

# First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

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PASTORAL MEDITATION by Rev. Thomas Hawkins



## CORBENY AND MY GRANDFATHER

In planning my long-distance walk along the Via Francigena in northern France, I prepared by researching churches, cathedrals, and pilgrimage sites near my walking trail. I was deeply moved by the cathedral at Laon and its historical association with Clovis and the early Merovingian kings of France as well as its cathedral school where some of the leading medieval theologians like Abelard and Anselm taught. The cathedral at Reims was inspiring as was worshipping in the newly opened Notre-Dame de Paris.

I was not prepared, on the other hand, for the battle-scarred landscape through which I was walking. I was walking across some of the most contested and fought-over landscape of the First World War. After leaving Laon, my first night was spent in Corbeny. Its original claim to fame was the presence of a shrine dedicated to the relics of an early Christian saint purported to cure scrofula. These relics were enough to prompt medieval French kings to visit Corbeny after their coronation at Reims or Laon in order to claim their divine right to cure scrofula by the laying on of their royal hands.

On the wall of the inn in Corbeny where I stayed were photos taken at the end of WW 1. There was nothing left standing. Corbeny looked like Gaza. The whole town was rubble as first one army, then another swept across it. The German line following the Battle of the Marne in 1915 was established along a ridge near Corbeny called Le Chemin des Dames. In April, 1917, the French army attempted to recapture this ridge. After a week of repeated assaults, French deaths had climbed to 187,000 soldiers. As a result of these catastrophic losses, French troops mutinied, believing their commanders neither cared for their lives nor knew strategically what they were doing. Their refusal to charge any longer against German lines sparked a widespread mutiny within the French army that spread to an estimated 40 percent of its units.

A third battle for this ridge began in 1918 and involved the US 33 Infantry Division, also called the Illinois National Guard Division or sometimes the Prairie Division. It is this division in which my grandfather Hawkins was present as part of a unit that handled draft horses for artillery and supply transport. In 1918 he could have been fighting in the same fields across which I was walking in 2026.

More than a century has passed since WW 1. Its events are beyond the reach of living memory. Over 10 million were killed in WW 1 and another 20 million injured. Who could possibly remember the details of their lives or their bravery? Or of the shattered bodies and minds of soldiers that returned home? Or the civilians who never returned to ruined fields and homes. I don't know what horror my grandfather observed. He never spoke of his experiences in France. Not once. And as a teenager, I was too absorbed in my own life to think about asking him about his life.

Sometime between 600 CE and 1200 CE there was a fierce battle between Angles and Saxons in what is now northern England. A Welsh bard recorded its history in a long poem called *Y Gododdin*. The warriors gathered at a place they called Din Eidyn and we now call Edinburgh. They fought bravely; but only one warrior survived to return and tell of his fellow soldiers' bravery. *Y Gododdin* sings of how "although they were slain, they slew. And until the end of the world they will be honored."

After more than 1,400 years we have a list of warriors whose names are long forgotten, let alone honored until the end of the world. World War One ended over 100 years ago; and I have no idea what my own grandfather experienced when he was in the Prairie Division fighting along the Chemin des Dames.

Caleb Wiseman, a direct maternal forebearer, enlisted in the Continental Army, fought in multiple Revolutionary battles, including the Battle of Long Island where he was captured and imprisoned by the British. He is buried in an unmarked grave in abandoned family cemetery on an overgrown West Virginia mountainside. Another warrior forgotten by the world.

The bigger war we are always fighting is not with another nation or people. It is with our own memory. We forget the cost of war and the destruction it represents: A cost counted in deaths and injuries but also in the collapse of cultures and nations. World War 1, even World War 2, is increasingly something we know only in history books and not in the memory of the living.

We are living in a time that one historian calls an “age of predators.” Like Cortes’ conquest of Mexico or the wars of the Italian Renaissance, predatory leaders prefer brute force over reasoned negotiation, according to Giuliano da Empoli an Italian-Swiss political scientist and author of *L'heure du prédateur*. Such times are the product of changing technologies that make old rules of war obsolete and give incentive to the ruthless rather than the patient.

The Bible includes significant passages that seem to endorse war’s violence and destruction, even holy war. Read 1 Samuel 15:33: “Samuel hacked Agag to pieces before the Lord in Gilgal.” Much of the Bible was composed in a context of conflict. One biblical commentator has written that collective trauma underlies many biblical texts. Cities from Jericho to Jerusalem were surrounded by fortified walls for a reason. Even then, however, prophets like Isaiah and Micah were proclaiming God’s intentions for the world were opposed to divine-sanctioned jihad. “[God] will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.” (Isa. 2:4)

In Jesus, we find a generally consistent pattern in which he tells his disciples to be people who create peace and do everything possible to live in harmony with others. He urges us to live in peace and work for peace as he says when he describes peacemakers as the children of God, (Matt 5:9). But later in Matthew, Jesus also says, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.” (Matt 10:34-36).

As I walked across this section of northern France between Laon and Reims, it looks peaceful, as this photo shows.



Yet it is a landscape scarred by a war provoked by careless kings, kaisers, and czars; conducted by generals often unconcerned about the fate of those they sent to their deaths; and ended with a peace that set the stage for the next generation’s far more violent war. Looking back at the WW 1’s consequences for Europe and England, mystery writer Agatha Christie wrote, “One is left with the horrible feeling now that war settles nothing; that to win a war is as disastrous as to lose one.”

With prayer,  
Pastor Thomas

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

## SUMMER SERMON SERIES EXPLORES "METAPHORS OF THE DIVINE"

This summer we will step away from the Revised Common Lectionary, which follows continuous readings from Matthew's gospel and instead have a six-week series of sermons entitled "Metaphors of the Divine."

Each week will examine a different name, image, or metaphor for God, all of which arise from a phenomenon in nature and that the Bible itself uses as a descriptor or name for God. Sermons will explore what these biblical names reveal about God as well as include one or more specific suggestions for a concrete practice based on that week's name or metaphor for God that we will be invited to experience during the following week.

These themes are:

- June 21 - Rock
- June 27 - Fire
- July 5 - Bread
- July 12 - Silence
- July 19 - Water
- July 26 - Light

I hope you'll join us if you are in town. And if you are away on weekends, there's always our online service or the uploaded versions available later in the week.

See you in worship! Pastor Thomas

## SUMMER OFFICE HOURS

Summer office hours start next week and run through September 4. The office will be open on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 9:00 am - 12:00 pm. Also note, during the summer, the newsletter is distributed every other week. The last weekly newsletter before the start of summer is today, June 17th.

## CHURCH WORLD SERVICE – "Tools of Hope"

Across the United States and around the world, seeds are being planted; seeds of nourishment, resilience and dignity. And at the heart of this harvest are the generous donors who support CWS Tools of Hope. Because of you, families have access to more than seeds and shovels—they have opportunities to grow lasting hope. Please donate by putting a few dollars in the envelope in the pew or send a check to the church office. Because of your compassion, families are growing food, earning income, improving health and building new futures rooted in dignity and strength. Your generosity isn't just changing lives—it's helping create a better world.

Thank you for planting seeds of compassion and for helping hope take root. M&O

## PRAYER (adapted from *Book of Common Worship*, p. 818)

God of the nations: in your sight nations rise and fall and pass through times of peril. May leaders be led by your wisdom; may they search your will and see it clearly. Guard brave men and women who risk themselves in battle for their country. Though they must be at war, let them live for peace. Keep us all from hate that hardens the heart. Give to all your light and your truth as their guide. Through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of this world and our Savior. Amen.



First Congregational Church

7 Somers Road, East Longmeadow, MA 01028

Web: [churchontherotary.org](http://churchontherotary.org) ~ email: [office@churchontherotary.org](mailto:office@churchontherotary.org) ~ 413.525.4121