts that make ministry possible, medical professionals and researchers. Holding in our hearts: those experiencing unemployment, those facing racial injustice and violence and cannot breathe under the weight of oppression, for our congregation as we grieve the loss of loved ones (particularly for the family and loved ones of Priscilla Toppin, who entered eternal life last week), those experiencing illness or health issues - especially those who are ill with Covid-19, and (for Al (and family as they care for him), Dan D. (Vicki's husband), Kelly R., Lindsey S.), those in nursing homes or extended care facilities (Betty, Claire), those caring for others (Carrie G., Crystal, Rachel), the United Methodist Church. *Note that this list will renew each month.*

Commissioning and Benediction - Marcia McFee

Each week we look at the reaction of the crowd in the healing story. This week the crowd was amazed and cried out that nothing like it had ever been seen before. How interesting that the crowd is "seeing" something for the first time, just like the blind man is brought to sight! Could it be that this is as important to the story as the ones who received physical healing? How could we open our eyes, figuratively, in new ways? What do we need to envision anew? And so in our communal discerning about how this church community could become a "health hub" through our ministry and mission, let us put our minds to imagining how we could shine a positive light on the work of mental health. The needs are so urgent, especially now. Throughout this time, I invite you to explore with us the possibilities for a new or renewed commitment to a contribution we can make at George Whitefield United Methodist Church to our larger community's effort to recover from this past year.

Now go with confidence that the One Who Is Living Water is already cleansing, renewing, and clarifying our lives, recovering our depth of love for all and our joy of living in this world. May the words of Jesus ring in your ears: "Do you believe it is possible?" And may the Spirit hover, move, and deliver salve to your soul and a spring in your step. Amen.

Postlude

Dreamweaver

Melissa Quilitzsch

Community Announcements

- **Important Announcement - A Letter From Pastor Christy.** Dear Beloved Community of George Whitefield UMC, as I reflect over the past two years, I have absolutely fallen in love with this community. We have walked together through some of the most joyous and most painful circumstances, but all the while, we have held fast to God's great love. Your warmth has been such a blessing, and I have felt so welcomed from day one. This is why it is with a heavy heart and a trusting spirit that I announce that Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar intends to appoint me to the First United Methodist Church of Stoughton, MA effective July 1, 2021 subject to fulfilling all the requirements needed for a successful transition by the pastor and the respective churches affected by the appointment. The appointment will be finalized at the 2021 Annual Conference Session of the New England Conference. The Staff Parish Relations Committee will be working with our District Superintendent, Rev. Megan Stowe, on discerning our next pastor. Please be in prayer during this process. I trust that your next pastor will be an incredible blessing to you as you have been an incredible blessing to me. Beloved community, know that I continue to hold you all in prayer during this transition, and that you will always remain in my heart. If you have any questions or input as we discern our next pastor, please reach out to Crystal Armitage at (413) 364-9709. In Christ's love and trust, Pastor Christy Wright
- **Upcoming Meetings.** Ad Council will meet by conference call on Wednesday, March 10th at 10 AM on our phonenumber at (978) 990-5000, access code 719365#. The Reopening Advisory Board will meet on Monday, March 15th at 7 PM, also by conference call using the same number above.
- **Prayer Chain.** As a church, we are a wonderful community of prayer. When a need arises, we send it through the prayer chain so we can all meditate together. If you would like to be a part of this prayer chain, reach out to Jane Dolan, who will put you on the list.
- **Covid-19 Vaccines.** Several groups of folks are now eligible to receive the Covid-19 vaccine in Massachusetts! Please visit <https://www.mass.gov/covid-19-vaccine> to sign up or call 2-1-1 for over-the-phone assistance with scheduling. If you need help signing up, please call Pastor Christy, and she can walk you through the process.
- **Pastor Christy's Office Hours: MARCH.** Pastor Christy's office hours have shifted to **Mondays** and Wednesdays from 8 AM to 4 PM and Thursdays from 8 AM to 12 noon in March. If you have an emergency outside of office hours, please call her cell phone, leave a message, and she will get back to you as soon as possible.
- **NEW Financial Secretaries. THANK YOU** to Gail for your tremendous commitment and dedication as our Financial Secretary over the past several years! We are so grateful to Betty Sue and Heidi for your giving spirits as our new Financial Secretaries, which began on February 1st. As we transition leadership, **please remember to mail your offerings directly to the church at PO Box 576, West Brookfield, MA 01585.** Thank you!
- **Heifer Project.** Once we have a count of how much we raised, we'll include a list of animals/projects we could support, and we'll make decisions soon. Thank you for your support!

Sonshine Phone Calls and Cards List

If you know of anyone who could be added to our Sonshine list, let Pastor Christy know.

Betty Hubbard

47 E Main St.

West Brookfield, MA 01585

Kelly Rice

98 Lake Shore Drive

West Brookfield, MA 01585

Claire Wirf

(508) 791-8131 (mornings)

838 Mill Street

Worcester, MA 01602

Daily Devotionals

Refuge: A Guided Lent Devotional by Rev. Kelsey Beebe

The Upper Room Daily Devotionals official magazines are still being distributed.

If you would like a copy, please let Pastor Christy know.

Monday, March 8th through Saturday, March 13th || Written by Rev. Kelsey Beebe

We invite you to light a candle at 9:30 AM daily, meditate on our given scripture, and join us in prayer

Monday, March 8th, 2021**Read Proverbs 3:3**

We have come to our third Monday of Lent and are thus returning the practice of S.H.I.F.T. I pray that it centers your heart and fills you with inspiration and hope as you begin your week. In your journal, reflect on the following questions:

- Where are you finding the SACRED in your life? Or in other words, where do you see God at work in your life?
 - What is giving you HOPE?
 - What has INSPIRED you lately?
 - What FILLED your cup last week?
 - What are you THANKFUL for?

If you are feeling stuck, refer back to the first week of Lent when we first did this practice for an example.

Tuesday, March 9th, 2021**Read Isaiah 42:16**

Have you ever seen the poster with footprints on the beach with the saying, “When you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you”? It is a bit cliché, I know, but I do believe strongly that God journeys with us and does not abandon us. Even in the moments when we feel lost and alone, God is there, making a way. Today, write a prayer to God in your journal. Reflect on the times in your life when you thought all hope was lost, but then a way was made.

Give thanks for those moments.

Wednesday, March 10th, 2021**Read John 6:33**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of people learned to make bread. I was not one of those people. However, I did have the privilege of witnessing that bread of God that gives life to the world. In a year of a lot of death, hardship, and loss, I saw how people rallied together to make sure food banks were full. I witnessed folks delivering meals to the home-bound and buying groceries for elders. That, my friends, is the bread of life in action. We fed each other – both literally and spiritually. As you journal today, I invite you to reflect on where you saw that bread of God giving life to the world. Then, with every meal you eat this week, say an extra prayer of thanks for the food before you and everyone who took part in the making of it – from the smallest seat to where it rests before you on the table now. What a gift.

Thursday, March 11th, 2021**Read Job 38:1, 4**

At the end of every podcast interview I do, I always ask my guests, “If you could ask God anything, what would you ask?”

The most common answer I get is some variation of, “Why?” Why all of the suffering? Why so much hardship? Why is there evil in the world? Why are people awful to each other? Why do you not intervene? In the book of Job, we encounter a man (Job) who loses everything. His wife, his kids, his livelihood, his health. Everything but his body, soul, and the clothes on his back. Through much of this Bible story, Job is sitting with his friends and they are asking essentially the same question: why? Then, as Job is lamenting with his friends, God speaks out of the storm: Where you there when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you understand. God gives an entire recollection of the story of creation. God essentially tells Job: I am God and you are not, and the workings of the universe are too wide and vast for you to understand. It is not so much an answer to the question of why but more God explaining why God cannot possibly answer that question in a way we can comprehend. It is a mystery far beyond our understanding. For your journal, I invite you to respond to the question I ask my podcast guests: If you could ask God anything, what would you ask?

Perhaps write a letter to God and ask your question.

Friday, March 12th, 2021**Read Ecclesiastes 1:7**

After reading this morning’s scripture, I invite you to open your Bible to a random page. Read a paragraph or two, and see if there is something there that speaks to your heart. If nothing on that page stands out, rather than flipping to somewhere else in the Bible, I encourage you to stay on that page and keep looking. Even just for a word or a short phrase. It might surprise you what you find. As we have done before, write down the word or phrase that catches your attention. Reflect on what it means to you.

Saturday, March 13th, 2021**Read Philippians 4:6-8**

Sit with this passage from Philippians for a moment. What does it mean to you? As someone who struggles with anxiety, sometimes that first sentence irks me. But as I keep reading, I hear the true message of the writer: our anxieties can ease (not necessarily be cured) when we bring our prayers to God – our joys, our concerns, as well as our gritudes. I know in the times when my depression or anxiety has a hold of my spirit, prayers is one of the things that fills my heart with that peace that passes all understanding. It also reminds me that, even on my worst days, I can at least try to focus my thoughts on those things that are true, holy, just, and lovely – even if it is just noticing how cozy and safe the weight of a cozy blanket feels – and find something to be grateful for. Take note today of what is weighing on you. Bring your joys and your concerns to God. Write them down. And then, write down a few things that you know to be true, holy, just, lovely, pure, or worthy of praise.