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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Psalm 90: 1-2; Luke 13: 34b; Matthew 7: 24-27
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Shelter From the Storm

Nine years ago our family had just moved into the parsonage when the White Elephant Sale came around. I had heard a frightful story about a former associate minister who, for whatever reason, was moving into or out of the parsonage around the time of the sale, and had all of her stuff hauled over to the church and sold. Which I thought was kind of hilarious. At the time, I remember standing up here in the pulpit and pleading with all of you not to sell our stuff. We had moved from a house that was tiny - it had about four walls and little else - and we didn't arrive here with all that much. Here's the difference nine years makes: these days, I'm liable to stand up here and plead - please, take our stuff! We're good!

In all seriousness, I do think this weekend, and this Sunday, is one of the more important times in our calendar year. For all of the headaches and logistical dilemmas the sale poses, to say nothing of the acquisitive impulses it unleashes in many of us - myself included by the way - the sale is a pretty wonderful thing for this community. For those working the sale, it brings everyone together for the sake of a common project, which, given the fragmentation and isolation we've experienced, we all need. For those who come to shop, it provides the thrill of a treasure hunt, for you never know what might turn up. But beyond those things, as I walked around on Friday morning, what I felt was the sheer pleasure of the scene. The donuts and coffee. The hot dogs and sausages that some people were consuming for breakfast. The baked goods. But more than anything, what I loved seeing and experiencing were people sitting or standing around and just visiting with one another. I think it's a gift that this church gives to the community. I also think it represents the best of who we are - creating a space of celebration and pleasure through the dedication, support, and tireless work ethic of this church. What a gift that is.

What I'd like to do today is to focus on some other ways the supportive and dedicated nature of this community has been exemplified. And I'd like to get at that with the exalted language of poetry and song:

'Twas in another lifetime, one of toil and blood
 When blackness was a virtue the road was full of mud
 I came in from the wilderness, a creature void of form
 Come in, she said
 I'll give ya shelter from the storm.

Those are the words of Bob Dylan, from his song "Shelter From the Storm." Not long ago, I heard a story that captures those qualities well, as well as the best qualities of our church. It was the year 1968, when it seemed to many that the world was falling apart. For one family in town, it was. Their world crumbled. The father of this large family just picked up and left, leaving behind a wife and a house full of kids, ranging in age from high school to elementary school. He would never, thereafter, be a part of their lives. Those left behind to pick up the pieces were devastated, but the loss was compounded by the reactions of many living in town.

Divorce was regarded as a moral failure, and so those who had once been friendly ceased to return calls, stopped saying hello in the market, and told their children not to mix with the family whose lives had been upended. Even the church they attended told the mother in no uncertain terms that she would no longer be welcome.

That's when Rev. Hoag stepped in. Some of you knew Dick Hoag, and he made a brief cameo in my remarks last week, when I spoke about the Shakespeare plays he directed, and *The Merchant of Venice*, and Portia's famous speech about the quality of mercy. It turns out that Rev. Hoag knew about mercy. He spoke to the mother, and told her that of course she was welcome in this place, and of course her children would be embraced here. He told her about grace, about mercy, and as I imagine it, reminded her of the words of the Psalmist - if God kept track of iniquities, who could stand? No one. But with God, the Psalmist says, there is mercy. Within these hallowed walls, under this sacred dome, surrounded by a community that knew something about grace and mercy, that family found a home, a shelter from the storm of life.

I'm sure Rev. Hoag did what he did because he was a kind and thoughtful man. But he was also putting into practice an ancient theology that somehow, this congregation has come to embody. You can find it in those words of Jesus, where, shortly before his own death, he looks upon Jerusalem, that city that was and is the site of so much conflict and discord, that city upon which the merciless rain of hardship would descend, and he's moved to compassion. How often I have longed to gather you under my wing, as a mother hen gathers her young, he says. It's a beautiful image, where that wing would shelter and protect those that he loves from the pelting rains. It is as though Jesus himself wishes to use his own being, his very body, to shelter those in his care. It is as though, with his very body, God, in Jesus, offers a protective curve, a kind of dome under which we ourselves might gather when the storms of life kick up. "I came in from the wilderness, a creature void of form. Come in, he says, I'll give you shelter from the storm."

That's what God has promised to do and to be for us - providing, and becoming, a shelter from the storms of life. And we do, from time to time, face various storms: they come in the form of challenges to our relationships. They come in the form of national and international events in which we're swept up, independent of our own intentions. They come in the form of our aging bodies, and the fears and anxieties we sometimes confront in the night. They come in the form of regrets and the pain of loss. It's a human thing to undergo such storms. They do roll in. But God has promised to be that curve of the wing under which we can take shelter when the storms do come. In Jesus, we glimpse the Spiritual Presence that does seek us out, and that does find us, when we require that particular care, when we're exposed to the rains with our unhoused heads. God has promised to be our shelter from the storm.

That's precisely what a church is meant to be as well. We're intended to be a people who demonstrate the curved wing of God's sheltering care in our treatment of one another. I'm so proud of this community, because that happens around here all the time. Sure, it happens in our big endeavors, like providing sanctuary or resettling refugees. But it happens just as often in other things, like the White Elephant Sale. The real work of the sale isn't in the set up or the breakdown or the intake, although that certainly requires work. The real work is in the interactions people share while pricing, or sorting, or unloading. The real work is in being together, in talking, in ordinary exchanges where we create small but binding shelters for one another - how are you today? What's it been like for you this past year? How's your family doing? Let me get that for you. Whether you know it or not, you're creating small temples, temporary shrines in which to stand and be for a moment. This stuff matters, maybe more than we know. Because when the big storms come, and they do, we learn that those small, temporary

shelters were in actuality pieces of a greater whole, parts of the curved wing of God's protective cover. This is a community that understands how to provide that, and it makes me proud.

There's another dimension of this that I wish to explore with you. However true it is that the church is not a building, that the church is a collection of people demonstrating God's care in the world, it's also true that structures like this Meetinghouse are an icon, functioning to show off and demonstrate that same protective care for anyone who walks through these doors. This domed ceiling, which creates a near perfect acoustic environment, these glassed walls, this simple design in which we gather to sing and to pray, to think and to mark the passage of time through baptisms and weddings and funerals and communion - this place has been a shelter for generations, and with our care, it will be that for generations to come. If you think about it, this is the scaffolding or framework that allows us to do all the things we do. We could do it from a school or a rented movie theater, I guess, but we wouldn't be the same community. This architecture, this hallowed place, is a defining feature of who we are.

When a fire broke out on July 3rd, 1907, the Meetinghouse of the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme burned to the ground. Three years later, in 1910, this Meetinghouse was dedicated, and for 122 years people have been sheltering within these walls and under this roof. Think of it. Seven years after that dedication, the United States entered World War I, and no doubt this was a space of refuge for many in an uncertain and scary time. When the stock market collapsed a little more than a decade later, ushering in the years of the Great Depression, this hallowed roof would have sheltered those seeking relief from that great storm. When the Second World War broke out, we can imagine how our forebears might have come here in order to sense God's protective care amidst a turbulent time. Amidst all the tumult of Vietnam and then Watergate, we can imagine, and some of you may even remember, how this sacred structure became a house built upon rock, while everything else seemed to exist upon sand. From age to age, from generation to generation, this has been our dwelling place, a shelter from the storms of life. And so it shall continue to be.

A slate roof has quite literally served as our protective shelter for those 122 years, allowing people to gather safely in this sacred space. The time has now come to replace that roof - years of storms and weather have aged it, and the cracks have been showing for a while now. Last year, during a hurricane, the slate gave out, and the ceiling sprung a leak, narrowly missing the organ. It might have been a disaster, but thankfully it wasn't. As in life, so in architecture, there are times in which we need to tend to and care for the protective shelters under which we gather. That's why the Trustees have recently voted to replace the roof on the Meetinghouse, work that will begin later in August. Everyone who inspected the roof agreed that the work needed to begin immediately. It's true, it is a piece of property maintenance, and yes, it is a piece of historic and architectural preservation. But it is so much more than that. What we'll be doing later this summer assures that throughout whatever storms may yet come for next 100 years, this space will serve as the curved wing of God's embrace, a shelter in which to gain wisdom, find stability, and grow in faith.

The cost of such an endeavor is not insignificant. It comes to \$200,000. Thanks to an anonymous gift, we're now able to cover half of that cost. But we could use your help to cover the rest. No amount is too large! But no amount is too small either. A gift of \$10 or \$25 will help, and so will gifts of \$100, or maybe even a \$1000, or maybe even more than that. I know times are hard. I know budgets are tight. But I submit to you that this is a worthy cause, a worthy project, and a worthy appeal. A roof is more than just a roof. It is a symbol and an icon

of the protective canopy of God's gracious love for humanity, even through life's difficult passages. It is, literally and figuratively, a shelter from the storms of life.

Since Rev. Hoag and his love of Shakespeare have been on my mind lately, I'll close with words from another of Shakespeare's plays, *King Lear*. When Lear has been unhoused by his daughters, exposed to the literal and figurative hail of life, he suddenly notices others who have been so exposed.

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads...defend you
From seasons such as these?

We may be bold to answer: beneath a roof such as this, within walls such as these, under the domed and winged embrace of a God who has been and who shall be our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.

With that, I invite you to join in singing together the old words of Isaac Watts, *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past*.