First Congregational UCC
September 6, 2026
New Beginnings? You Betcha!
Exodus 12:1-14
Rev. Nick Hatch

Let Us Pray: God, help us mark each day with perseverance and praise. May the words from my mouth and the meditations upon our hearts be acceptable to you, oh our rock and redeemer. Amen.

It happens each year, sometime between April and May. Somewhere in there, my winter-pale skin must secret a hormone that makes me crave sunlight. You know, warm sunshine and vitamin D. So, on the first nice sunny day I make a sacred pilgrimage to - my driveway. I make lemonade, turn on the radio and go barefoot. I feel the warm concrete and crunchy sand from winter driving underfoot. Sometimes I hear the trickle of snow water running down our gutters. The grass is khaki and flattened, and maybe still beneath chunky snow. And I lay down and grab as much sunshine as I can.

And then comes the real moment.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

Plunk. Plunk. Plunk.

It is the sound of the Scotch pines. For two years they were carefully nourishing this season’s crop pinecones, and when they hit just the right

temp, each individual scale snaps free from the central axis of the woody stem with a strong force, flinging seeds which cascade down through the branches.

Pop. Plunk. Pop. Plunk.

This for me has become the first true day of spring; it's a personal observance. It marks the changing of the seasons and all the joy which warmer weather brings. It's a celebration really; for my skin, my mental health, and notifies me of the impending end of school and the program year at church. I look forward to this day. I need this day. It is a gift from God and a chance to offer God praise - for renewal, deliverance, and life itself.

Do you have any official, or unofficial observances that meaningfully mark your calendars?

The observances and realities which Scripture speaks about are not just relegated to by gone times or merely stories in a book. Scripture shapes our calendars, gives us words to name our contemporary reality, and ground us as people of faith with unlimited new beginnings.

Our scripture from Exodus is the story of the Passover, the moment which the Lord promised to deliver Israel from the wickedness of the Egyptian Pharoah. Now, it's hard for us to celebrate all of God's methods; they are harsh, cruel, unbending. God's judgment though, marked the beginning of Israel's transition as a nation enslaved to Pharaoh to a nation free to serve

God. The blood on the doorposts was to be a sign calling upon God's mercy and way-making.

And then, God provides very specific instructions of how God's people were to observe this miracle. This observance is called Passover and marks the beginning, or "Head" of the Jewish biblical New Year.

For our Jewish brothers and sisters, Passover is a family occasion. Traditionally they avoid leavened bread in their homes and only eat Kosher food. The centerpiece of Passover is the seder, a ritual meal held on the first night which involves readings detailing the Exodus story. A traditional seder plate displays symbolic food items relevant to the Exodus story There is music and intentional; welcoming of strangers - a purposeful observance of God's scriptural covenant of welcome.

Passover is not just an event from Israel's past in the way that stories often are; this is *the* event from the past that shapes the living present for Jewish people.

While Passover more vividly reenacts the event it commemorates and brings home its significance to people of the Jewish faith, our observance of Holy Communion really links with Passover.

Churches choose the frequency of which we observe communion. At First Congregational we do this at the "head" or first Sunday of the month. It's an occasion where we mark the nourishing and transformative forgiveness of Jesus Christ. We do it first thing, every month, to re-center us on the One

who delivers us and whom we seek to worship. Communion is one of our two sacraments, along with baptism, where Christ says in the scripture that when we do these things, the Holy Spirit promises to be uniquely present.

Sacraments observe the spiritual incarnation of Christ himself; organically moving among our souls bound together as the worshipping body of our Savior.

When we receive communion, we use an earthen cup and plate which might look like that used by Christ. We drink from grapes and eat from bread-like Christ. It is our belief that the primacy of worship is to observe, praise, and receive the grace of God in Jesus Christ by responding to Christ's invitation to commune in the presence of his living body. This is why we call the table on a chancel a communion table, not an altar.

Our sacraments are *the event* from the words of Christ in the past which shapes the living present for us Christians.

This month is an especially good month to celebrate communion first thing. Because next week is Rally Sunday. Rally Sunday is a protestant tradition commencing with the beginning of the new church school and thus program year. It is a day set aside to reassemble or "rally" after the relatively quiet summer of vacations, camps, and sunshine sprees.

Many churches, including our church, observe this new beginning with a picnic and festivities. We will have a tent and lemonade. We will hand out

our program guides full of opportunity. The choir returns. Our energy coalesces. Our focus sharpens upon the living presence of God.

Do you know what else is next Sunday? It is the Jewish holiday Rosh Hashanah. This the Jewish calendar's civic New Year, marking the beginning of the High Holy Days; a time of prayer, reflection, and renewal. They celebrate God's creation of Adam and Eve, and it's like a birthday party for all of creation.

Now why do our Jewish brothers and sisters get two New Years and we only get one? I'm feeling a little jealous.

But truthfully, we are surrounded by observances marking God's abiding deliverance; Passover and Communion, popping pinecones and splendid picnics, forgiveness and grace, deliverance and freedom.

Does God really provide new beginnings? You Betcha!

God showers us with opportunities, like seeds sown from the sky, cultivating righteousness and beauty. So, try something new. Clean up after the Rally Sunday picnic. Serve or prepare Communion. Attend a retreat. Help out with CYF. Volunteer with one of our mission partners. Greet someone you don't know during coffee hour. Join the choir. Attend a book or Bible study. Take your Open-Door bulletin home and pray for every name on the prayer list every morning during breakfast. Walk barefoot. Feel the warm sun. Listen for God's chorus of creation.

And mark today - as Holy. For when we live with the Spirit, this month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for us. And therefore, everyday can be a day of remembrance for us. We shall celebrate them as a festival to the LORD; throughout our generations we shall observe them as a perpetual ordinance.

Thanks be for our Passover God who preservers in promises and blessings.

Amen.