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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
 Texts: Psalm 90: 1-2; Psalm 91: 1-6; Revelation 21: 1-3  
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### Blues Falling Down Like Hail: Reflections at 12,000 Feet

I got to keep moving, got to keep moving,  
 Blues fallin down like hail.  
 -Robert Johnson, *"Hellhound on my Trail"*

We made it past Cleveland this year. Many of you recall that last year, our summer road trip was interrupted by a positive Covid test, delivering our family back home a mere 48 hours after we had left, and depositing me on the third floor of the parsonage for ten days of quarantine. I had a nice time up there, but I was glad to make it a little farther this time around.

This year we went big. There were college visits. There was a stop in Tulsa, and Tucumcari, New Mexico. We spent a week visiting family and friends in Southern California. There was, at certain moments, baking heat, and wildfire smoke seemed to find us throughout the trip. There was a different Grateful Dead album every day. There were fireworks in Santa Fe, and a mountain town in Colorado, along with the friends that reside there, that we've come to love over the last few years. There were lots of tacos. It was all of it wonderful, at least from my vantage.

Our kids, on the other hand, have informed Rachael and me that they're done spending summers on the road. I get it. It can't be fun to be 17, or 13, and to be trapped in a rolling metal box with your family for five weeks. It can't be fun to be a teenager, crowded into a hotel room night after night, sharing a bed with a grouchy sibling. Even so, I have happily become that American cliché: Clark Griswold circa 1983, certain that the way to find deeper connection lies somewhere out there, on the open road. However fleeting that dream, I fall for it every time, because in truth, we do connect out there, and we do have fun - at least some of the time. We'll find new ways to connect, I'm sure, but I'll miss doing it on the road.

This morning I'd like to focus on just one experience we had, which I think might open up toward our Scripture passages for the morning, as well as some of the things we all experience on the human journey. One of the things I spent a fair amount of time thinking about as we traveled was what it is that provides a sense of well being in our lives. I spent time turning over some old phrases found in the Psalms, about dwelling in the presence of the Lord, about being sheltered beneath the feathers of God's wing. These are ancient and maybe archaic images, but they give expression to a deep human yearning to find places of repose, a still point from which to gather our senses, to know we are not alone, and to feel loved and valued in the core of our being. How do we dwell within that protective shelter?

Here's the story. During our time in Colorado, we did a three day backpacking trip into the Rockies. Our friends, Patrick and Beth, knew just where to go. We camped at the foot of two massive peaks, both of them over 14,000 feet. The peaks and cliffs that connected them formed a kind of bowl, and when the sun was setting, we were treated to some spectacular displays of light. Our family was all crowded into a single tent, which made for some frayed emotions, but, drifting off to sleep that night, with a mountain stream flowing nearby, I felt something I hadn't truly felt in a while. I was happy.

It's not that I had been unhappy before that, exactly. But things had felt heavy for a while. The previous year had felt long, filled with lots of important things, but leaving Rachael and I precious little time to connect. Then, just before we were scheduled to start our road trip, I got news that my mom's younger brother, my uncle Dave, had died suddenly. And so I stayed back to attend his funeral, while Rachael and the kids headed west. On the morning of that funeral, the news came that Mark Testori had died, a truth that still makes me sad. How I wish he was back there at his soundboard. Along the way, there was news of several other deaths, hospitalizations and illnesses among members of our community. And then finally, just as I was leaving, there was the attempt to ban two books having to do with LGBTQ sexuality from the library, which, though cloaked in a concern for children and propriety, just seemed ugly and cruel. All to say, even several thousand miles away, a kind of heaviness lingered in my being. But I felt something begin to lift that night in the tent.

It continued the following day. In the early afternoon, we hiked a little farther up into the mountains. We climbed to the place where few trees grow, where rocks and snowfields shared space with shrub grass and wildflowers. As we walked, parts of the sky were darkening, and then everything grew dark. Soon, on our arms, on our necks, we felt the sting of hail on our skin, as tiny balls of ice began to pelt us. Then the sky just opened up, and we got pummeled. Thinking quickly, our friend Beth spied a small copse of stunted pine trees, scarcely larger than bushes, just to the side of the trail. We darted over, and then crouched beneath their shelter for as long as the storm lasted - 5 minutes, maybe 10. Some of the hail still found us, but most of it was deflected by the trees. Thunder rumbled overhead, but we felt protected, or protected enough, and we grinned at each other as balls of ice rattled around us, like seeds shaking inside a maraca. And my thoughts drifted, thinking a little more about the previous few weeks, thinking about the previous few years, thinking about what it means, really, to dwell, as the Psalmist says, in the protective shelter of God. Was it something like that copse of trees?

Blues fall down like hail, the guitarist Robert Johnson once sang, which is as realistic a statement of human life as any I know. Death stings us. Illness stings us. Depression and anxiety sting us. Most of all, though, I think it's time itself that stings us, forcing us to contend with changes and losses that alter us irrevocably. Crouching under the trees, I became cognizant of how time is preparing our family for one of those giant shifts that so many of you have already experienced, as our daughter Sabina prepares to go off to college. And I began to wonder if putting us all into a minivan to drive across the country was my own way of pushing back on time's encroachment, a way of containing us all in the same space for as long as I could manage. Time will win. It always does. Blues fall like hail.

But another, greater, reality began to emerge during that storm. Blues may fall like hail, but I began to think about all the copses of trees that we use for shelter in our lives. When we find our way to them, and crouch beneath their protective canopy, the sting of that falling hail is somehow reduced. We gather under the branches, we meet each other's gaze, and we share in a moment of togetherness that manages, as the songwriter Nick Cave puts it, to "push the sky away," with its hail, with its emptiness, with its loneliness. Blues still fall all around us, like hail, as time continues its inexorable march. But the copse of trees offers a place to be, and to dwell, within the storm.

In the Psalms, of course, it is God in whom we find our refuge, and in the New Testament, it is Jesus in whom our hearts find rest. I believe that to be true, with all of my being. There have been, in my life, quasi-mystical moments in which I have felt an assurance of faith that has carried me through a dark night. But as often as not, for me and I suspect for most of

you as well, that shelter and refuge is incarnated, found in specific places and particular people, some of them explicitly religious, but many of them not. I'd like to name just a few of my own copses of trees, the places that have sheltered me throughout my life. Whether sacred or secular, these are the places in which I have sensed the poetic truth of what it means to find refuge in the feathers of God's wing. I offer what follows in hopes that it might stimulate you to reflect on the copses of trees that have sheltered you throughout your life.

The first shelter I'll offer has taken on a special significance of late. Libraries have nearly always been places of nearly religious significance for me. When I was in third grade, my family lived in the town of Carlisle, Pennsylvania. And for just one year, we lived in a house near enough to the public library, the Bosler, that I could walk to it. I did so frequently that year. We were new in town, and I still didn't know many people. And so books became a form of relationship, and the library itself became a sanctuary filled with friends - some imagined, some living, some long dead. I can still remember the flush of the air conditioning on humid summer mornings, and I can remember the smell of all the books. I can recall the spaces in which I lingered, and the shelves that I combed, scanning the titles, first for Hardy Boy mysteries, then for books by Madeleine L'Engle, and then for nearly anything I could find. It's not that I felt a need to read it all. But I sensed an infinite array of human possibilities contained within the spine of each book, and I reveled in it. To this day, I get a tingling sensation of discovery whenever I enter a library, and for a while after college I even toyed with becoming a librarian, which still seems to me a noble calling. What if we imagined all those books, all that knowledge, filled with so many real and imaginary lives, as so many divine feathers in which we were enfolded? What if the sum total of the human imagination, contained in the world's greatest libraries, was one of the ways we were held, protected even, from the sting of falling hail? Enfolded within the best and most creative thinking that humans have produced - might it be the feathers of God's wing in the world? It has been for me. Libraries have been my copse of trees amidst falling hail. That's why I'm so grateful that so many of you came to the defense of our own library here in town when it was targeted for censorship and abuse. Thank you for that.

A second way I have felt the shelter of that wing, a second copse of trees, if you will, has been in a handful of friendships I have known. Now, I must tell you in all candor, I feel like I'm a bad bet for a friend these days. Between family obligations and the responsibilities that come with ministry, I don't have the time that I wish simply to hang, simply to be. But there are a handful of people in my life who seem to understand that, and who seem to forgive it, and who continue to reach out all the same. There's my friend Paul, a spiritual director, who makes it a point to come visit several times a year, even though I'm not at liberty to do the same for him. There's Tom in New Orleans, one of my literary heroes as it happens, who makes it a point to call every month or so, just to find out how I'm doing. There's my friend Chris, who swaps literary and musical insights with me every day or so via text. There's my brother, with whom I feel free to laugh and simply to be like few others. And I would be remiss not to mention Rachael, my way better half and my life companion, in such a litany. Are the friends and companions in our lives not the copse of trees for each of us? When things go haywire, and even when things are going just fine, are they not the branches under whom we crouch? Do they not somehow help us absorb the sting of falling hail? Such friends and companions are one of the ways in which the protective shelter of God's wing is to be found. And learning how to be such a friend for others is to enter a holy apprenticeship, becoming more fully alive as human beings. It has been so for me. What about you?

The final copse of trees I'll offer will seem obvious, but it's no less true for that. It's churches and faith communities - this one and many others. Here, I'd like to quote some words offered by David Good in an email earlier this week. David is our minister emeritus, and he is a dear friend. Most of you know that at this time of year, it's been our custom for David to preach, a service I always look forward to and enjoy, for the insights he shares, but also for the camaraderie of the morning. This year, he didn't feel up to preaching, but he wound up sending a set of reflections earlier this week that read like a sermon, in the best sense of that word, about the faith communities that have shaped him. It contained these words:

Many other church homes or faith communities I could mention (that have shaped me) — a prayer rug thrown on the floor of a bombed out Mosque in the Golan - a reminder of how the unholy can be made holy, the broken can be mended — a circle in the sand in Wadi Rum where we would be urged to remember that “Nothing is Written and no one is ever to be written off” — a tiny church in the mountains of West Virginia where sitting around a table in Mrs. Webb's home after church, I learned that “Holy Communion” can be something so simple as buckwheat cakes shared with friends.

He then continues:

But I'll close this epistle with the most obvious of all — The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme, a sacred place that has taught me the most about what it means “To Be a Place of Grace.” So much to be said, but suffice it to say for now that there isn't a day that goes by without me offering prayers of thanksgiving for this place. Thank you to all of you for allowing me to be a member of this place!

To that, I can only add my own Amen. You may not know it, you may not realize it, but as often as not, ministers gather strength from those who sit in the pews and who sit on Boards, who sing in the choir and who teach children. You have been, and you continue to be, a copse of trees not only for David, but for me, affording the freedom to develop and to grow in your midst, and demonstrating what faith can be in the world. That is a gift beyond words. But more to the point, I hope that each of you can sense the ways that this community is, or can be, that copse of trees for you, the place in which, to draw from the poetic language of the Psalms again, the feathers of God's wings shelter you. If, as in the Book of Revelation, the dwelling - the shelter, the protective canopy - of God is among mortals, I think it will be because communities such as this one incarnate that truth, and make it so.

What about you? Say it's true that, from time to time, the blues fall down like hail around us. But say it's also true that tiny enclosures, protective shelters, offer themselves along the pathways of life. What have those been for you? A quiet place in the natural world? A handful of people who know and value you for who you are? A community of faith that helps you sense what matters in the world? A place of learning in which your curiosity comes alive? A field of play in which you found your joy? The possibilities are endless, and the specifics are yours to name. I hope you do. I hope you might even consider sharing your reflections with me, the way I've done with you. I'm convinced that it's in such moments, crouching within a tiny copse of trees, whatever they might finally be for each of us, that we actually come to know what it is to dwell in God's protective embrace.