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First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
November 26, 2017 - Last Sunday as Sr. Pastor
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Of Two-Fingered Waves, Looking to the Hills, & Fish from the Sky

Psalm 121 NRSV 1I lift up my eyes to the hills- from where will my help come? 2My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. 3He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. 4He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. 5The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. 6The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. 7The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. 8The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

Romans 8:38-39 The Message I'm absolutely convinced that nothing-nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable-absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.

1 Peter 3:15b-16a Always be ready to account to anyone for the hope that is within you; yet do so with gentleness and reverence.

I have recently discovered a Wyoming novelist by the name of C.J. Box,¹ and have particularly enjoyed reading his series centered around the character of Sheriff Joe Pickett and his family. Over the course of seventeen novels, Pickett, a game warden for the state of Wyoming, confronts various sorts of evil-doers and malefactors, while dealing with the joys and challenges of trying to also be a good husband and father. Woven into the novels are gorgeous descriptions of Wyoming vistas, forests, and mountains. **That** came as a surprise to me since my experience of Wyoming has been the quite **un**-scenic drive on I-80 from Cheyenne to Rock Springs. But Box's books have shown me that there is much more to Wyoming than that, and someday I would love to visit some of the places he describes so lovingly and intriguingly. In one of the novels, Sheriff Pickett is showing a newcomer around and they are driving in the newcomer's car down a long and lonely Wyoming two-lane highway. As another car approaches them, the driver of the other car lifts two fingers from the steering wheel to

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C._J._Box

greet them. But the newcomer does not return the gesture, and this is what Sheriff Pickett is depicted as thinking about that not-very neighborly omission: *“I guess he hadn’t been here long enough to realize that that two-fingered wave is the sign of the privilege and the opportunity of sharing the road together.”*

The privilege and the opportunity of sharing the road together. My friends, that is what is on my heart this morning as I look out over your faces – that it has indeed been a humbling privilege and a joyful opportunity to share this road with you for the last ninety-eight months:

- It has been a privilege to help lead you in some new directions, building on the ministries of Gay Hatler, Warren Hile, Don Shelton, and so many other women and men who have served here for over a century.
- It has been a privilege to share with you in both your deepest moments of sorrow and your highest joys.
- It has been a painful privilege to bid our earthly farewell to so many saints, and it is has been a wondrous privilege to welcome new people and to dedicate babies and their parents to lives lived in the care and keeping of God.
- It has been a privilege to work with an amazingly talented staff, who give evidence to my belief that the best way to lead a staff is to pick people who are smarter than I am and let them run!
- It has been a privilege to help move us much more squarely into being a “program-sized” church with practices and structures that evidence trust in those you call to help lead you rather than the suspicion that marks some churches’ lives.
- It has been a privilege Sunday by Sunday by Sunday to come into this place and praise with glorious music the God who loves each and all, the God Whom we know is all about joy and not about judgmentalism, Who bids us welcome the

stranger, the “different,” the “other,” with the message that not only are you welcome here, but you are wanted and you are safe here – because, as Paul says, there is absolutely nothing that will ever separate any of us from the love of God.

Days like today are the kind of days that evoke reflection, and I have been reflecting that every ministry I have been a part of has had a mountain – or at least a hill – on the horizon: There were those two congregations set in the flatness of the Indiana cornfields which nonetheless had their hills that were not very tall but did stand out amidst all that two-dimensionality. The San Francisco Bay Area in California had the improbable Mt. Diablo, rising up 4000 feet from the surrounding grasslands and it served as a landmark and a sign that I was coming home to my beloved Barbara during those years when I drove all over the area as Regional Minister. Hawaii, where Barbara and I spent five fascinating years, would not have existed if it weren't for Mauna Kea volcano, towering 13,000 feet over us and extending 20,000 more feet to the sea-floor. For these last eight years Pikes Peak, dusted dramatically in snow 10 months of the year, recipient of the dawn's first purple light, has stood over us. And soon I will go to Tacoma where Barbara and will once again be together physically even as we have been together in spirit every single day and I will look forward to supporting her ministry and I will do so in sight of Mt. Rainer, another volcano, snow-capped all year, that rises 14,000 feet over the sea-level sprawl of the Seattle-Tacoma area.

Is it any wonder that the Psalmist begins his or her psalm with the lines “I look to the hills....” How can we not? For they are solid and unchanging whenever life changes or hurts or moves in ways that we didn't anticipate. But notice something: in the very next line the Psalmist actually has a warning for us: “From where will my help come?” But that, as they say on “Jeopardy,” is in the form of a question, not an answer, for in the line that follows we are reminded that no matter how glorious, how

magnificent, how alluring the hills and the mountains are, they are NOT where our help comes from; no, our help “comes from the Lord.” And that, in an important way, is also a **warning** for us and it is a warning that I have been preaching about – both to you and to myself! – and which is one I would leave you with: sometimes those things in our lives that are alluring can be wrong. What do I mean? Well, in our fractious day and time, there is an undeniable allure to those who would claim over-simple certainty. But too often such supposed certainties end up hurting those whom God loves: There are yet too many preachers and pundits who will proclaim to you with self-righteous certitude that God does not really love some people and, in fact, hates certain people. Too often those self-satisfied voices tell us to fear the immigrant – despite the fact that the entire Bible is the story of immigrants, including Jesus Himself – being welcomed and shown hospitality. Or those voices tell us that Muslims are especially to be feared and even hated even though they are our brothers and sisters in the eyes of God, descended from the same family, and who love God just as much as we do. Or those voices smugly say that those whose orientation is “different” are somehow second-class in God’s eyes, not really as valuable, worthy of being condemned because they are “different,” despite the fact that God made them who they are and as they are and celebrates when they too find love.

You see, if we look to the *wrong* hills, if we gaze upon the *wrong* mountains, the over-simplistic seemingly solid certainties we find and espouse may well hurt God’s creation, not help it. For as someone once said, “People are better prepared for life with good questions than with good answers.... [For] God is better able to work with and through people who are kept open by questions than with those who are closed off by answers.”² The best of the Jewish and Christian traditions have always seen questions as a sign not of faithlessness, but of respect. Your questions mean you take God

²http://day1.org/842-whose_life_is_it

seriously. Your questions mean that you know that you are human and that God can be trusted to receive your worries and your wonderings, your fears and your doubts, your questions and your conundrums, even your honest anger. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise, because the only way your faith grows is to ask questions honestly.

First Christian Church, I have no doubt, will continue to be the place and the kind of community that wants to reach out to those around you – those, by the way, who are fleeing from Christianity in records numbers because they believe the Church has been obsessed with the wrong things – who have honest questions, who are seeking something worthy that is greater than themselves, something that is morally and intellectually credible. These are the folks who have rejected the hateful voices who proclaim with confidence who it is that God hates and despises. Yet these folks are nonetheless looking for a place and a people and faith that will allow them to connect with a God who is goodness and grace, not joylessness and judgment. May you continue to seek out and welcome those folks, my friends, and never find yourself fixated on the wrong mountain, no matter how dramatic and alluring it may be.

When a pastor departs from a congregation that he or she has loved, it is always a poignant time. After today, and when I drive away from this place tomorrow, I will no longer be your pastor. And while I like to think of myself as indispensable, you and I know that isn't true. In the coming days and months you will form a new relationship with Jonathan. And I utterly delight in that even amidst the poignancy of departing from you. Jonathan brings his own gifts from God, his own perspectives and theology, and he will lead you in new and excellent ways. Clergy ethics wisely says – as painful as it may feel sometimes for both former pastor and people – that a pastor who is leaving needs to absent himself for a time from the lives of those who were his flock. Not to do so can hurt the church. And this is one of those situations, I think, where such rules exist precisely for those times when it is **not** easy or natural to do what is the right and

best thing. After all, we usually don't need a rule telling us to do what is easy! I will always, always, care for you and pray for you and be very grateful for our time together, but I won't be able to respond to emails or phone calls or texts which would implicitly keep me in a pastoral role with you. I will enjoy your Facebook postings but I will not be commenting on them or tagging you or responding. That will be your pastor's privilege. I will continue to take joy in who you are and what you do, and I know that you will continue to take joy in and pray for Barbara and me. But our relationship will and must change. I do hope to return to you one day, but as Barbara once said upon leaving her congregation, *"I can come back and visit you when you no longer miss me as your pastor, because you are so delighted with your **new** pastor."*

Which also leads me to say that if there are any who are here primarily because of me, then while I am flattered, please know that you would do me no honor if you ceased to be a part of this church community once I am no longer here. Please don't do that. Please continue to bring your gifts, your wisdom, your passion, your commitment to the ministry of this place and this people. Please honor me by honoring the mission of this church, making it better, helping it achieve that mission ever more faithfully; honor me by looking to Jonathan as your pastoral leader, trusting his wisdom and his care and his leading. So please hear this: the very best gift you can give to me on this occasion would be for me to know that you will seek to love and support Jonathan in the same way that you have loved and supported me.

Change, even good change, is never easy, is it? And on this occasion of change, let me quote Barbara once again with words that she said on her final Sunday in a former congregation:

The forms of God's presence that we have known and loved [are sometimes] taken from our lives. And [yet] that [very] absence opens up the possibility for new forms of God's presence to come among us.... So I may miss the voice of

God in you and you may miss the voice of God in me. But I know that we will hear the voice of God in some new voices.³

And for that I am very, very grateful.

A couple of months ago there was a story on NPR that both intrigued and amused me. The story's headline was this: "It Rained Fish In Mexico."⁴ It seems that during a rainstorm in Tampico a number of fish fell from the sky. One city official was quoted as saying "It's strange, [it's] not normal." Duh! NPR, in its sometimes quirky way, then investigated further and discovered more than a few such documented instances. And Tampico was not the only locale blessed with piscine precipitation. Marksville, Louisiana, in 1947 was also the beneficiary of falling fish, and in 2010 in Lajamanu, Australia, hundreds of perch plummeted from the sky and the townspeople ran around collecting them, presumably to cook later.⁵

The scientific explanation for all those fish is of course that strong convective winds, whether on land or sea, sucked up the no-doubt surprised creatures and then dropped them when those winds died down. But this morning, I'm not nearly as interested in the science as I am with the image itself: For you see, I am absolutely convinced that all kinds of fish will continue to fall on First Christian Church. I am absolutely convinced that new and unexpected opportunities will continue to surprise you. I am absolutely convinced that like those residents in Australia you will snatch up such future bounty with enthusiasm and hope and joy. I am absolutely convinced that you and Jonathan together will find new unexpected harvests of opportunity to reach out to new people in new ways with the gospel of God's grace for each and all. And

³Rev. Barbara S. Blaisdell, former pastor of United Community Church, Hilo, Hawaii. Sermon entitled "A New Thing" preached on August 30, 2009, her last sermon to the congregation.

⁴<http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/09/28/554242564/it-rained-fish-in-mexico-authorities-say-no-its-not-the-end-times-we-think>

⁵<https://www.loc.gov/rr/scitech/mysteries/rainingfrogs.html>

that, as I Peter put it, “is the reason for the hope that is within [me].”

And as you do these things, as you catch those future falling fish, know this: that from afar, I be lifting my two fingers to salute you, both for the new ministries that will claim you and for the privilege of having been able to share this road with you. Amen.