

## Introduction to Scripture

I would like to begin by wishing a Happy Father's Day to all of the dads with us, as well as all of you who have dads in your lives. I am particularly blessed in that both of my children enthusiastically agreed to read the scriptures this morning. Thank you Julia and Anna....this means more to me than you can possibly imagine.

My youngest daughter, Anna, will read from Psalm 95 which is a widely popular text that serves most importantly as an invitation to worship and also serves as an introduction to a series of Psalms, specifically 95-100 that are devoted to the theme of worship and praise (<https://bible.org/seriespage/12-psalm-95-warning-about-worship>). Psalm 95 calls us to rejoice together with a joyful noise and to shout out joyfully. Most significantly it stresses that this worship is a congregational act not a solitary event. It is also a Psalm that will be referenced in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews as a warning that they not falter in their faith.

(<https://www.christianity.com/bible/commentary.php?com=spur&b=19&c=95>)

The second reading, by my daughter Julia, is from Hebrews. Originally thought to be written by Paul, most scholars now do not believe he was the author ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrews\\_10](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrews_10)). Regardless, this text is understood to be a transitional text between the old and the new covenant. The author exhorts us to come together in worship and encourage others to do the same. It was "meant to inspire early Christians to be confident, courageous, and uplifted in living out their faith".

(<https://www.bibleref.com/Hebrews/10/Hebrews-10-23.html>)

## Sermon

About six months ago Mary asked me if I was interested in preaching one of the Sundays during her sabbatical. I must admit my initial reaction was a bit of a panic. I am not terribly fond of public speaking and more importantly I am extremely unqualified to "preach", especially in a congregation such as ours that is full of retired clergy. The second reaction I had started with my late Grandma Rider's voice in my head. A few years ago, my then 102 year old Grandmother was living at a local nursing home. After suffering a stroke at 100 her mental capacity had begun to diminish significantly but she remained alert and lively. Especially when I used to go and visit her during her lunchtime on Sundays which was conveniently scheduled right after our church services were completed. . Visiting her after church also gave us something to talk about since she and my grandfather had been very active and dedicated members of their church.

On particular Sunday, when my wife and kids joined me, I mentioned that we had all just gone to Church and she set her fork down and declared., "Toddy would make a great preacher". .....there must have been puzzled looks coming from us, and then she continued, "He speaks loudly and clearly; he uses big words; and Lord knows we don't need another dental hygenist in the family."!! As you can imagine, no-one in my family has had anything to do with the dental field whatsoever. So.....with that ringing endorsement I agreed to preach.

One of my favorite things Pastor Geoff used to do during his call to worship was to welcome all of us whether we were new to the church or if we had been attending this church for decades. He often elaborated on that theme, welcoming us regardless of where we were on our spiritual journeys. If you came to worship that morning completely lost you were welcome here at First Parish Church. Our congregational arms are always open to those seeking solace as well as those who wanted to celebrate joys.

This reminder was always important to me, because although I joined the church 14-15 years ago, I still am not sure where I am in my spiritual journey. I was baptized as a Presbyterian; as a toddler my parents experimented with Quakerism; as a young person growing up I attended a Congregational Church; as a teenager I attended a Episcopalian prep school in which the services were replete with all the bells and smells of a High Mass; as a college student I took a break from church feeling that having attended service five out of seven days of the week at prep school for the past four years I had built up enough "credit" that I could take some time off. Karen and I were married in a UU church and but as young professionals in D.C. our hectic lives left little time for Church. I rationalized my absence at a Church by privately trying to fill that empty space with my own personal journey of prayer and faith. Becoming a parent changed that. Karen and I both felt calling to renew our relationship with a church and felt strongly that our young children would benefit from Sunday school. As you can imagine, after meeting Susan Fitzgerald and Mary Baard, it did not take long for this young family to end up here at First Parish Church. The fact that Mr. Ray played "O God our help in ages past" our first time in this sanctuary which is deeply important to me and is the "school hymn" of my prep school certainly sealed the deal for me. \*\*\*\*\*You have probably noticed I already managed to work it into today's service

Our daughters loved Sunday school, my wife and I enjoyed worship but I must admit I initially approached this community much like I had with the faith communities before. Maybe due to the multiple changes in traditions during my life, I treated church only as

a complement to my own personal relationship with God. In many ways, I thought I had my spiritual journey figured out and church was sort of a public expression of my faith. Despite my attendance at a service, I still felt like I controlled my Christian narrative. I was worshiping among you, not with you. You may have noticed in both of our Scripture readings this morning there was a very common theme. It was the phrase “Let us...” which appeared no fewer than eight times in those short readings. Those readings are not calling out, “Let Todd”. They are calling for US! All of us together. First Parish Church was the first place that I began to understand the biblical call to corporate worship. Reflecting on that term recently made me feel like it was a bit sterile...sort of like “Corporate Worship” was a new Amazon.com Shopping level above “Prime”. So thinking about it over the past few months I’ve settled on “Rejoicing Together” as more fun and engaging term.

The problem with private worship is that we feel in charge. We control where our spiritual path takes us. It allows us to limit and guide our worship experience. We miss out on the wisdom and leadership of others. We miss out on experiencing the journey of others through sermons, prayers and music. We miss out on Rejoicing Together! Psalm 95 says “let us sing to the Lord, Let us make joyful noise with songs of praise.” Certainly, my Christian experience would not be nearly the same without the inspiration of our beautiful music program that blesses this congregation. And our music program would not be the same with the voice of just one person. Our whole is much larger than the sum of its parts.

Today is the last day of Sunday school and for some of us, not just parents of children, it also begins a period of irregular church attendance. Many of us take time to spend time with family, recharge our spirits and spend time worshiping God in places other than a traditional sanctuary... places that are described in the Celtic tradition as “thin” places. For my family, Popham Beach is one of those thin places where the space between us and God seems small. A place where we can easily encounter God and marvel at the Lord’s creation. I encourage all of you to find those spaces that speak to you. They are important, but please also do not forget about your “corporate body” here. We need you, and I have learned over the years here, that each of us needs the people around us as well and the worship that goes on in this sanctuary. As Teddy Roosevelt said, “You may worship God anywhere, at any time, but the chances are that you will not do so unless you have first learned to worship Him somewhere in some particular place, at some particular time.”

The past couple of years have seen significant change in our church, both in regards to personnel as well as our physical campus. This fall we embark on a new path, as we experiment with our role as a teaching Church. Change does not come easily for many of us and this idea may sound a little foreign to some. But in many ways, we have been a teaching Church before. Pastor Geoff came straight out of seminary to join us and we all learned and flourished together through that experience. This congregation is 300 years old because we have demonstrated the ability to deal with change and more importantly understand the importance of remaining engaged. This community is powerful and does much good but it is not by accident. It is because of all of you and the God given gifts you bring to our Congregation. As the reading from Hebrews pointed out, it is not only important for each of us to be here, but also encourage those around you to be engaged as well. We need all of you here. Your worship in this place is important to the people around you. We need your voice, your vision and your prayers. As Pastor Geoff said in his final sermon last October, "Keep coming back...Keep coming back here to show up in each other's lives...Keep coming back to discover what call of justice God has placed in each of you and all of you, and how you can nurture that in others."

Finally, as a Father, I want to thank all of you for your role in encouraging my daughters towards love and good deeds. You were here the days they were baptized and confirmed. Some of you were their teachers in Sunday School; mentored them as young adults or taught them how to secure a sailboat to a dock with a proper cleat hitch (Thank you David and Margo Knight). You were role models that inspired them to go on multiple mission trips to some of our country's inner cities to help those less fortunate than ourselves. Your kindness and love have helped shape the beginnings of their own spiritual discoveries. I do not necessarily know where you are on your journey nor do you know mine, but I am infinitely grateful that this congregation is willing to hold each other's hands and walk together; encouraging each other along the way.

God's blessings on all of you.