

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2021

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

SECOND SUNDAY in LENT

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: We bring our praise to glorify God.
All: We are welcomed by God as people of the covenant.
One: God calls us by name and gives us new names.
All: We are summoned to faithfulness.
One: Let the ends of the earth worship the Creator.
All: We will praise the God of all nations and all peoples.

***OPENING HYMN** “The God of Abraham Praise” GtG 49 (*Verses 1, 2, & 4*)

One: The God of Abraham praise,
All: who reigns enthroned above,
One: the Ancient of Eternal Days,
All: the God of love!
One: The Lord, the great I Am,
by earth and heaven confessed,
All: we bow before your holy name,
forever blest.

One: Your spirit still flows free,
high surging where it will.
All: In prophet's word you spoke of old
and you speak still.

One: Established is your law,
and changeless it shall stand,
All: deep writ upon the human heart
by your strong hand.

One: You have eternal life
implanted in the soul;
All: your love shall be our strength and stay,
while ages roll.

One: We praise you, living God!
All: We praise your holy name:
One: the first, the last, beyond all thought,
All: and still the same!

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***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

God of our ancestors, we come to you, confessing that we have set our minds on human things. We have sought to gain the world – so many things to buy, so many things to do. Yet we are not satisfied. Life’s meaning eludes us. Your ways seem out of date; your promises appear as the hopes and dreams of a past generation. But in our hearts we sense an eternal design which is for all generations, a way of life more satisfying than we have allowed ourselves to explore. O God, we seek forgiveness for failing to follow your ways, and we confess our need for you.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

One: The Lord is indeed a God of mercy and compassion. We know this for certain because of Jesus Christ.
All: In Christ, God seeks the lost and forgives the sinner and loves the world.
One: So let us hear and believe that good news once again.
All: For by the grace of God we are loved and accepted, forgiven and restored through Jesus Christ our Lord. 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 READINGS Genesis 17:1-7,15-16
Mark 8:31-38

GENESIS 17:1-7,15-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹ When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ² And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” ³ Then Abram

fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴ “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ... ¹⁵ ...As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

MARK 8:31-38 (New Revised Standard Version+)

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Humankind must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ For what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ For those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Humankind will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON by Pastor Bill Vincent

It's hard to lose everything you ever thought about yourself: your hopes and dreams; your image of yourself, how you see yourself; the picture you have in your mind of your world and your life.

A major news story of this past week was the car accident involving golf great, Tiger Woods. With his leg crushed in the accident and hours of emergency surgery following, the question that hung over much of the story was, “Will he ever play again? Will he ever walk again?” It is far too early to be able to answer that question.

But I want you to picture yourself coming out of that surgery and waking up from the anesthesia, and being told the life you had before is no more: you have to embrace a totally new you.

Now, imagine that you have been told that very thing, and it's not because of a tragic accident. Imagine it's simply the result of this itinerant preacher walking up to you and saying: "You've got it completely and totally wrong. Everything you ever thought about yourself is wrong. You have to chuck it out the window, and start all over again. Everything you've ever thought about your life is false, untrue. This is who you really are. Start now living into the true you."

It is, from one perspective, being told an "horrific truth." It is, from another perspective, being invited to embrace "a new, never before imagined reality." [the phrases are from Jill Duffield, but in an entirely different context]

A complete makeover. A true 180 degree turn-around.

And Jesus says – after rebuking Peter for "*setting your mind not on divine things but on human things*" – Jesus says,

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

The call to discipleship.

Now, we tend to think of this call to discipleship – taking up your cross, denying yourself, losing your life to follow Jesus – as a sort of dour downer, a depressive, burdensome thing.

And I'm certainly not meaning to minimize the seriousness of it at all.

But could it be that thinking of discipleship as nothing but a terrible burden is but putting our mind on "human things"? A narrow, limited – even selfish – perspective, seeing ourselves only through our own eyes.

When maybe thinking of discipleship – even the "taking up your cross" part of discipleship, even the "denying yourself" part of discipleship, even the "losing your life to follow Jesus" part of discipleship – that thinking of discipleship should be –and in fact is– a wondrous, freeing, expansive, uplifting thing. Not to deny the very real pain and persecution; not to ignore rejection and suffering that could very well be involved. But seeing a bigger picture, a broader picture, a deeper truth, and a real-er life.

So that even Jesus

for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame. (Hebrews 12:2 NRSV)

The "human things" way:

-that I have worth only in relation to what I can accomplish or only in terms of what I can consume

-that I must be frightened of others, of differences

-that I must live up to other people's changing, and often fickle, expectations

-that love is not worthwhile and community is a sham, so look out only for yourself.

The “divine things” way:
-that I am a child of God. I belong to God. And I find meaning and purpose and significance in life by being a part of God’s plan and purposes.
And this is life – true life, real life – as I was created to live it.

Putting our mind on “divine things” is an expansive, in some ways, limitless perspective. Think about it. Think about Abram and Sarai. Nations from a barren woman is a pretty limitless perspective. Multitudinous descendants from a childless man is a pretty expansive perspective.

And so Paul, who knew something of the pain and persecution, the rejection and suffering of discipleship, who had been whipped and beaten and stoned and more (see II Corinthians 11), calls it all “rubbish” compared to the amazing grace and astounding gratitude that comes from knowing life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul wrote:

For Christ’s sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him ... I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Philippians 3:8-9a NRSV)

Now note: Paul is not diminishing the ‘cost of discipleship’. The cost is still huge. It still costs us our life, or what we think of as our life.

But we keep our eyes on this prize. Not selfishly, “Because I get my reward.” But trusting the promise of God and knowing that promise to be true.

And what it takes is faith.

So that Paul, speaking of the faith of Abraham, talks about believing in the one “*who gives life to the dead*” – even dead in our false self? – believing in the one who “*calls into existence the things that do not exist*”; not “*wavering concerning the promise of God*”, “*being fully convinced that God is able to do what God has promised*” (Romans 4:17,20,21 NRSV).

For God says, “No longer will you be called Abram” – ‘exalted ancestor’ (that’s not a bad title, but there’s something better).

God says, “Now you will be called Abraham” – ‘ancestor of a multitude’.
And that’s a promise.

Our Lord says, “No longer do I call you servants, but friends” (John 15:15).
And that’s a promise.

God says, “No longer will you focus on ‘human things’: a limited horizon, a narrow perspective, focusing only on yourself and your small, constricted world.”

God says, “Now you will focus on ‘divine things’: a world beyond yourself, a community beyond your own little circle, a family that includes you and embraces everyone else you meet; a life that expands your view and enlarges your heart and fills your soul because it is my ever-loving love that fills you.”

And that’s a promise.

You see, to deny yourself is not to deny the truth about yourself.

I mean, can you even imagine Jesus ever saying that?

To deny yourself is not to deny the truth.

But we're already living a lie: the "human things" perspective. So deny that. And affirm the true you.

To lose your life is not to lose the real you. But to lose the facade – the thick skin of presumption and pretension, of thinking too much of yourself or thinking too little of yourself – to lose the facade, the falsehood, the lie.

And to save the truth, the real you: the child of God created in the image of God for love and service, for celebrating and tending to God's good creation, for communing with God and each other.

And Jesus says, "Follow me, and you will know this life. You will know pain and persecution, too. You will experience rejection and suffering, too. Because the small little world of 'human things' and human thinking is far too prevalent and far too entrenched in the world and others and even still in you. But, if you follow me," Jesus says, "and if you will 'crucify' the false you, and if you will let me change you into the real you, and if you will believe that I can do that; then you will know a never before imagined reality known as life – real life, abundant life – eternal love...God."

Eustace is a character in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. (3rd book: *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*) Eustace is a real nasty fellow. He picks on others. He throws his weight around and bullies other. He thinks only of himself and his convenience, so of course he complains a lot!

Eustace is a pain in the you-know-what!

In their voyage, they land on one particular island to explore and stock up on supplies. In the course of their stay, something frightening and wondrous takes place. Eustace finds himself turned into a dragon. Now, from the perspective of the story, he wasn't so much turned into a dragon; it's just that finally his true colors are revealed. Eustace is revealed in the life he is actually living: the pain-in-the-neck so-and-so.

And Eustace finally begins to see that about himself.

When the time is ripe, when he is ready – grieving, deeply saddened by the picture he sees staring back at him – he meets Aslan the lion, the Christ-figure in the story, who tells him he must wash in a pool in order to be rid of his dragon-skin, his dragon-self. Actually, he has to take off the skin before entering the pool. You know, kind of like a snake shedding it's skin.

Eustace tries several times on his own, each time failing, each time becoming more and more desperate, his actions feeling more and more futile. Until finally, Aslan says, "You will have to let me do it for you."

And with the sharp claws of his lion's paw, Aslan digs deep and carves off Eustace's dragon-skin, his dragon-self. And tosses him into the pool...of new life.

And Eustace is revealed for who he truly is: not a dragon, but a human boy, who has a lot to learn, but is now willing and eager to grow into his true self.

On that island, Eustace was faced with the same challenge – and invitation – that faced the disciples that day as Jesus addressed them: deny the lie, and affirm the truth about who you really are; lose the facade – the false self of bravado and ‘I can do it all myself’ or ‘I’m not worth anything’ or ‘I’m better than everyone else’ – lose the facade, the falsehood, the fake you, and live and embrace the real you.

Will there be push back? You bet there will! Going against the current of the current understanding of what life is supposed to be like, going against the current of the prevalent perspective of who we are supposed to be – going against that current, you can expect to be battered and knocked around, you can assume you’ll be bruised and kicked, you can bet you’ll be rejected and laughed at and persecuted.

But it’s all because you’re going in the right direction, not the wrong. It’s all because you’re trying to live the truth, not the lie. It’s all because you’re embracing the really real, not the fake facade. It’s all because you’re embracing life, not death.

It is a challenge – make no mistake about it – this call to discipleship. And it is costly. You will have to give up much, like expectations and dreams and the way life is, as you think of it. It will cost you your life...as you know it and think of it.

But know this too: it is also an invitation, and a promise. An invitation to a new life based on standards far beyond what we typically experience. An invitation to being the best and true you God intends and imagines – and God has a pretty good imagination.

The call to discipleship:

-challenge?

-invitation?

Both!

Don’t forget the challenge.

But also, never forget the invitation.

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

We trust in God,

whom Jesus called Abba, Father.

In sovereign love God created the world good

and makes everyone equally in God's image,

male and female, of every race and people,

to live as one community.

But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.

Ignoring God's commandments,

we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,

accept lies as truth,

exploit neighbor and nature,

and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.

We deserve God's condemnation.

**Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
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.**

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

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pastor: Holy God...
People: ...hear our prayer.

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.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

Source of all goodness, what can we give that has not already been given to us? Surely no gift of ours can repay Christ's gift of love. Therefore we offer ourselves, with thanksgiving for new life in the Spirit, and place before you what we have in response to your love. Accept our offerings with the dedication of our lives, that we may be for the world a sign of your abiding love and a testament to your enduring promise. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN "Will You Come and Follow Me" GtG 726**

One: "Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?"

All: Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?

One: Will you let my love be shown;
will you let my name be known;

All: will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?"

One: "Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?"

All: Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?

One: Will you risk the hostile stare
should your life attract or scare?

All: Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?"

One: "Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?"

Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?

**All: Will you kiss the leper clean,
and do such as this unseen,
and admit to what I mean in you and you in me?"**

One: "Will you love the 'you' you hide if I but call your name?"

Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?

Will you use the faith you've found

to reshape the world around,

through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?"

All: Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.

Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.

In your company I'll go

where your love and footsteps show.

Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

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

People: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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