

**Sermon June 20, 2010 Father's Day Talk for Sunday service by Norma Hansen,  
Salem United Church of Christ, Denver, CO 80222 "Rocks, Fathers and  
Celebrations"**

**Rocks... Strength and stability.**

**Jesus said he would build his church on Peter the rock.**

**In our faith journey we have heard of many stories about rocks.**

**David chose 5 smooth stones...**

**Moses struck a rock for water...**

**The women rolled the stone away when they went to Jesus tomb.**

**Rocks are mentioned 121 times in my Concordance.**

**Stories from my childhood include my own love of rocks. When I was 7 or 8, we lived in western Kansas where my father was a parts man for International Harvester.**

**One-week end he had an assignment to take an old stake truck out to a dry riverbed and bring back a load of sand.**

**We left home early. It was going to be a hot day. We were to get the sand and be home for supper. I never was one to miss a meal so I packed a shoebox with peanut butter sandwiches and an apple or two. Mother gave her approval before she filled several canning jars with water for us to take with us.**

**While I don't remember why we were to get the sand, I can call from memory the feeling of adventure.**

**As we bumped along the sometimes road, the axle broke. The large truck was made immovable on those two narrow tracks. We were several miles away from a farm and there was no way to get help without walking. (oh for a cell phone!) The day proved to full of the promised heat.**

**As I climbed out of the truck, I grabbed my box. I was immediately distracted. *There were rocks everywhere.* Black smooth shiny rocks of all sizes and shapes.**

**I began to pick them up.**

**I fell behind and had to hurry to catch up. I showed my folks my treasures as I stooped to gather in more. I asked for help but was told if I wanted them I had to find a way to carry them.**

**An old pair of my brothers' overalls with many pockets was my chosen attire. I indiscriminately began to fill the many pockets. You can imagine the weight it created. The shoulder straps began to crush me. Out came a few rocks from my side pockets...then my back pockets.**

**We managed to find a scraggly bush of a tree where we stopped to rest. Daddy asked if I thought it was time to break out the sandwiches. As we picnicked we looked back to see how far we had come...mother laughed that I had left a trail of smooth shiny black rocks. My father and brother teased that I wouldn't make it home with any.**

**I stopped to pick up a few more and again my pockets became heavy. I began to toss a rock here and there, keeping my most treasured rocks in the top pocket.**

**You know, I don't remember being rescued. But I had my treasured shiny, smooth black rock to set on my dresser to admire for many years. .. And my brother was wrong.**

**I have always liked the feel of smooth river rocks and found beauty in the glitter of rugged rocks. As I grow older, I still collect rocks...and I carry the ones I want. Occasionally we drive to where I have stashed a special quite large rock so we can lift it and take it home. Perhaps to give reason to my interest in rocks, and justify the metal file cabinet that holds my treasures,**

**I think it is truly connected to those Bible stories I heard long ago.**

**I feel the strength of the times that formed the rock, and recognize how time has finished/ polished them.**

**The Old Testament books are filled with long lists of genealogy.**

**Genesis lists fathers who were well over 100 years old when they began to have children.**

**Most of the listings are of men with an occasional wife mentioned. It was a brutal time to live.**

**Trust between brothers... between children and their father is often based on who would be powerful. Idols were worshiped.**

**As God entered into a relationship with our ancestors, rules for living a fruitful life,**

**obedience to God's Will was learned in the escape from slavery in Egypt.**

**In the New Testament, God is shown as a loving God. He sent Jesus to guides us on how to live.**

**Today is Fathers Day.**

**The time in which I grew up was male dominated.**

**My father was unique. He valued my mother's opinions, creative abilities and gave credit for his life success to her.**

**I was expected to go on to college. If I said I wanted to try to do something, I was encouraged. Money was not plentiful.**

**My parents sacrificed so my brother and I could get college degrees.**

**When I married just before my senior year, Bob was set down and told that I would get a degree too. Bob remembered this incident after our graduation. He laughed and said it never occurred to him to do otherwise but he was grateful to my family for the support we received our senior year.**

**As I thought about Father's Day, so many memories surfaced. Since I have had the opportunity to speak on Father's Day several times, I needed to give more reasons for my love of this day.**

**I just couldn't come up with anything new. I love Father's Day because the men in my life have great models. Their strength and loyalty gave me guidelines for my own life.**

**They were God fearing, family loving disciplinarians that led by example.**

**Over the years, I have grown to enjoy reading the Guidepost magazine. It is a little magazine that has positive articles written by the people who have experienced the event.**

**When each new publication arrives, I try to read just one article, hoping to make it last longer. But much like a plate of cookies I have a hard time stopping**

with just one. With modern technology I am able to read additional articles that come to me via e-mail.

In my research for inspiration, I discovered an article written by Elizabeth Peale Allen, the daughter of Norman Vincent Peale, who authored Positive Thinking and created Guidepost.

*5 things I learned from my father.*

1. Leave your worries at the door. Quote from Mr. Peale “Imagine yourself dropping your anxious thoughts overboard. Leave them in your wake and sail on.”
2. Make enthusiasm a way of life. “The way you act is the way you tend to be.”
3. A healthy body and a healthy mind go together. Dad took a daily walk, even if it was only around a parking lot before a speech. Every morning he’d declare, “I will be happy today.”
4. Expect the best from each new day. In dealing with the grief of her husband’s death, she remembered her father telling her, “There are good things waiting for you every day.” It allowed her to linger over coffee...watch birds...and it eased the grief.
5. Tap into the source of all energy. (Perhaps this was the most important memory I read) “Tap into God’s life-giving power and creativity on a daily basis.

One of the Guidepost writers, Ptolemy Tompkins wrote of his father in an article titled Set Free.

“My father was never much for rules.” was the first sentence and it captured my interest at once. Ptolemy told that his father had been sent to a super strict boarding school at a very early age, the schoolmasters were mean, the food was terrible and every minute of every day was defined by what you couldn’t do. It caused him to be fearful and suspicious of authority figures from traffic cops to librarians. He became a very fussy eater do to the many meals of moldy potatoes and horsemeat. He became determined that his own life would have as few rules as possible...preferably none. It was better to live in chaos than to be subjected by rules.

Ptolemy accepted the dramas and disasters that came along with a freedom-obsessed father but in 1999 his patience ran out, about the same time he started at Guideposts... he quit talking to his father.

Surprisingly, he found that as he wrote stories, he would use some lesson his father had taught him. He often wondered if his father would ever see it .... Then he would remember some offense that his father had committed and he would snap out of his nostalgia, washing his hands of his father and was better for it until... In the summer of 2006, a nephew had visited his uncle and called to relate the visit to Ptolemy. After he asked how his father was and heard that he looked older and weaker and he wishes you guys could get past your differences. It was just what Ptolemy needed and he e-mailed his father and received a very quick reply. This led to a visit.

He writes,” My nephew was right. He was older and he looked weaker. But at the same time, he was very clearly the same person he had always been. He smiled and

reached out and grasped my hand, and within a few minutes was lecturing me at full force on the latest political conspiracies he'd uncovered."

Politics and his father's health were the weekend topics. His father had been suffering from prostate cancer for years and it had been under control until recently.

True to form, he was investigating some 'mind-blowing new alternative therapies.' Giving into cancer, after all, would have gone against his father's whole philosophy. Not even death would get in the way of his quest for freedom.

They stayed connected by e-mail and phone calls until his father's nurse called and told him he needed to come now if he wanted to see his father. By the time he arrived, his father was barely conscious. His sister, who had arrived first, told their father, "Ptolemy's here." To which his father answered with his eyes still closed, "I know, I can feel him."

Over the next three days, the children took turns sitting by their father as he drifted in and out of consciousness. With a generous supply of Red Bull, Ptolemy took the all night shift. He relates that those long evenings were some of the strangest and most significant he had ever spent with his father. He felt that behind those closed eyes; his father was seeing something that he couldn't see. Maybe he thought his father was getting his first real glimpse of that landscape of real freedom...at last.

Ptolemy discovered a small boat tucked in among his father's many stacks of books. I would like to read what he wrote..." My father had given the boat to me many years before, during one of our summers in New Hampshire. Taking it down from the shelf, I saw that it was scratched, dusty, and missing its mast, its sails, and the delicate set of strings and pulleys that it had been outfitted with when my father had first presented it to me. But it was unmistakably the same boat.

Looking at its black enamel hull and the miniature metal fittings set carefully into the smooth wooden planking of its decks, I remember the protective feeling that the boat's jewel-like perfection had instantly inspired when my father had first presented it to me. The last thing I'd wanted to do was put into the water."

As Ptolemy stood by the water, he saw the sandy beach but directly across was an overgrown swampy area. He feared that his boat would get caught up in the brambly plants that grew right down to the shore. His father asked why he was not sailing his boat. To which Ptolemy replied that he was afraid that he would not get it back.

"That," said my father, is precisely why you should put the boat into the water right away. Set its sails properly and set it free. It'll come back to you if it wants to." In conclusion of his story, I would like to read...

"Set it free, Despite all the protests my father had made to me about the God of the Bible over the years, he and that God had some things—some very important things in common. Though he might appear as a bossy tyrant, the God of the Bible is really every bit as ardent a believer in freedom as my father was. That's why, throughout both the Old and New Testaments, he is forever allowing his children to fail, and fail, and fail again... and forgiving them each time they do.

It's also why he forgives them not only when they fail to live up to his commandments, but even when they turn their backs on him completely. For it is only by allowing humans to act as they will that he does justice to that uniquely

human ability to choose their actions independently, with no help from him whatsoever: an ability that sets human beings above even the angels in God' sight.

My father died at 6:00 a.m. on Wednesday morning, January 24, 2006, at the age of 89, at the end of my final evening vigil with him and just a few short months after we'd forgiven each other our differences and come together again as father and son. Just like that sailboat my father had given me so long ago, I'd sailed away from him. But in the end. Free as all of us ultimately are to choose what is best, I had found my way back."

The third facet of my talk today is titled, Celebrations

Today would have been my mother's 97<sup>th</sup> birthday. We sang In the Garden to celebrate. It was her favorite hymn, and it holds a favored place in my heart. Birthdays in my family meant we got to say what we would eat. We didn't have to do the dishes and my brother was nicer to me. As I grew older, I carried that tradition on to my own family. I don't remember gifts received but I do remember mothers fried chicken, cucumbers in vinegar, potato salad, watermelon AND a birthday cake. My menu has changed with age.

In remembering those very hot birthdays, I don't remember any of the gifts... I do remember the precise feelings of having a celebration.

One of my favorite children's book authors and illustrator has a book titled I'm in charge of Celebrations. It is a beautiful book and I thought I could create a shorter version and just share the thought but I couldn't. I will read the book in its entirety and let you judge for yourself.

Sometimes people ask me, "Aren't you lonely out there with just the desert around you?"

I guess they mean the beargrass and the yuccas and the cactus and the rocks.

I guess they mean the deep ravines and the hawk nests in the cliffs and the coyote trails that wind across the hills. "Lonely?" I can't help laughing when they ask me that. I always look at them...surprised. And I say, "How could I be lonely? I'm in charge of celebrations."

Sometimes they don't believe me, but it's true, I am. I put myself in charge. I choose my own. Last year I gave myself one hundred and eight celebrations—besides the ones that they close school for. I cannot get by with only a few.

Friend, I'll tell you how it works. I keep a notebook and I write the date and then I write about the celebration. I'm very choosy over what goes in that book. It has to be something I plan to remember the rest of my life. You can tell what's worth a celebration because your heart will POUND and you'll feel like you're standing on top of a mountain and you'll catch your breath like you were breathing some kind of air. Otherwise, I count it as just and average day. (I told you I was choosy)

Friend, I wish you'd been here for Dust Devil Day. But since you weren't, I'll tell you how it got to be my first real celebration. You can call them whirlwinds if you want to. Me, I think *dust devils* has a much better sound. Well, anyway, I always stop to watch them. Here, everyone does. You know how they come from far away, moving up from the flats, swirling and swaying and falling and turning, picking up sticks and sand and feathers and dry tumbleweeds. Well, last March eleventh we were all going somewhere. I was in the back of a pickup truck when the dust devils started to gather. You could see they were giants. You'd swear they

were calling their friends too. And they came—dancing to their own windy music. We all started counting. We all started looking for more. They stopped that truck and we turned around and around watching them all. There were seven. At a time like that, something goes kind of crazy in you. You have to run to meet them, yelling all the way. You have to whirl around like you were one of them, and you can't stop until you're falling down.

And then all day you think how lucky you were to be there. Some of my best celebrations are sudden surprises like that. If you weren't outside at that exact moment, you'd miss them. I spend a lot of time outside myself, looking around.

Once I saw a triple rainbow that ended in a canyon where I'd been the day before. I was halfway up a hill standing in a drizzle of rain. It was almost dark but I wouldn't go in (because of the rainbows, of course, and there at the top of the hill a jackrabbit was standing up on his hind legs, perfectly still, looking straight at that same triple rainbow. I may be the only person in the world who's seen a rabbit standing in the mist quietly watching three rainbows. That's worth a celebration any time. I wrote it down and drew the hill and the rabbit and the rainbow and me. Now August ninth is Rainbow celebration Day.

I have Green Cloud Day too. Ask anybody and they'll tell you clouds aren't green. But late one winter afternoon I saw this huge green cloud. It was not bluish-green or something else. This cloud was green...green as a jungle parrot. And the strange thing was that it began to take a parrot's shape, first the wings, and then the head and beak. High in the winter sky that green bird flew. It didn't last more than a minute. You know how fast a cloud can change but I still remember how it looked. So I celebrate green clouds on February sixth. At times like that, I always think, "What if I'd missed it? What if I had been in the house? Or what if I hadn't looked up when I did?" You can see I'm very lucky about things like that.

And I was lucky, on Coyote Day. Because out of all time it had to be one moment only that a certain coyote and I could meet—and we did. Friends, you should have been here too. I was following deer tracks, taking my time, bending down as I walked, kind of humming. (I hum a lot when I'm alone.) I looked up in time to see a young coyote trotting through the brush. She crossed in front of me. It was a windy day and she was going east. In that easy silent way coyotes move, she pushed into the wind. I stood there hardly breathing, wishing I could move that way. I was surprised to see her stop and turn and look at me. She seemed to think that I was just another creature following another rocky trail. (That's true, of course, I am.) She didn't hurry. She wasn't afraid. I saw her eyes and she saw mine. That look held us together.

Because of that, I never will feel quite the same again. So on September twenty-eighth I celebrate Coyote Day. Here's what I do; I walk the trail I walked that day and I hum softly as I go. Finally, I unwrap the feast I've brought for her. Last time it was three apples and some pumpkins seeds and an ear of corn and some big soft homemade ginger cookies. The next day I happened to pass that way again. Coyote tracks went all around the rock where the food had been, and the food was gone. Next year I'll make it even better, I'll bring an extra feast and eat there too.

Another one of my greatest of all celebrations is called The Time of Falling Stars. It lasts almost a week in the middle of August, and I wait all year for those hot summer nights when the sky goes wild. You can call them *meteor showers* if you

want to. Me, I like to say they're *falling stars*. All that week I sleep outside. I give my full attention to the sky. And every time a streak of light goes shooting through the darkness, I feel my heart shoot out of me. One night I saw a fireball that left a long red blazing trail across the sky. After it was gone, I stood there looking up, not quite believing what I'd seen. The strange thing was, I met a man who told me he'd seen it too while he was lying by the campfire five hundred miles away. He said he did not sleep again that night. Suddenly it seemed that we two spoke a language no one else could understand. Every August of my life, I'll think of that.

Friend, I've saved my New Year Celebration until last. Mine is a little different from the one most people have. It comes in *spring*. To tell the truth, I never did feel like my new year started January first. To me that's just another winter day. I let my year begin when winter ends and morning light comes earlier, the way it *should*. That's when I feel like starting new. I wait until the white-winged doves are back from Mexico, and wildflowers cover the hills, and my favorite cactus blooms. It always makes me think I ought to bloom myself.

And that's when I start to plan my New Year celebration. I finally choose a day that is exactly right. Even the air has to be perfect, and the dirt has to feel warm on bare feet. (Usually, it's a Saturday around the end of April.) I have a drum that I beat to signal The Day. I go wandering off, following all of my favorite trails to all of the places I like. I check how everything is doing. I spend the day admiring things. If the old desert tortoise I know from last year is out strolling around, I'll go his direction awhile. I celebrate with horned toads and ravens and lizards and quail... And, Friend, it's not a bad party.

Walking back home (kind of humming), sometimes I think about those people who ask me if I'm lonely here. I have to laugh out loud.

When you can take a look at the illustrations and see how much they add to the story. I like this story because it reinforces that it is not the gifts purchased that makes the celebration...it is the celebration that makes the gift.

To sum up my thoughts:

After researching through books and my own memories, I realized that the best book of family stories is... Our Bible. It was the start of my thoughts on...Rocks, Fathers and Celebrations.

Rocks are thought to show strength as well as beauty. We build our lives on a variety of rocks...especially God, our rock.

Family is not limited to just the immediate but to ancestors and those yet to come. It allows us to become who we are and to accept changes that come to us.

Celebrations are where we find them... today we celebrate the men in our lives and give thanks to God for the gifts they are.

God our rock, help us to celebrate the family that we are and give us strength to reach out. These we ask in your name...