DATE: November 22nd, 2026
TEXT: Psalm 95:1-7a
THEME: We are totally dependent upon God.
SUBJECT: Permanence and impermanence
TITLE: A Pilgrim Way Station

Main question: How are we to navigate life's uncertainty and change?

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, fill our minds with your Word and help us to be curious. Increase our love for one another, and inspire us with a commitment to create a transformed world, starting with ourselves. Amen.

Children's Time

[Start with children in the narthex and have the lay reader read:]

"Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before God with thanksgiving and praise God with music and song. For the Lord is the great God, the great God above all gods. In YHWH's hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to God. The sea belongs to YHWH, for God made it, and God's hands formed the dry land."

[March into the sanctuary while singing "We are marching." Then, when we all reach the front, continue reading:]

"Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for God is our God and we are the people of God's pasture, the flock under God's care."

[Build a *sukkah* (temporary shelter - literally "booth") in the sanctuary with children while talking about why we're building it: remembering what our Hebrew ancestors did long ago; depending on God]

Perhaps you've seen the play, "A Midsummer Night's Dream" that includes a play within that play. During the Children's Time, we enacted worship within worship. The original use of Psalm 95 is uncertain, but the first few lines read like a call to worship (vs. 1-5). Then, there's a second call to worship in the middle (vs. 6-7a). That's why we started

with a Call to Worship in the narthex, then marched into the sanctuary, then did another call to worship followed by a short message. Psalm 95 may have been used thousands of years ago to mark the beginning of Sabbath — a day of rest. Or it may have been the liturgical setting for the Feast of Tabernacles, one of the three pilgrimage festivals where Jews were required to make their way to Jerusalem. The Feast of Tabernacles commemorates the 40-year journey through the wilderness after the Israelites escaped from Egypt — when they lived in fragile, temporary shelters, or booths. This festival, in fact, is also called the Feast of Booths (su-kkah' - סוכה) for that reason. The psalm actually refers to that 40-year journey in verse 10. We didn't read that part, but it appears in the latter part of the psalm, after the second call to worship, as part of the "sermon" in verses 8-11. During the Feast of Tabernacles/Booths, people would construct physical booths to help them recall the temporary and transient life — and the total dependence upon God — that their ancestors experienced for several decades. The purpose of the Feast was to remind worshippers of their <u>own</u> temporary condition — no matter how permanent it may seem — and of their <u>own</u> total dependence upon God.

The sermon in Psalm 95 (vs 8-11) has a rather harsh message for the people of Israel: "Today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your ancestors tried and tested me, though they had seen what I did" (vs. 8-9). This passage refers to two specific points during the 40-year wilderness journey after the Hebrew people escaped from slavery. The people quarreled with Moses (and God) as they grew tired and thirsty. In fact, Meribah literally means "quarreling." Maybe "complaining" would also be an appropriate translation. Due to their complaining about being thirsty, Moses struck a rock at a place called Massah ("testing") in order to produce water. The whole scene is symbolic of the people's testing

of God and Moses in the wilderness. They also complained about food — if you remember the stories about quails and manna. But honestly, if they only complained three times in 40 years, I think that's pretty amazing! I suspect it was much more than that, however. It's hard to leave familiarity, even if that familiarity isn't sustainable, even if it's better to leave than stay in a bad situation. So, the people complained.

For much of the latter half of the 20th century, the world got "used to" a bad situation: a Cold War between two superpowers - the Soviet Union and the U.S. For over 40 years, though it wasn't sustainable, it provided a familiar, though temporary, framework — a *sukkah* — as humanity continued to make its way through the wilderness. Inevitably, it ended, leaving the world with one superpower. That has proven not to be sustainable either. I wouldn't exactly characterize the past 35 years as a time of peace and stability, both here in the U.S. and on a world scale. And so, we find ourselves dismantling yet another *sukkah* on our human wilderness journey. The Church in the U.S. has seen similar patterns. Many of the administrative structures and physical buildings that now exist were built in the decades right after WWII as the Church in the U.S. was expanding. Southminster was part of that expansion. For several decades, the Church in the U.S. saw much growth: the construction of church buildings, the creation of administrative structures, and the addition of many people to membership rolls. Membership peaked in the mid-1960s, though involvement in mainline churches continued to grow until the turn of the century. That growth, it turns out, was also a "*sukkah*" because 9/11 marked a real decline in church membership and involvement. Our Transitional Executive Presbyter in the Cascades Presbytery, Brian Craker, points out that study after study shows that 9/11 marked the beginning of when mainline **churches became less invitational**. Perhaps that was because of increased distrust in "foreigners." Remember the phrase "axis of evil"

(coined in 2002) that described an expanding list of countries in the Middle East, Asia, Africa and the Caribbean? The Church, like U.S. foreign policy and culture in general, began to cocoon at that point, causing its members to invite fewer people to church. Then, in 2000, the first smartphone (the Ericsson R380) became commercially available, followed by the first full-touchscreen smartphone in 2007: the Apple iPhone … 1. Though I may sound like an old-fogey when I say this, smartphones have definitely changed how people relate and interact. They have both allowed us to connect and caused distancing, and perhaps the invitational mechanisms that led to church growth were disrupted by new ways to communicate.

Mainline decline may also be the result of **outdated church structures** that no longer meet the needs of the church and that don't necessarily work for younger generations. The way that the church has functioned for many decades no longer seems to work for Millennials and Gen-Zs. Is our committee structure a *sukkah*? Are our worship format and the hymns we sing *sukkahs* also? Is the Presbyterian church's reliance on ordained ministers a *sukkah* — a pilgrim way station on the way to something else? For every one person that the Presbyterian Church (USA) has ordained in the last 10 years, 8 people have retired. In our presbytery alone, 43% of ordained pastors serving congregations are at least 60 years old and may look to retire from parish ministry in a few years, myself included. The way we're doing church now is clearly not sustainable. Some churches may continue to be able to operate as they currently do, but we'll see many churches close in the Cascades and in the PC(USA) over the next few years because they simply can't sustain the status quo. Our presbytery — a connectional body of churches currently comprised of 86 congregations throughout the western half of Oregon — is in the process of overhauling a structure that has been in place for the last 54 years. It no longer

works. Churches have different needs and live in different circumstances than they did in the early 1970s. What's coming next isn't clear yet, but I dare say that we're about to dismantle our presbytery's *sukkah* as we prepare to continue our journey into the future.

We're seeing changes in the world, we're seeing changes in the Church and in our presbytery. This congregation is also in the midst of a transition — a journey through the wilderness, if you will. But even now, we're operating much the same way we did 50 years ago. Our committees, our administrative structures, building maintenance, and our staff configuration all rely on a certain level of human energy and pledges. Are they sustainable, or are we looking at another *sukkah*? Today, as you know, we'll gather after worship right here in the sanctuary for another transitional conversation, the third this fall in which we've been thinking about who we are as a church, who are the people around us (our community partners and neighbors) and, today, about what we believe God is calling us to do in the next 3 years. Now, while I preached a whole sermon series this fall based on a book called *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*, I want you to know that there is a very intentional design behind this transitional process. For the first several months after I arrived, I focused on simply getting to know you and on understanding this congregation and its history. In September, a Transition Team was formed and it has now hosted three conversations. Between those conversations, that Team gathered the notes that each group has taken, prayed and discerned together as it listens to God's voice speaking and leading us forward on this pilgrim journey. The resulting report will be presented to you early in the New Year where you'll have a chance to see it and provide feedback. Session may decide that we need to explore further aspects of Southminster before completing a Mission Study. When that Mission Study is written, however, it will be time to form a Pastoral Nominating Committee if that's the

direction that Session would like to go. The work of the Nominating Committee can take many months and possibly a year or longer. It depends on many factors: the number of pastors looking for congregations, the number of pastors looking for a church like Southminster, the ability of the Nominating Committee to find a pastor that matches Southminster's identity and vision, etc.

We've spoken of this season we're in as a transitional time and a liminal period. We might also call it a *sukkah* moment — maybe even a *sukkah* within a *sukkah* — where we've set up a temporary shelter, a pilgrim way station that is intended to provide short-term lodging as we prepare to continue our journey to … who knows where God is leading us. One thing is sure, however: we do not put our trust in temporary structures or impermanent buildings and programs. We put our trust in God who is the great God, the God above all impermanent gods. We need not be shaken by things that come and go; that is the way of all things except the love of God. For God is our God — yesterday, today and always — and we are the people of God's pasture, the flock under God's care. Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before God with thanksgiving and extol God with music and song as we sing hymn #288: Spirit of the Living God.

Benediction

Life is short

and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us.

So be swift to love.

Make haste to be kind.

And may the peace of Christ, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds today, tomorrow, and down all our days.