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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Genesis 7-8, Selected Verses; John 14: 1-2
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A Sprig of Hope

*The waiting is the hardest part
 Every day you see one more card
 You take it on faith, you take it to the heart
 The waiting is the hardest part.*

-Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers

Indeed, it's true. The waiting has been the hardest part. No matter which horse and which rider your money was on, the waiting was the hardest part. In the midst of it all, I've been thinking about all of you. I've been wondering how you're doing. I wished to know how you've handled the tension, whether you've been able to sleep, whether you've been able to concentrate, whether your spirit is calm or if you've felt agitated and restless. I've wondered what you've turned to in order to quell whatever anxiety you might have felt, whatever anxiety you might continue to feel, and I've prayed that the peace which passeth all understanding would somehow arrive for each of you. You've been on my mind this week, and I hope you've been holding up in the midst of so much waiting. One wait is now over, but another has now begun: waiting to see what will happen during the coming transition.

The image that's sprung to mind most often this week is of that scene from one of the Indiana Jones movies, where the heroes are crossing a vast chasm on a rickety rope bridge. They stand as we do, suspended between two cliffs. One of my prayers has been that no idiot cowboy, no heedless adventurer, no real estate tycoon will decide to cut the ropes, sending us all swinging, or flying. Listen: we're going to make it across. Though it swings when the wind blows, the bridge is sturdier than it feels. The boards that compose it, old as they are, remain strong. The greatest image of that strength that we've seen this week are all of those ordinary people across the country methodically and painstakingly tabulating election results. They've pulled all-nighters. They've been under intense scrutiny, and surveillance. Many have had reason to fear for their lives from extremist groups. When *Time* magazine selects its person of the year, I hope they'll consider those ordinary men and women across the country sitting in convention centers and high school gyms, those who, by remaining steady and performing acts of ordinary competence, have helped to grant us a safe passage across the abyss.

Some of them voted Republican. Some of them voted Democrat. No doubt they all have their own private wishes about how things would turn out. But for the sake of democracy, for the sake of the us all, they simply went to work, thereby ensuring the integrity of our election process. As much as anything, folks like that comprise the strong boards beneath our feet. Hang onto those folks for a little bit. I'll come back to them.

I think all of us have turned to various sources of strength this past week as we've waited. In addition to obsessively checking news reports, we've gone on walks. We've done what needs to be done for the kids. Some of us have returned to old novels, favorite films, or treasured recipes as a means to remain calm and focused. I myself started rereading *Moby-Dick*, and I

originally thought to share some election week gleanings from that novel with you today – its wisdom is timeless and its prose is shining. But it was another 19th century story that I found myself returning to more than anything else this week, one that offered a kind of ballast amidst the tension of each news cycle. It was the story of Frederick Douglass, particularly an episode from 1864 that I was drawn to. It's a story that feels particularly fitting for a Sunday such as this.

By way of introduction, I should say that I spent much of my vacation this past summer reading David Blight's monumental biography of Douglass. His lifelong and tenacious struggle against white supremacy, a virus that by now seems baked into the American project, felt utterly necessary, and contemporary, within our own American moment. In particular, it was Douglass' continual use of Old Testament images of judgment and rebirth that I found so vivid. Across episodes of his daring escape from enslavement in Maryland through his abolitionist crusades, through his advocacy for black humanity during the Civil War and especially in its aftermath, through it all, it was the Old Testament that fueled his imagination in his struggle for the emancipation and human rights of black Americans. If you need a reminder that our country has seen dark days before, including a string of now forgotten mediocrities who occupied the highest office of the land (when was the last time you considered Millard Fillmore or James Buchanan, for example?); if you need a reminder of the importance of continuing the struggle for human rights and dignity, no matter how turbulent the waters, no matter how intolerable the tension may become; if you need a reminder that it's possible to come through those conflicts exhausted but still intact; if you need a reminder of how an imagination informed and shaped by the words and stories of the Bible might yield not reactionary, revanchist understandings of the world but progressive and emancipatory visions; if you need any of those things now, you might do well to turn toward Frederick Douglass's remarkable life.

Several weeks ago, a few of us were able to hear Prof. Blight speak about Douglass over in Old Saybrook, and he shared an episode from the election of 1864, when Lincoln narrowly squeaked out a victory against George McClellan, the former head of the Union army.¹ The war had been raging for more than three years, and the bloodshed of 1864 had been horrific. People in the North were exhausted and demoralized. Many simply wanted to bring the war to an end. McClellan promised to do just that, negotiating a peace with the Confederacy that would have left slavery more or less intact. Lincoln himself wasn't the mythic figure we now lionize – he was an incumbent and embattled president facing a daunting reelection campaign, one that he seemed poised to lose. McClellan's campaign became openly racist, portraying Lincoln's Republicans as radicals devoted to racial miscegenation. It was the vote of Union soldiers on the battlefield that tilted that election. Had their votes gotten lost, or tossed out, ours would be a far different country right now.

On the Sunday after Lincoln won, Prof. Blight shared that Douglass preached at the Spring Street African Methodist Episcopal Church in his hometown of Rochester. His chosen text was that ancient story of judgment and rebirth found in the 7th and 8th chapters of Genesis, Noah and the ark. That story has been so often relegated to the stuff of picture books and children's murals that it's easy to miss its symbolic power, its capacity to speak into the human condition. Sometime after the creation of the world, human beings had become so wicked and corrupt that God orders one righteous man, Noah, to build an ark and to fill it with a representative sample of the creatures of the world. For 40 days and nights, a torrential flood

¹ See David Blight, "After the Flood Recedes," published in *The Atlantic*, April 26, 2020 for a fuller account of this episode. What follows depends upon Prof. Blight's published comments.

obliterates the world, leaving only Noah and his family as survivors. They wait for the waters to recede, but they see no end in sight. In time, Noah releases first a raven from the ark, and then a dove. The dove returns with an olive leaf in its beak, evidence that life is returning at last. When Noah releases a second dove, it doesn't return. After that, he finds solid ground on which to rebuild his life, and the life of the world.

On that Sunday in 1864, Douglass compared Lincoln's victory to the waters of the flood receding. He told the assembled congregation that the sprig in the dove's beak might be taken as a symbol for the eradication of slavery. With the full emancipation of the enslaved, the very ground beneath their feet could thereafter spring back to life, Douglass said. It's worth noting that the war hadn't yet ended. There were battles still to be fought, lives still to be lost, dead still to be buried, rebuilding still to be accomplished. When Douglass spoke, the waters were but receding, but the flood still remained. Importantly, Douglass doesn't urge his listeners to get out of the ark. He doesn't tell his congregants to quit the struggle. Instead, he tells them to stay the course, to exercise patience and determination, to keep sailing, all the while knowing that dry land would eventually emerge. Using the ancient wisdom of the Genesis story, Douglass was able to provide perspective, moral vision, and encouragement for the work ahead to all those who listened that day. Claiming Noah as a forerunner, Douglass found the sprig of hope that a beleaguered nation needed.

So it is today. I don't wish to suggest that the election we've just witnessed was in any way equivalent to the one in 1864. Biden is Biden, not Abraham Lincoln. Trump is Trump, not George McClellan or anyone else. And God be thanked, we're not in the midst of a civil war. But the pandemic has unleashed a kind of flood. The economic fallout from the pandemic has yielded a flood. Continual violence against black and brown lives has produced a flood. The torrent of abuse, disinformation, lies, boasts, misogyny, racism and xenophobia from the White House has produced what feels like a flood. The climate crisis, accelerated and escalated by rollbacks of environmental protections has felt like a flood, and those will no doubt occasion further, very real floods. The absence of civility and respect from our highest elected officials in their everyday interactions has produced what feels like a flood. The post-truth alternate reality in which many are still enveloped, where science and elections alike can be waved away, has produced a flood – post-truth is pre-fascism, is how the Yale historian Timothy Snyder puts it. The divisions that plague so much of the country, where otherwise decent and well-meaning people can't find ways to connect to one another, that too feels like it's part of a torrential flood pouring down upon us. I don't wish to be grandiose – we're not in the midst of a Civil War, and Lincoln, Douglass and all the rest are long gone. But these years have taken a toll. They've cost us much. Our civic spirit is frayed. Our reputation around the world is tarnished. And many of the institutions we depend upon, whether we realize it or not, have been gutted. We've been Noah, floating upon the deep, waiting for the skies to close.

But the waters haven't rolled back. The flood hasn't subsided. I don't believe it will anytime soon. If the election has revealed anything, it is that we remain deeply and bitterly divided as a people. Still, a dove has gone forth from our hands, and it has returned with an olive leaf, a sign of rebirth and new life. Make no mistake: that olive leaf is not the president-elect. Rather, it is the chance we all have now to step back, to breathe deeply, and to find our way back toward some form of civility and decency. It is a chance to assess who and what we wish to be as a people, and to step away from all the anger, hostility and bitterness that have torn through us. It's an opportunity to expand our empathy, to extend our compassion, and to enlarge our care. It's the narrow opening that we all have to reach out across our differences, to find one

another again, and to affirm the basic humanity that we all share, regardless of our convictions. The olive leaf in the dove's beak is the invitation we've always had to say to those who are unlike us, "I love you." Having said that, there are norms that need to be upheld. There are lines of decency and integrity that cannot be transgressed. There are ways in which we must, as a people, say no to particular currents of thought and expression within our culture, no matter how widely held they might be. The dove and the olive leaf are the scarcely imagined possibility of doing those things, while simultaneously being able to say, "I love you."

Above all, the sprig of hope that I sense returning in the dove's beak is this: it's all those ordinary election workers I spoke about earlier, allowing us to cross the chasm before us step by step. Even as a few prominent voices sought to discredit their work, they kept going. They showed up, they stayed up, and they ensured a safe passage across that precarious and tricky portion of the chasm. It might have been otherwise. Had some folks behaved differently, we might have crumbled. Lots of people feared we would. But we didn't, because lots of people showed up, and did their jobs well. They're black, they're white, they're brown, they're Asians, they're Republicans, and they're Democrats. That ordinary competence is the sprig of hope. Because you know what? There are millions, and perhaps hundreds of millions of people out there who are just like that. Yes, there are some who seek to destabilize the bridge. Yes, there are some who would cut the ropes holding us all aloft. But the real sprig of hope is that there are more reconcilers than wreckers in the world. The real sprig of hope is that there are those who will show up, stay up, and do what must be done to see that we all get across this chasm. I trust those folks will continue to show up all along the way. They are the olive leaf, the sprig of hope in the dove's beak.

As for us, we have work to do as well. The election was never going to change that. Whoever occupies national office, the task of people of faith is to continue to do what we do best: to strengthen the fainthearted, to support the weak, and to help the suffering. In this country, no matter who occupies national office, whether a Republican or a Democrat, the fainthearted, the weak, and the suffering are disproportionately minoritarian voices: people of color and those in the LGBTQ community; immigrants and refugees; the disabled, women, the poor, the incarcerated and the detained. An election has not changed the situation that many individuals face. Four years ago we set out signs affirming our support and care of all of them. Their flood waters have not receded. For them, doves only rarely return with a sprig of hope, if they ever do. As people of faith, we need to repudiate the temptation to believe that our work ceases or begins, ebbs or flows, because of who occupies public office. We'll have to keep saying, and demonstrating, that Black Lives Matter, no matter who is in office. We'll have to keep fighting for immigrants, no matter who is in office. We'll have to keep on supporting refugees, no matter who is in office. Malik and Zahida, the Torres family, Jose, Saul, Palestinians, Haitians, indigenous peoples, to say nothing of those who line up on Saturday mornings out here for groceries: their plight remains, no matter who is in office. Their plight remains, but our commitment does too.

I'll close with words that Jesus spoke to his disciples in the Gospel of John, words that I believe can guide us in the days to come: "In my Father's house, there are many rooms." What is the Father's House if not this planet we all of us share? What is the Father's House except the common sky above our heads, except the common ground beneath our feet? There are many rooms, which is to say, there's room enough for all God's children in this place that we share. If that's true of the planet, then it's also true of democracies. In this house, there are many rooms. There's a place for us all. We need to help each other understand that. And we need to reach out

to one another from whatever place we happen to occupy. There is room enough for all in this particular house.

The floods haven't receded, not yet. But we have sent forth a dove, and the dove has returned. It carries with it a sprig of hope. I pray we heed that sign, and use it well.