

First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

January 14, 2026



PASTORAL MEDITATION by Reverend Thomas Hawkins

NIGHT AND FOG

One morning last week, fog greeted me when I went out to walk our dogs. A few days later, I pulled out of the garage and found myself enveloped in heavy fog. When I'm in a car, I dread being lost in fog. Fog makes driving difficult and dangerous. Walking in the fog, on the other hand, is an entirely different experience. There's something magical, even a bit mythical, about fog. Walking on a foggy morning can be a gift, a stimulus for imagination and wonder. When walking on a foggy morning, the familiar becomes unfamiliar; the known, made unknown. Usual expectations are softened and obscured. I can imagine myself in any place or time. I'm with Arthur's knights in the mists of Avalon or alongside Humphrey Bogart in the closing scene of "Casablanca."

Fog usually comes as a surprise. Expecting a sunny morning, we are instead greeted by fog. Fog can disappear as easily as it appears. We are creeping along a foggy highway and suddenly it vanishes. Fog obscures our vision so that a car on the roadway or walkers on a trail suddenly appear out of nowhere. Fog makes it hard to see very far ahead of ourselves. It disorients our sense of time and space.

Fog can be frightening. One winter day I was travelling along a midwestern interstate when suddenly all the cars ahead of me began slipping and sliding. Some into the ditch; others, into one another. I managed to avoid a crash and crept slowly to my destination; but I was puzzled by what had happened. Freezing fog, a friend explained. The supercooled water droplets in fog can freeze suddenly when they fall on a colder exposed surface, creating black ice on a roadway. Freezing fog can also be a problem for aircraft on take-off and landing.

Fog's capacity to frighten us may be why everything from folklore to films invokes fog to suggest a lurking menace. In Arthur Conan Doyle's "Hound of the Baskervilles," even master detective Sherlock Holmes is seemingly thwarted by fog's creeping blanket of fear. Creepy fog is itself a major character in movies from "The Mist" to "Good Boy." Fog dulls perceptions and limits vision, which makes it ideal for conjuring up a threatening atmosphere or a malevolent creature.

In 1955 French filmmaker René Resnais produced a documentary entitled "Night and Fog" (Nuit et Brouillard) that juxtaposed scenes of an abandoned Auschwitz with earlier, wartime footage of the camp. The film is still available as part of the Criterion Collection in many libraries. In 1941, the National Socialists used the same term "Night and Fog" (Nacht und Nebel) to describe the official policy of creating widespread societal fear and uncertainty by disappearing opponents who are snatched off streets or from their homes and never seen again. Resnais' documentary investigates the cyclical nature of human violence and the unsettling suggestion that such horrors are a regular feature of human behavior.

I decided to look for biblical references to fog. Since most of its authors lived in a semi-arid region tucked between the Arabian, Libyan, and Syrian Deserts, the bible does not have much to say about fog. Genesis 2:6 describes how a fog or mist arose from the dust of the earth as God created Adam and Eve. Fog in this passage suggests something creative, a gift, a stimulus to growth and life. The other significant reference to fog is James 4:14 where it becomes a metaphor for life's brevity and unpredictability. "You do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are like a fog that appears for a little while and then vanishes."

These days I feel like I am walking around in another kind of fog. It's not comforting or magical fog. There's nothing mystical or romantic about it. The fog enveloping me feels like a creeping blanket of fear. It's a fog that disorients and instills fear. This fog has not been created by the interaction of temperature and moisture. It is the product of a fog machine of political and social polarization, eroding norms, contempt for others, and increasing angry appeals to violence as how we settle differences or take what we want. Some days I feel disoriented. Other days I feel frightened. On still other days, I have lost all sense that the world is a stable, predictable place.

Lost in this fog, I find some comfort in the Bible's two references to fog. Genesis 2:6 reminds me that fog can be creative and not just ominous. It's out of fog and mist that God brings forth something new: the First Man and the First Woman. I find hopeful the Book of James' description of fog as something that lacks permanence. Whatever is happening will not last. What we are experiencing is only temporary and will, we hope, give way to something new and better.

In the meantime, we have to keep doing what Christian people always do when shrouded in night and fog. We:

- Slow down, pay attention, take care of each other, and advance carefully,
- Accept we cannot see the whole picture, but we can see enough to take one more step,
- listen to one another rather than shout past each other,
- build communities of care to sustain us through hard times,
- resist despair,
- be persistent in faithfulness,
- take care of ourselves physically and emotionally,
- pray for one another and our world,
- mind our language, and
- look for joy within us and around us.

The church's calendar calls the Sundays of January and February "the Season of Epiphany." It celebrates the many ways Christ's light shines in our world and encourages us to be light-bearers. We celebrate the season of Epiphany this year in a world full of shadows that desperately needs a multitude of lights to shine brightly in the darkness. In such a time as this, we need to ground ourselves in and reflect out into our world the life and goodness of the One who said of himself, "I am the Light of the world." (John 8:12)

Be the Light,
Pastor Thomas

P.S. – One way I am seeking to respond pastorally to the anxious and confused times we are living through is to host conversations both in-person and on Zoom around Dr. Hanna Reichel's "For Such A Time as This: An Emergency Devotional." See information elsewhere in the e-news for information about dates and time. Books are provided.

SUNDAY WORSHIP in the sanctuary or livestream link: <http://www.facebook.com/churchontherotary/>

FROM YOUR MODERATOR

Happy New Year!

As we begin our journey into 2026, I want to highlight some important items.

First, the accessible bathroom is 99% complete! The contractor is doing the final installation and touch ups this week. They have done an amazing job to transform a portion of our youth room into a fully accessible bathroom that is also "family friendly" with a drop-down changing table to further accommodate our folks with young children. There have been many, many projects throughout 2025 that we will discuss in this year's financial meeting. Our boards and committees are hard at work doing what they do best which is provide time, talent (and treasure!) in support of our missions and church operations. Our annual financial meeting will be held on February 22, in the sanctuary immediately following service.

This year, as always, the Board of Business and Finance will provide the financial overview of 2025, historical trends in our finances and present the proposed budget for FY2026. After the presentation and a question, answer and comment period we will vote on acceptance of the proposed budget. The financial portion of the meeting will not be live streamed but as always, we will have hard copies of the annual financial report, available in advance of the meeting. We are always available to answer any questions and to receive commentary on the financial health of the church.

Lastly, the theme for this meeting will be a "Day of Gratitude", which will involve a review of accomplishments over the past year among other celebratory surprises, after the financial discussions. Please join us on Sunday, February 22 for a "Day of Gratitude"!

"FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS" – Winter Adult Study

We are living through a time unlike any that recent generations have experienced: explosions of anger and resistance in places like Iran where 1,000s of protesters have been murdered by their government; barbaric violence as in Sudan where an estimated 400,000 civilians have been murdered in the recent civil war; a fever-pitch of angry rhetoric and polarization in our own country. What does all this mean for us as Christians who seek to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, particularly in our own North American society?

You are invited to explore this question as part of a winter short-term study that will begin soon. We will be using a recently published devotional resource written by Dr. Hanna Reichel, professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, entitled "For Such A Time As This: An Emergency Devotional." Based on four chapters organized around the four movements of a worship service, with 4-6 page subsections for each day of the week, Reichel weaves together scriptural reflection, her own expertise in writings of German theologians during the period of National Socialism, and personal experiences to help us think about how we respond to events around us, not out of the language of social media and political partisanship but as followers of Jesus Christ who calls us to the love, knowledge, and service of God and neighbor.

Books for the study will be available this Sunday immediately after worship. Two options are available: one in-person session and another on Zoom. Sessions will begin on January 27 (Zoom) and January 28 (face-to-face).

Zoom sessions on Tuesdays at 7:00 p.m. – Jan. 27, Feb. 10, 17, & 24.

In-Person sessions on Wednesdays at 12:30 p.m. at the church – Jan. 28, Feb. 4, 11, 18.

It's understood that we'll make our best effort to be present for most sessions but anticipated that all of us may have conflicts one or more sessions. Don't not sign-up simply because you'll miss one session. Also, it's possible if there's a conflict to switch from the Zoom to In-Person sessions occasionally.

Questions? Speak to Pastor Thomas

ALTAR FLOWERS

We invite you to provide beautiful flowers for our church altar on Sunday morning. The following dates are open: February 8th and 22nd and all of March. To reserve dates please look at the Flower Calendar sign up poster in Fellowship Hall or call the church office with any questions (525-4121). Thank you so much, The Flower Committee

HOW ABOUT DOING A PUZZLE???

It's that "indoor" time of year when the nights are VERY long. In my need to keep busy, I started doing puzzles, especially in the cold winter months! I find this activity to be quite relaxing and some even say it's good for your brain, too.

Several are currently on the shelves in the breezeway. Just take one home and when you are done, put it back or pass it along so someone else can do it. Enjoy!!!

KEEPING CHILDREN WARM

What child doesn't lose a hat or a pair of mittens at least once during the cold winter? Please help us fill the basket in the breezeway with new or gently used hats, gloves, mittens and scarves for the children at Kensington School to keep them warm...because we care. Neighbors helping neighbors in need, it's what we do so well. Thank you so much!

UPDATE ON MASKS

There is an uptick in cases of respiratory illnesses reported both by hospitals and in the media. In light of the increased cases of respiratory illness we encourage those attending worship with chronic conditions or heightened risk of infection to consider masking for worship. For all of us, if we have a fever or other flu-like symptoms or have had the flu within the last 7-10 days, to consider participating in worship online rather than in person or to wear a mask. We have masks available in the sanctuary near the small tables where you find the bulletins.

PRAYER

Dear Lord: We feel we are not powerful, important people. Help us to see that every good thing we do makes a difference for someone. You said to us that you are the light of the world and that you want us to light up our world by living by your values of patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control, and joy. It's a troubled world, Lord. So help me to live in ways that do not feed the shadows but encourage the light. Amen.



First Congregational Church

7 Somers Road, East Longmeadow, MA 01028

Web: churchontherotary.org ~ email: office@churchontherotary.org ~ 413.525.4121