

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, MAY 17, 2020

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

SIXTH SUNDAY of EASTER

GATHERING

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: Bless the Lord, O people, sing!
All: **Let the sound of praise ring out.**
One: Come and hear what the Lord has done,
All: **the Lord who has made everything!**

***OPENING HYMN** "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" GtG 610 (*Verses 1-4*)

1. **O for a thousand tongues to sing
my dear Redeemer's praise,
the glories of my God and King,
the triumphs of God's grace!**
2. **The name of Jesus charms our fears,
and bids our sorrows cease,
sings music in the sinner's ears,
brings life, and health, and peace.**
3. **Christ speaks, and listening to his voice
new life the dead receive;
the mournful waken to rejoice;
the poor in heart believe.**
4. **My gracious Master and my God,
assist me to proclaim,
to spread through all the earth abroad
the honors of thy name.**

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***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

Forgive us, God, for religion without passion and relationships that lack compassion. Take away the divisive attitudes that separate us from individuals and groups who are different from us. Release us from jealousy and iniquity and self-serving comparisons. Help us to see ourselves as you intend us to be, through Christ. Amen.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

One: Sisters and brothers,
God forgives, restores, and strengthens us
through the risen Christ.
Know that you are forgiven
and be at peace.

All: **Thanks be to God!**

***RESPONSE OF PRAISE** “We Are Forgiven” GtG 447

We are forgiven. We are forgiven.
Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God.
(Repeat)
(Public Domain)

THE WORD

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Come Holy Spirit, our helper and advocate:
Open our hearts and minds this day,
entice us with your presence.
Spark us with a word of life—
a message that we may share with others
as we seek to live Christ’s love in the world.
All this we ask in the name of God,
who creates, redeems, and sustains us. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READINGS Psalm 66:8-20
John 14:15-21

PSALM 66:8-20 *(various)*

From Psalm 66, a sharing of the writer’s story...and faith.

8 Bless our God, all peoples;
make the voice of praise to be heard.

9 God preserved us among the living,
and kept our feet from slipping.

10 For you, O God, have tested us;
you have refined us like silver,

11 You brought us into the net
and laid burdens on our backs.

12 You let people ride over our heads;

we went through fire and water,
but you brought us to a place of abundance.
13 I will enter your house with burnt-offerings
and will pay you my vows,
14 which I promised with my lips
and spoke with my mouth when I was in trouble.
15 I will offer the best burned offerings to you
along with the smoke of sacrificed rams;
I will offer both bulls and goats.
16 Come and hear, all you who honor God,
and I will tell you what God has done for me.
17 I cried out with my mouth,
and God's praise was on my tongue.
18 If I had cherished evil in my heart,
my Lord would not have listened.
19 But in truth God has heard me
and attended to the voice of my prayer.
20 Blessed be God, who has not rejected my prayer,
nor withheld steadfast love from me.

JOHN 14:15-21 (*New Revised Standard Version*)

Some of the last words Jesus spoke to his disciples as his earthly ministry drew to a close.

15 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, who will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees nor knows the Spirit. You know the Spirit, because the Spirit abides with you, and will be in you.

18 "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 21 They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

SERMON "Hear, God, Here." by Pastor Bill Vincent

Through the wringer.

That's what the psalmist's experience was like: like being put through the wringer.

"Refined like silver" (v.10).

"Through fire and water" (v.12).

The imagery is haunting.

The imagery is all too close to home.

We do not know the specifics of what the writer of our psalm experienced. We do not know the everyday details: how long it lasted; whether it was just the psalm writer, or the whole community, the psalmist simply sharing one part of the larger story.

But we know how the psalmist experienced it, what it felt like.

It felt like being put through the wringer.

And notice it really did feel like *being put through* the wringer. Not choosing on my own to go through this metallurgically refined experience. But, it's happening *to me.*, not necessarily by choice.

For you, O God, have tested us;

You have refined us like silver. (v.10)

The psalmist describes the experience -- indeed *understands* the experience -- as being tested by God.

Save us from the time of trial (Contemporary Version)

as we pray in the Lord's Prayer. Well, this psalmist did get led into the time of trial.

And it was like being put through the wringer.

Now, I don't always know about God actually putting us through testing times. Is God actually doing that to us? Did God actually take specific and intentional action to bring about a certain set of circumstances in order to test us?

I don't know about that.

But I do know there are certainly times in life when that's what it feels like. 'Why is this happening to me?' 'Am I being tested?'

Is it possible that, Yes, I am being tested; but, No, God is not actually doing it, not actually 'sticking it' to us; but, Yes, sometimes that's simply how life is?

Through the wringer. That's how the psalmist understands their experience.

But also,

you [God] brought us to a place of abundance.

For the psalmist also understands, and sees, that God has provided and helped: that God has seen the psalmist through the experience, through to the other side.

And for that, the psalmist gives thanks.

Now, I think we can probably understand 'going through the wringer': ending up in a difficult place in life, feeling pressure from so many sides, feeling like this is happening *to us*, and wanting to cry out, "Why me?"

Actually I think we may ALL be able to understand that.

But sometimes, *seeing how God helps and provides in and through that experience...*

That can be hard to understand, hard to see, hard to grasp, hard to believe.

But what helps us understand, and believe, is precisely what the psalmist does. The psalmist tells their own story: this is what happened to me; this is who I am, this is who God is, this is how I saw God at work.

The psalmist provides a testimony, a witness, to their life and God's action in their life, not only as a way to give thanks for "*what God has done for me*" (v.16), but also as a way to bolster and shape and form the faith -- the belief, the trust -- of others, of the community.

A faith that affirms that
-God hears, and
-God's here.

God hears the inner cries of agony from those struggling to breathe.
God hears the sobs of those who miss them so much when they have taken their last breath.

God hears the desperation in the voice of the parent who struggles to feed and clothe their children, let alone themselves.

God hears the agony of the small business owner who wrestles with the risks to health in opening versus the risks to economic ruin in remaining closed.

God hears.

**God has heard me
and attended to the voice of my prayer. (v.19)**

the psalmist attests.

God hears.

Have you been heard?

Perhaps you have had the experience of talking something out with someone, and it made you feel better. The person listening did not necessarily have to offer the 'world's best advice' or the most 'insightful solution'. In fact, they may not have said much of anything. But they listened to you. They heard what you had to say. They heard your heartache. They heard YOU.

And in hearing you, they showed they cared. In hearing you, you were supported. In hearing you, they sought to understand. In hearing you, you no longer felt you were alone.

In hearing you, they stood with you. In hearing you, they were there.

In hearing us, God is here.

Even more so than the presence of another human being. For this One who hears our prayers knows us better than we know ourselves. This One who's here cares for us deeper than the person who cares for us the most.

God is here. God is present, with us in our struggles, present to our suffering.

As Robert V. Thompson (Minister, Lake Street Church, Evanston IL) reminds us, though,

The holy Presence does not promise to keep suffering at a distance. Rather, [Thompson affirms] the Holy One is a ubiquitous Presence that forever reveals to us the spirit that is resilient within us by testing us in ways that make us stretch. This is not a coercive Presence that changes our external situation. God is rather the persuasive Presence that holds us so that, no matter what happens to us, we know we are not alone. (Feasting:Homiletical)

"I will not leave you orphaned,"

Jesus said.

“I will ask the Father, who will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ... the Spirit [who] abides with you, and will be in you.” (John 14)

The Advocate. The Spirit. God’s Presence with us. Powerful. Comforting. Assuring. Strengthening. Directing/Guiding.

Presence. You are not alone.

And so, with the Apostle Paul, we can affirm,

I can do all things through [the one] who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:13-NRSV)

I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me. (Philippians 4:13-TEV)

I can do all things, because I do not do them alone, but with the God who is with me: the God who hears my tears and my cries; the God who’s here in my trials and difficulties, standing with me...always.

Again, this doesn’t mean the suffering is taken away from us.

As Beverly R. Gaventa acknowledges,

In the face of any suffering, whether caused by human inhumanity, by disease, or by nature, the available answers always [eventually] fall short. What [we] can assert..., with Christians of every time and place, is that God stands with those who suffer and that God ultimately triumphs over that suffering. (Texts, p.307)

For, remember:

He is risen! He is risen indeed!

In that faith we trust that God hears and God is here.

Knowing that also provides a template for how we help each other through the wringer.

We listen. We hear.

And we stand with. We are there for each other, the best we can, with what we have, even simply ourselves.

All the while giving thanks to God; not in a pollyanna-ish manner, with our head in the clouds and our eyes closed to the struggles of life.

But thanks that God does hear, and God is here.

And trusting in God’s trustworthiness to “bring us (eventually) to a place of abundance”: to see us through the wringer to the other side.

For remember that line from the Lord’s Prayer?

Save us from the time of trial (Contemporary Version)

No, we don’t want to go through this time of trial, through this trying time. But if we do -- when we do -- then, “O God,

deliver us from evil.”

Help us out. Give us strength. Help us to avoid doing something we will later regret. And deliver us from the evil of failing to trust in you.

And then we give thanks:
that God does hear us;
and that God is here with us, in the midst of it all.

This is a testimony -- a witness, a story -- that I need to hear.
And when I have difficulty laying claim to its truth, then I need to hear it from you, as
you lay claim to it for me. And vice versa.

So Gail Ramshaw (Professor Emerita of Religion, La Salle University, Philadelphia PA)
offers,

*if this is a Sunday on which it is difficult for me to praise God, I trust to the rest
of the...community to carry me along with their song.* (Connections, 278a)

Yes, this is a story I need to hear.

This is a testimony you need to hear.

This is a witness we need to share with one another, especially in those times when we
find it difficult to affirm for ourselves.

But this testimony is not simply for you, me, us -- for those in the church.

Bless our God, all peoples; (v.8)

Come and hear, all you who honor God, (v.16)

the psalmist proclaims.

This testimony is for the world: a story about God who is for us and for the world.

So, let us tell that story.

Let us be that witness.

Let us live that testimony.

I need it.

You need it.

The world needs it.

A testimony, a witness, a story about hope and help and life...and the God who offers it
all, to all, even in all.

Amen.

Thanks be to God.

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

In life and in death we belong to God.

**Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,**

**and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.**

With believers in every time and place,

**we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

(from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us give thanks to God who listens
and gives heed to our prayers.

We praise and we bless you, our true and loving God.

We pray for all who search for you:
may they find their way in you.

Bless us with lips that sing your praise
and lives that tell the stories of all that you have done for us.

Open our eyes to find you among us
as we share your love with others.

Lord in your mercy, **receive our prayer.**

We pray for all who are oppressed by governments
or institutions:

for those whose voices are not heard or believed,
those with no one on their side.

Bless us with a joy for justice
and the strength to persevere as we work toward
your coming realm.

Lord in your mercy, **receive our prayer.**

We pray for all who hunger,
and those who worry each day how they will care for their families.

Bless us all with meaningful work and fill us with good things,
as we love and care for each other and find our sustenance in you.

Lord in your mercy, **receive our prayer.**

We pray for all who suffer the violence and scars of war,
for all soldiers and their families,
and all who live and serve in war-torn places.

Give them courage in the face of fear;
in times of trouble, do not let their feet slip.

Bless us with your vision of peace,
for you have made us one family by giving life and breath to all.

Lord in your mercy, **receive our prayer.**

We pray for all who care for others
and all who seek to bring healing in the midst of disease.
Protect them from the very disease they seek to protect others from;
guide them in decisions made and counsel given;
and encourage them with your care and provision.
Lord in your mercy, **receive our prayer.**

We remember before you all who have died,
and pray for all who will die today,
that they may know your peace.
Bless us with the gift of faith,
that we may know you and love you,
and enjoy life eternal shared with you,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER (Contemporary Version)

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Let us praise God with our offerings. Let us return thanks to the Creator, who gives us life and breath. Let us manifest God's love for the world through sharing the time, talents, and material gifts God has loaned to us.

Offering

**Doxology* GtG 606

**Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
praise God, all creatures here below;
praise God above, you heavenly host;
praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.**
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**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

O Lord, we give that others may live. We give to praise you for life and love. We give to share with the world the presence and promise of God, in whom we live and move and have our being. May these tokens of your abundant mercy give counsel and hope to your children near and far. Amen.

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “Come, Hear” [*Tune: Dennis - GtG 306*]

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|---|--|
| 1. Come, hear what God has done.
God’s promises are true.
New life in Christ has just begun,
And love will see us through. | 2. We seek and feel and find
God’s presence with us here,
Transforming all of humankind
And canceling our fear. |
| 3. The One who made this world
Is near to us as breath.
God listens to our prayers unfurled
And lifts us up from death. | 4. Let reverence and zeal
Be joined with gentleness.
The Holy Spirit will reveal
God’s love and will to bless. |

***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Sisters and brothers,
God has heard you and given heed
to your prayers.
Therefore, go in peace to serve Christ,
and always be eager to do what is good.

May God, who creates, redeems, and sustains,
keep you steadfast in faith, buoyant in hope, and abounding in love.
And the blessing of God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.

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