

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2021

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

FIRST SUNDAY in LENT

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(from Psalm 25)*

One: "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul;"

All: "my God, I put my trust in you."

One: "Show me your ways, O Lord,"

All: "and teach me your paths."

One: "Lead me in your truth and teach me,"

All: "for you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted all the day long."

One: We come to worship the God of all grace and mercy.

***OPENING HYMN** "When We Are Tested" GtG 783

One: When we are tested and wrestle alone,
famished for bread when the world offers stone,

**All: nourish us, God, by your word and your way,
food that sustains us by night and by day.**

One: When in the desert we cry for relief,
pleading for paths marked by certain belief,

**All: lift us to love you beyond sign and test,
trusting your presence, our only true rest.**

One: When we are tempted to barter our souls,
trading the truth for the power to control,

**All: teach us to worship and praise only you,
seeking your will in the work that we do.**

One: When we have struggled and searched through the night,
sorting and sifting the wrong from the right,

**All: Savior, surround us with circles of care,
angels of healing, of hope, and of prayer.**

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***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

God of mercy,
we begin this Lenten season in confession.
We do not live according to your ways,
but according to our own.
We muddle along in our self-serving schemes
rather than waiting on your word.
We follow the path of least resistance
without seeking your higher way.
We condone violence,
participate in systems of injustice,
and use power to our own advantage
at the expense of others.
Forgive us, we pray,
when we are tempted to follow paths
other than those you set before us.
Help us to turn from evil in its many guises,
and turn us toward your kingdom drawing near.
In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON** *(from Psalm 25)*

One: "Because the Lord is righteous and good, the Lord teaches sinners the path they should follow."
All: **"God leads the humble in the right way and teaches them God's will."**
One: "Teach me your ways, O Lord. Make them known to me."
All: **"Teach me to live according to your truth. For you are my God, who saves me. I always trust in you."**
One: The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. In the cross of Christ we discern the height and length and depth and breadth of God's love and forgiveness.
All: **So let us rejoice in the good news, for in Jesus Christ we are forgiven, we are loved. Alleluia! Amen!**

***THE PEACE**

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: **And also with you.**
(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READING Mark 1:9-15

MARK 1:9-15 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁹ *In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.* ¹⁰ *And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.* ¹¹ *And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

¹² *And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.* ¹³ *He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

¹⁴ *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,* ¹⁵ *and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON "I Love You; Now Go to Hell" by Pastor Bill Vincent

You have to picture this:

All this wonderful and wonder-filled stuff happens: Jesus is baptized in the Jordan. He comes up out of the water and sees the Holy Spirit coming down from heaven and descending upon him. He hears this voice from heaven: *"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Wow! All this great stuff happens.

And then – wham! – the same Spirit who *"descended on him"* (v.10) *"drove him out into the wilderness"* (v.12).

What a bummer! What a roller coaster ride! From the high of the baptism to the low of the wilderness.

God declares God's love for Jesus.

Then immediately God forces Jesus out into the hell of the wilderness: the dry, trackless wasteland, where temptation is strong and sustenance is scarce.

We know something of the wilderness.

As Pastor Leah McKell Horton describes it:

...times when the future felt frightening, when the path ahead was unknown, when all hope seemed to have vanished, when we felt completely alone, far from rescue, abandoned by all the things and people we trust. (*Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, p.17)

When a pandemic sweeps over us – and will not let us go.

When isolation surrounds us.

When shame and worthlessness overwhelm us.

Now, sometimes, that's just how life is, that's just what happens: living, walking, journeying through the hell of the wilderness.

And sometimes, that's God's intention.

Not temptation per se, but testing: it is the same Greek word.

And testing is for our sake.

Testing the mettle:

-Who we really are.

-What we are made of.

Naturally, one of the first questions that comes to our mind is, How do we discern those 'sometimes'? How do we distinguish between those testing times and those 'that's just the way life is' times?

I don't know. I'm sorry: there is no magic formula.

Typically, we only discern the difference in hindsight, which doesn't help in the moment.

It can help to be brutally honest with ourselves: Have I brought this upon myself, or at least contributed?

But sometimes that's simply the way things are: "That's life!"

And sometimes it's a testing.

We may not like it, but it is for our own good.

We watched the 2017 movie "The Zookeeper's Wife" this past week. Set in Warsaw, Poland, right as World War Two begins. The Warsaw Zoo is severely damaged as the Nazis occupy the country. Most of the animals are killed or carried away. In the damaged buildings of the zoo, the zookeeper and his wife end up smuggling Jews out of the country right underneath the nose of the Nazis.

And I remember thinking, "O God, I hope I never have to live through a situation like that." Put in a situation to make agonizing, terrifying choices such as that.

And then it struck me: we make that prayer every week, whether we realize it or not.

Lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

(The Lord's Prayer, Matthew 6:13)

Not that God would actually entice us to do that which is wrong. But God does test us (same word). And in these words of prayer we beseech God not to lead us into the time of trial and testing. But we also pray, if that be what comes, then, "God, deliver us from evil": steer us clear and guide and strengthen us so that, in our trial and in our time of testing, we would not walk into wickedness and wrong, but we would be delivered from evil; we would pass the test, and learn and grow as a result.

At the end of my second year in seminary, we were going through a series of evaluative reviews of our progress. In one of them, we were doing some role playing evaluating our skills in pastoral care. And the professor evaluating us wrote on my report, "Needs to be with people in pain." I was not in tune with the truth of his comment at the time, but he was right. I needed to experience my own pain and agony of being with people in pain and walking with them

through that hell. And I believe, it has made me a better person. So, in his own unique way, it was this professor's way of saying, "I love you; now go to hell."

Sometimes the hell of the wilderness is a consequence of the love. When God seeks **"thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine"** as the hymn puts it ("How Firm a Foundation"). When the love leads to a cross and a crucifixion.

But let me be absolutely clear: the hell never negates the love, nor overwhelms the love. We may "go to hell" or "go through hell." But God's "I love you" always remains.

As someone notes,

No desolation is so complete that God is not there with us. (*Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, p.17)

And if we look, we might see God in the angels around us.

Remember? *"And the angels waited on him"* (v.13). All indications are that **"the angels...are present throughout"** (Lamar Williamson, *Interpretation*, p.37) Jesus' wilderness sojourn.

If we look, we might see angels, too.

In

-an unexpected offer of help

-a simple presence of another

-the inspiration of what someone else does that fills us with hope and strengthens us to carry on

and grow, and be the better for it.

"Story of the Teacup"

There was a couple who used to go to England to shop in a beautiful antique store. This trip was to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary. They both liked antiques and pottery, and especially teacups. Spotting an exceptional cup, they asked, "May we see that? We've never seen a cup quite so beautiful."

As the lady handed it to them, suddenly the teacup spoke. "You don't understand," it said. "I have not always been a teacup. There was a time when I was just a lump of red clay. My master took me and rolled me, pounded and patted me over and over, and I yelled out, 'Don't do that. I don't like it! Let me alone!' But he only smiled, and gently said, 'Not yet!'"

"Then, WHAM! I was placed on a spinning wheel, and suddenly I was spun around and around and around. 'Stop it! I'm getting so dizzy! I'm going to be sick!' I screamed. But the master only nodded and said, quietly, 'Not yet.'

"He spun me, and poked and prodded and bent me out of shape to suit himself. And then..."

"Then he put me in the kiln. I never felt such heat. I yelled and knocked and pounded at the door. 'Help! Get me out of here!' I could see

him through the opening, and I could read his lips as he shook his head from side to side, ‘Not yet.’

“When I thought I couldn’t bear it another minute, the door opened. He carefully took me out and put me on the shelf, and I began to cool. Oh, that felt so good! ‘Ah, this is much better,’ I thought.

“But, after I cooled, he picked me up and he brushed and painted me all over. The fumes were horrible. I thought I would gag. ‘Oh, please! Stop it, stop it!’ I cried. He only shook his head and said, ‘Not yet!’

“Then suddenly he put me back into the oven. Only it was not like the first one. This was twice as hot, and I just knew I would suffocate. I begged. I pleaded. I screamed. I cried. I was convinced I would never make it. I was ready to give up. Just then the door opened, and he took me out and again placed me on the shelf, where I cooled and waited – and waited, wondering, ‘What’s he going to do to me next?’

“An hour later he handed me a mirror and said, ‘Look at yourself.’ And I did.

“I said, ‘That’s not me; that couldn’t be me. It’s beautiful. I’m beautiful.’

“Quietly he spoke: ‘I want you to remember, then,’ he said. ‘I know it hurt to be rolled and pounded and patted; but had I just left you alone, you’d have dried up.’

“‘I know it made you dizzy to spin around on the wheel; but if I had stopped, you would have crumbled.’

“‘I know it hurt and it was hot and disagreeable in the oven; but if I hadn’t put you there, you would have cracked.’

“‘I know the fumes were bad when I brushed and painted you all over; but if I hadn’t done that, you never would have hardened. You would not have had any color in your life. If I hadn’t put you back in that second oven, you wouldn’t have survived for long because the hardness would not have held.’

“‘Now you are a finished product. Now you are what I had in mind when I first began with you.’”

The moral of this story is this:

God knows what God is doing. God is the Potter, and we are the clay. God will mold us and make us, and expose us to just enough pressures of just the right kinds that we may be made into a flawless piece of work to fulfill God’s good, pleasing and perfect will.

So when life seems hard, and you are being pounded and patted and pushed almost beyond endurance; when your world seems to be spinning out of control; when you feel like you are in a fiery furnace of trials; when life seems to “stink,” try this.... Brew a cup of your favorite tea in your prettiest tea cup, sit down and think on this story; and then, have a little talk with the Potter. (email Friday, August 13, 2004 - FW: Story of the Teacup.)

The Potter, who, in the words of the Letter to the Hebrews,
in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:15b-16 NRSV)
Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested. (Hebrews 2:18 NRSV)

It seems to me what we most yearn for in all of this is not to be left alone.
A truth spoken of well in the African-American spiritual:

I want Jesus to walk with me;
...
in my trials, Lord,...
when my heart is almost breaking,
...
when I'm in trouble,...
when my head is bowed in sorrow,
...
all along my pilgrim journey,
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.
(“I Want Jesus to Walk with Me”)

And he will.
And he does.
And he is.

Sometimes – *sometimes* – our Lord says to us,
“I love you; now go to hell.”
Not all the time – not all the hard times – but sometimes.
But remember this: whether the hell be the Lord’s creating or a hell of our own making,
the Lord always also says,
“Take my hand, and I’ll go with you.”

***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.

In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.

**Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel
from the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.**

**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

Pastor: God of grace and guidance...
People: ...we lift up our hearts and lives to you.

THE EUCHARIST

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**God of steadfast love and faithfulness,
we are humbled as we try to do what is right
and to walk in your ways.
Accept our offerings
as tokens of our commitment to you.
Enhance their effectiveness
in accordance with your will,
and use them for your own good purposes
in the church and in all creation.
May all that we do be a clear sign
of our willingness to respond to the call of Christ.
In his name we pray. Amen.**

SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Invitation to the Lord's Table

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Lift up your hearts.

People: We lift them to the Lord.

Leader: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

People: It is right to give our thanks and praise.

(The prayer continues...)

The Lord's Prayer Traditional

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever. Amen.**

Breaking of the Bread

Communion of the People

(Please hold the bread so that we might partake of it together. Please drink the cup as you are served.)

Prayer

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** "How Firm a Foundation" GtG 463

One: How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
is laid for your faith in God's excellent Word!

**All: What more can be said than to you God hath said,
to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?**

One: "Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed,
All: for I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;
One: I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
All: upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.

One: "When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
**All: for I will be near thee, thy troubles to bless,
and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.**

One: "When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
All: my grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
One: the flame shall not hurt thee;
**All: I only design
thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.**

One: "The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
I will not,
All: I will not desert to its foes;
One: that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
All: I'll never,
One: no, never,
All: no, never forsake."

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Pastor: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
People: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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