**May 30, 2021 Worship Service**

Welcome

Welcome to the First Congregational Church in Randolph. We are delighted that you are here this morning and especially delighted to welcome the veterans who are here as we celebrate and honor Memorial Day weekend. They’re about to process in as we begin our opening hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy”. Let us gather together in worship.

Hymn: Holy, Holy, Holy (performed by the Praise Band)

Holy, holy, holy!

Lord God Almighty,

Early in the morning

Our song shall rise to Thee.

Holy, holy, holy!

Merciful and mighty,

God in three persons,

Blessed Trinity!

Holy, holy, holy!

Lord God Almighty,

Oh thy works shall praise Thy name

In earth and sky and sea.

Holy, holy, holy!

Merciful and mighty,

God in three persons,

Blessed Trinity !

Opening Prayer

Please be seated. Will you join with me in prayer?

Holy and gracious God, on this Memorial Day weekend, as we remember and honor those who have gone before, those who have served in so many ways for this country, we gather here in Your presence. Help us to recognize, remember, and sense the nearness of that presence which is as close to us as our beating hearts and the breath that flows in and out of our lungs. Hear our prayer, O Holy One, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Anthem: Battle Hymn of the Republic (performed by the Chancel Choir)

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;

He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;

He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:

His truth is marching on.

(Gloria!)

Glory, glory, hallelujah! (Gloria!)

Glory, glory, hallelujah! (Gloria, gloria!)

Glory, glory, hallelujah! (Gloria!)

His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps,

(Truth is marching, truth is marching, truth is marching, truth is marching!)

They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;

(Truth is marching, truth is marching, truth is marching, truth is marching!)

I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps:

(Truth is marching, truth is marching, truth is marching, truth is marching!)

His day is marching on.

(Truth is marching, truth is marching, truth is marching, truth is marching!)

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

His truth is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,

With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me.

As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,

While our God is marching on.

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

His truth is marching on.

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

His truth is marching on.

Offering

Today, as we honor and celebrate Memorial Day Weekend and all those who have sacrificed for us, we invite you at the time of offering to bring before God whatever it is that best represents you, that comes from that place of sacrifice in your soul, that you might help bring about the love and justice of God in the world together with us. For the online congregation, there is a way to donate online; for those in the sanctuary, there is a plate in the back; but for all of us, will you join with me in prayer?

Gracious and holy God, who has called upon us, and we have responded. We bring before you our lives and our offering as our gift for You, our hope for Your realm of love and justice. May You bless the gift and the givers that together Your name may be glorified throughout the earth. We ask in Jesus’ name, amen.

Scripture Reading (reader: Susan Goodale)

Good morning. Introduction to this morning’s scripture reading: Isaiah gives the grounds for his authority as the prophet. Uzziah’s reign has been prosperous, but certain times lie ahead. Assyria is expanding borders in the northern kingdom. Israel is trying to coerce Judah into the military alliance against the Assyrians’ threat. Back then, dreams were taken seriously.

Isaiah 6, 1 through 8.

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temples. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts;

the whole earth is full of his glory.”

“The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and then the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King and the Lord of hosts!”

“Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go with us?” And I said, “Here I am; send me!””

Handbell Piece (played by the Chapel Chimes)

Sermon

Will you join with me in prayer? Holy and gracious God, grant the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the wonderings of this day might be made holy by the power, the whisper, the flow of Your Holy Spirit. We ask in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

The year was 1919, it was April, and the Spanish Flu pandemic was winding down. Businesses and schools had been closed. Some would not open again, as people moved into lockdown and quarantine to stop the spread of that deadly illness. The spread of that flu was waning and people were emerging from the pandemic in that day. That same month, April of 1919, the people in Randolph began to prepare to celebrate the end of World War I and to welcome home the nearly twenty dozen men from Randolph who were now veterans of the war. John Douglas Crawford was not among those veterans returning. He served in the US Army during World War I as a second lieutenant in Company H, 28th infantry regiment, 1st infantry division, and he died in battle on May 27th, 1918. One year later, they would name the square out in front of our church in his honor: Crawford Square.

For the past few years, our church has been working to discern once again for this time and place what would be its vision, its identity, and its purpose in this chapter. And on the back wall where you come into the sanctuary, there is the words of that vision, and they begin with a concept that speaks about how this church is the cornerstone of Crawford Square. If you look at the front of the building, facing Crawford Square, you will see above the door a ship, most likely the Mayflower, a reminder that the church goes where God sends it. A ship in the harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for. You’ll find out there a lamp as well, a reminder of the teaching that the word of God is a lamp unto our feet and a light to our path, a call to bring that light of God out into the world. And you’ll find a scripture, a scripture that reminds us that in our particular tradition, we stand firmly on the God who is still speaking, still revealing, still teaching. Not a set of old rules and regulations, dogma and doctrine that are static and unchanging, but a living, breathing Scriptural Word of God revealing that there is yet more light and truth to come out from God’s holy Word.

The First Congregational Church in Randolph has been a part of Crawford Square, a cornerstone since its inception, since the beginning, even before the town was born, when we were still a precinct, a part of Braintree. The town meetings, the town discussions, the town votes would happen within that cornerstone of Crawford Square, even as it became the town of Randolph. It was from the pulpit of that cornerstone of Crawford Square that the Declaration of Independence was first read here within this region. And when Britain decided to raid Cohasset, the word was given from the pulpit of the cornerstone of Crawford Square to call the militia into action. Not long after that war, from the pulpit of the Crawford Square cornerstone, the word went out to begin the Massachusetts Missionary Society that would become the Mass Conference and eventually become the foundation of the United Church of Christ. It was here, within the cornerstone of Crawford Square, that the first Sunday School was begun within this community, as it was in churches across the country, a Sunday School that would eventually become the foundation of the public school system in our country. In the first half of the nineteenth century, it was this cornerstone of Crawford Square that spoke out in abolition of slavery, and at the end of the next century, they would continue as participants in civil rights.

The cornerstone of Crawford Square is not a monument or a museum to bygone days or bygone eras. It is the base camp, the launching pad from which God’s work and God’s ministry are carried out into the world.

In Isaiah, we encounter those remarkable words. Isaiah is in the sanctuary when he has this amazing vision, a vision of God and of Heaven opening up, a vision so powerful, so holy that he felt improper and inadequate until one of the cherubs brought a coal from the altar of God, touched his lips. And then he heard the words of God, saying, “Who will go for Me? Who will bring My light into the world?” And Isaiah responds, “Here I am. Send me.” I have shared a bit about that word before, but let me tell you that the word “Here I am” is *Hineni*. *Hineni* is an ancient Hebrew word that doesn’t simply mean “I’m right here”; it means “Reporting for duty, sir.” “Reporting for duty, sir.” It’s a military term.

So to be the cornerstone of Crawford Square is not so much about being a historic structure. Rather, it means that we are the people of a legacy, the people who are called to report to duty, to bring God’s care into the world. That has been the nature of veterans, to sacrifice, to serve, for years.

March 19, 1941, was a time when many patriotic young Americans enlisted in the Army, and among them was a man who was not so young. At the age of 33, he had already won an Oscar for *The Philadelphia Story.* So Jimmy Stewart reported for duty, only to be rejected because his weight and height did not meet their standards. Deeply disappointed, this man who was already a private and a commercially-licensed pilot went back to Hollywood and enlisted a physical trainer to help him get himself in shape. One year later, he would report for duty again. He would go to the recruiting center, and they would bring him into the Army. They were excited to have a Hollywood actor amongst their midst, a man whom they thought could help them sell war bonds and recruit more people for the effort. But Jimmy would have none of that. He wanted to serve his country in the military. He wanted to fly.

So they allowed him, finally, to become part of the Air Force, part of that as a flight instructor, still living stateside. But he kept arguing, he kept pleading, and finally they let him serve, going overseas to Europe to be a pilot of a B-24 Liberator bomber. Jimmy Stewart swiftly rose through the ranks and soon became a major and a squadron leader, a squadron commander. He could have stayed on the ground and commanded the missions from there, but he also still forced his way, argued his way, encouraged his way. He wanted to serve. He wanted to report for duty. And he served and flew many missions over in Europe, enough that he won two Distinguished Flying Crosses and the French Croix de Guerre. He was one of the few American soldiers who in the course of four years went from private to colonel.

Like many veterans, when he returned to civilian life, things were difficult. He drifted back to Hollywood only to find that much had changed in his absence. And he was struggling with what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder. He wasn’t sure if he would ever be able to act again. Director Frank Capra, who was himself also a veteran, pitched a role to Jimmy. He said, “You’d be playing a guy who’s very depressed, and you decide to kill yourself on Christmas Eve.” Jimmy knew he could play that role. That role spoke to him, and it spoke of him. And so he found himself the lead in *It’s a Wonderful Life,* a movie that was initially panned as being overly sentimental, but how many of us can get through Christmas without watching *It’s a Wonderful Life* at least once? It’s one of those films that has become a favorite and a staple of the season.

He would not serve again as an actor in a military movie, and he had his contracts written with Hollywood that they would not mention his military service as a way to promote their movies, but he did continue in the Air Force Reserve, finally ending his career as a brigadier general. Many would say that his role in *It’s a Wonderful Life* as a small-town banker working for the ordinary man embodied and exemplified the nature of veterans, and it does.

Jimmy Stewart’s story speaks to us of our appreciation for those who have served. They accepted their call to serve this country for the freedoms upon which this country was founded and still aspires to. They endured the sacrifice of all that they carry and bring back with them from the war, the things which they were called upon to do, the images and the scenes that are burned into their very hearts and their very souls, the stories that they do not want to share and do not want to recall, the PTSD or the trauma that still is a part of what shapes the fabric of who they are.

Memorial Day, according to Wikipedia, it began as a celebration, the chance to go around decorating graves of the veterans. It was done on different days in different parts of the country, particularly between the North and the South, since it was given birth after the Civil War. But finally, they came together to create Memorial Day as a day to remember those who have served and those who have sacrificed. So today we honor them. *Hineni.* Those who have said, “Reporting for duty, sir.” Those who heeded the call of God to be the cornerstone of Crawford Square, to bring God’s love and justice into the world, and those who heeded the call of the country that called upon them to serve faithfully.

A single word can change the meaning of a whole sentence, and a misunderstanding can strain an entire town. Some years ago in a small town, an immigrant family bought a local gas station. During the transition, they had to do the work required in order for them to be able to sell tobacco and to be able to sell lottery tickets. It was during that transition, when things hadn’t fallen in place yet, that a young man came in to buy a lottery ticket there at the gas station. He said he was a veteran of the war, but the person who was there, not fully understanding what was being said or how to say it properly, recognized the word “service” and said “I cannot sell you a lottery ticket because of their service”. That’s not exactly what the person said or how it was intended, but it went flooding across the internet as people angrily got disturbed that a veteran was denied service in a gas station. What the man actually said was, “I can’t sell you a ticket, we don’t have the license yet, but thank you for your service.” So let me say those words with clarity. Thank you for your service. Thank you to those of you who here at the cornerstone of Crawford Square who continue to serve God, *hineni,* reporting for duty, so that you might bring God’s love and compassion into the world. Thank you to the veterans who have heard that call to duty and responded. Thank you for your service. Thank you for your sacrifice. May the example of these people help to guide us forward into a world that when we hear God’s call for us, “Who will go for Me?”, we will respond, *hineni.* Here I am. Send me. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Folks, I want to invite you into a time of prayer together. And remind you that on our Facebook page you’ll see a number of prayer concerns, and joys, and celebrations that are listed there. We hope you will take time in this moment, and in the times to come, to bring to mind all of those words and all of those prayers and bring them before God. This morning, I invite you to think about all the things you would like to bring before God in our time of prayer. And I invite you to join me as we gather our spirits into prayer.

*Holy and gracious God, we give you thanks for all those who have responded to the call for duty. As we remember those who have served in the military who have lost their lives - friends, colleagues, comrades, family, throughout the years, throughout the wars - we lift them to you. While our own souls may be ambiguous about war, about the politics behind them, our souls bring before you, God, the troops who have served. We bring before you those who have served in this flu pandemic. The frontline people reporting for duty each day in hospitals and nursing homes, exposing themselves to that deadly illness. To those who serve in the police and the fire departments, who continue to reach out and serve in this community and in this country, to make sure that there is order around us. We bring before you, God, all of those who serve, despite the sacrifice that may be called upon them. We lift them to you with thanksgiving. Even as we bring before you ourselves, God, that we might learn from their example how to listen to your call, when you call upon us to bring compassion into the world. To bring justice into the world. To keep the work that our forebearers have taught us in our hearts and minds as we move into the world, to bring your glory, your love, and your justice into that world. We bring before you as well, God, all those who are part of our hearts this morning, who are recovering from illness, recovering from surgery, who may yet be facing tests and waiting for results. Who may yet be facing surgeries to come. All those who are grieving people they have lost this past year, especially to the flu and the pandemic. To all those who are struggling economically because of this pandemic, and even before it. For those who wrestle because we are not yet a perfect country. There are still those who live under discrimination, and prejudice, and all the different isms that hold them back. Help us, God, to be that cornerstone, that ship, that light that stands upon your scripture and brings your love, compassion, and justice into the world. We can’t say that often enough. Help us, oh God. For here we are. Send us. So, speak your words to us God, even now, in the silence, as we pause, to turn our ears towards you, and listen for your call upon our hearts.*

*God of grace, God of compassion, God of love and justice, hear the prayer we offer to you in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us, when we pray, to say:*

*Our Father, 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,*

*the power, and the glory,*

*For ever,*

*Amen.*

Revelation - Performed by the Praise Band

Worthy is the

Lamb who was slain

Holy, holy is He

Sing a new song

To Him who sits on

Heaven's mercy seat

Worthy is the

Lamb who was slain

Holy, holy is He

We sing a new song

To Him who sits on

Heaven's mercy seat

Holy, holy, holy

Is the Lord, God Almighty

Who was and is and is to come

With all creation I sing, praise to the King of Kings

You are my everything

And I will adore You

(I will...)

Clothed in rainbows of living color

Flashes of lighting, rolls of thunder

Blessing and honor, strength and glory and power be

To You, the only wise King

Holy, holy, holy

Is the Lord, God Almighty

Who was and is and is to come

With all creation I sing, praise to the King of Kings

You are my everything

And I will adore You

(I will adore You... Lord)

Filled with wonder

Awestruck wonder

At the mention of Your name

Jesus, Your name is power

Breath and living water

Such a marvelous mystery

Oh, You're worthy, mystery (Mystery)

You are (You are)

Are worthy, yes

Holy, holy, holy

Is the Lord God Almighty

Who was and is and is to come

With all creation I sing, praise to the King of Kings

You are my everything

And I will adore You

I will adore You

Benediction

Following the Benediction, I’m going to ask Billy O’Connell, the Chaplain for the veterans to come forward and share with us the names of the veterans who have died this past year in the town. Following that, our trumpeter will play Taps, and we’ll participate in the national anthem.

But for now, I encourage you to go out listening for God’s call, God’s summons for you to report for duty. And may you say, “here I am, send me.” In the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “and now, unto him who is able to keep us from falling and lift us from the dark valley of despair to the mountains of hope, for the midnight of desperation, to the daybreak for joy, to him be power and authority, forever and ever. Amen.” May you go forth in peace and in joy. Billy O'Connell, report for duty.

*Memorial Day Tribute - to the veterans of Randolph who have passed away within the past year.*