

Holy Places—August 16, 2026 Worship Service

Roger Gibson—Highway 101 winds between steep forested mountains to its east and the ocean to its west, along most of the Pacific coast of the United States. It is a marvel of imagination, vision, and engineering, but being man-made, it doesn't qualify for this week's topic.

If you drive on Highway 101 north from Florence Oregon, you round a bend and see, sitting at the end of a promontory 200 feet above the crashing surf, the Heceta Head Lighthouse. The setting is visually stunning; breathtaking. Its light that extends over 20 miles through the darkness over the ocean is also a marvel, but even though it provides a ready metaphor (the light in the dark), it also is outside the boundaries of our topic this morning.

But below the lighthouse, there is an arc-ing sandy beach that feels pristine and almost forces the opportunity for quiet meditation. Whenever I have visited that beach, either in person or more frequently in my imagination, a favorite poem by Robert Frost has come to mind. "The heart can think of no devotion greater than being shore to the ocean; holding the curve of one position, counting and endless repetition." Though the poem is called "Devotion," it is an easy step to Faith. God is the shore, holding one position and counting the endless repetition, and my faith is the ebbing and flowing of the tide: doubt—faith, uncertainty—faith, disbelief—faith, the need to control—faith.

This beach below the lighthouse is a sacred space for me for how it helps me ponder both the poverty of my spirit, but also the timeless reach and permanence of God's grace.

Patrice Krause—I feel a sacred connection and presence with the night sky. Growing up on a farm that was miles from the nearest town, I could see the beautiful stars at night whenever it wasn't cloudy. At the time, I took this for granted. Now it is rare that I have a chance to see the stars away from city lights. It's hard to put into words how I feel when I get an unencumbered view of the stars, but I'll try. There's a deep hush, a profound expansiveness, a sense of safety beyond the travails of the earth – a presence of that which is holy. Now I have learned that some of the starlight I see took light years to get here, and so I am also looking back in time. This all boggles my mind. I sometimes get bogged down in the mundane details of life, and if that's all I look at, it's depressing. When that happens, the stars remind me that wonder and mystery are also a part of reality. It comforts me to feel this deep connection to the beyond.

Here's another brief story about this connection between matter and spirit. A number of years ago Jim and I were preparing to make a trip to Oregon to visit his family, which we did every 2 or 3 years. This also gave us a chance to experience quite different landscapes and ecosystems. As often happens, the details of travel preparation nearly overwhelmed me. I wondered if we should even be going. ... But the day before we were to leave, I as I woke up I saw a brief flash of an image of something we would see in Oregon: a view of the landscape looking east from I-5

near Salem, with grassy fields and the foothills of the Cascades in the distance. The land was calling me, and I knew that this trip had meaning beyond my worries.

Barbara Yoder—I brought along some guests today. This urn contains the ashes of 3 beloved cats and Roger. They're a part of my story, and they are now – and forever will be – a part of a Sacred Place called Monkey Rock.

I bet some of you know it. Monkey Rock is the name of a rock formation overlooking Rocky Mountain Mennonite Camp and the surrounding Pike National Forest of Colorado. Through the huge windows of the camp's dining room, one can make out a monkey's head in profile. It's a quick but steep hike to the top, one I've made many times over many years.

Ascending Monkey is always the same experience except for the time it now takes me to do it. The trail starts gradually, past the entrance to an old silver mine, dirt giving way to rock and loose gravel. Quaking Aspen trees line the steepening trail as you climb up, up until ancient pine tree roots kindly appear and steady your feet. Scramble up a few boulders to the left, and you're there.

From the Monkey's head, the view looks down on the winding road to the camp, and away toward mountain peaks and other rock outcroppings. Always, black ravens soar below the Monkey and over the green mountain slopes. Feel the cool breeze and breathe in the fragrance of pine. It's the most peaceful place in the world.

So when I was looking for closure to what my cousin Jill refers to as my *annus hor-RIB-ilis*, I knew I had to return to Monkey Rock.

Annus horribilis is a Latin phrase meaning "horrible year." In March of 2022, Roger and I lost our dear friend, Kay Kent. In April my Dad died. In June, my cat, Maddie died, and in July, her sister, Mickey. Roger died on August 26, four days before his birthday. The rest of 2022 is foggy. 2023 began with the death of Roger's cat Sabrina and for me, a case of pneumonia, then covid, then pneumonia again. My *annus horribilis* ended in March, completing the circle.

One early September morning that year, I packed a bag of the cats' and Roger's ashes and drove to Colorado. I'd never spread anyone's ashes before and had no script, so I simply let things flow. Here's what happened as best I can remember.

Along the way up Monkey Rock, I gathered some wildflowers, a few interesting sticks and stones, some pinecones, and a feather. Atop the boulder that is the monkey's head, I laid out the array of natural objects and sat still. I breathed in deeply, fresh cool mountain air filling my entire being and quieting my mind. I must have sat there a while before I began to cry. And what a cry I had! Besides tears from my eyes, my entire body cried – it heaved, it wailed, it clenched. I cried for everyone I'd ever lost, shouting out their names. I cried for the world, for all that is

wrong with civilization. Looking back, I realize it wasn't as much a cry as it was a full body/mind/spirit prayer. The presence of God was very real.

My arms reached toward the heavens, and then everything stopped. I sat a while longer until there was nothing left to do but scatter – first the combined ashes of Roger, Maddie, Mickey and Sabrina, then after them, one by one, the flowers, pine cones, sticks and stones, the feather.

Filled with peace and renewed energy, I returned down the trail to my cabin and made a pot of coffee.

My potter friend Becca made the urn after I told her a story from the last days of Roger's life when he was mostly unresponsive. It's inscribed with the lyrics of John Lennon's song, *Imagine*. A nurse told me that several times she'd played it, and he'd cried. She wanted me to see it. I felt offended by what seemed a little like a cheap party trick: *Watch me make the dead man cry!*

But I relented and placed the phone near Roger's ear. As the song played, he looked me in the eye, and a big fat tear fell onto his cheek.

You may say I'm a dreamer- But I'm not the only one.

I hope some day you'll join us. And the world will live as one.

Susan Rieger--A few years ago, Joe and I visited Isle Royale, the least-visited national park, yet the most revisited. You could see Canada from our campsite, which was near the water, where the constant lapping of Lake Superior was very soothing. And looking at the pebbles at the water's edge, I had a deep sense of familiarity.

I grew up a mile from another Great Lake, Lake Erie. As a child, the lake was endless, changing from green, blue, brown and the whisper of the waves would sooth me. I would squint my eyes and try to see Canada. Sometimes, my grandparents, who were immigrants, would drive us to the lake. If it was chilly, we would sit in the car and just look out at the water. Sometimes, there were sailboats, or motor boats with fishermen. If it was windy, there were whitecaps. If it was milder, we would walk out the long stone piers and be surrounded on three sides by the water. In the summer, we would play in the sand and swim. One of my most vivid memories is of my grandfather when he caught a live fish in his hands and chased me in the water.

When I was 16, my family moved to Kansas City. Lake Erie was often in the news due to the terrible industrial pollution. The Cuyahoga River, which fed the lake 40 miles away from my hometown, caught on fire. The fish were filled with lead and warning signs were posted warning people to avoid eating the fish. I was heartsick. The Lake became a poster child for environmental regulation and birthed the first Earth Day.

Yet, the lake benefited from the regulations and recovered more quickly than many scientists expected. Today, another generation of children can form their own vivid memories of this majestic lake that was so much a part of my youth.

The resilience of Lake Erie is a symbol of great healing, and I believe that this is the same power of healing offered to us by God. Also, the Great Lakes were formed by the relentless power of glacial ice. And that relentless love of God can be our refuge.

Reflection by Jim Krause

I Am a Pilgrim

(Traditional)

1. I am a pilgrim, and a stranger
Traveling through this wearisome land.
I have a home built in that yonder city, Good Lord
And it's not....
Not made by hand.
2. I have a mother, father, and a brother
Who have gone to the other shore.
I'm determined to go and see them, Good Lord
And live up there,
Forever more.
3. I'm going down to the river Jordan
Just to bathe my weary soul.
If I can but touch the hem of his garment, Good Lord
I believe he'd make me whole
Repeat first verse.

Commentary (recreated as best I remember)

I first sang this song at my senior vocal recital, given in partial fulfillment for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in vocal music performance, in the spring of 1975. Over the years the song has taken on a somewhat biographical tone for me.

Partly it expresses my grief over the loss of close family members. It also expresses my own feeling that Kansas has never really felt like home, but merely an address, even though I've had an interesting career back here in the east, made some good friends, found a job that I truly look forward to every week at a school whose stated goals and values reflect my own. And I've even found true love here. What more could a man ask? But still, and I sometimes joke about this, I feel somewhat like an expatriate, living in self-imposed and voluntary exile from my home in Oregon where I was born. That longing for home so poignantly expressed in the song has after all these decades never quite left me.