

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2021

First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: Come, let us present ourselves before God.
All: We find strength for living as we praise God.
One: We pour out our souls before the living God.
All: We do not withhold from God our misery and distress.
One: The counsel of our God gladdens our hearts.
All: In God's presence there is fullness of joy.

***OPENING HYMN** "I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art" GtG 624 (*Verses 1-3 & 5*)

One: I greet thee, who my sure Redeemer art,
**All: my only trust and Savior of my heart,
who pain didst undergo for my poor sake;**
One: I pray thee from our hearts all cares to take.

One: Thou art the King of mercy and of grace,
reigning omnipotent in every place:
**All: so come, O King, and our whole being sway;
shine on us with the light of thy pure day.**

One: Thou art the life, by which alone we live,
and all our substance and our strength receive;
**All: sustain us by thy faith and by thy power,
and give us strength in every trying hour.**

One: Our hope is in no other save in thee;
All: our faith is built upon thy promise free;
One: Lord, give us peace, and make us calm and sure,
All: that in thy strength we evermore endure.

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***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

**Mighty and merciful God,
we have failed to help those who have little
while we have much.
We shake our heads at the evil around us
but do little to witness to a better way.
We follow after false leaders
and grasp for whatever security we can find.
We are boastful and haughty,
and your pathways of self-sacrificing love are rarely explored.
Forgive us, O God, for we are quick to forget
that all of life is in your hands.
Turn us around to you.
Renew our hope, increase our courage,
and lead us to the humble path of Jesus Christ our Lord;
in whose name we pray. Amen.**

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

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 13:1-8

MARK 13:1-8 (various)

¹ *As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What wonderful stones and buildings!"* ² *Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."*

³ As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ “Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?”

⁵ Then Jesus began to say to them, “Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁶ Many will come in my name saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will deceive many. ⁷ When you hear of wars and reports of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is not yet. ⁸ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These things are the beginning of the birthpangs.”

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “How Are We, Then, to Midwife?” by Pastor Bill Vincent

On the first album of a favorite group of mine, the group Chicago asked,
Does anybody really know what time it is?
Does anybody really care?
(Chicago Transit Authority album, 1969)

Turns out, some people really do care what time it is, and think they know.

About the time of that album, there was a book that came out by Hal Lindsey: *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (1970). Since then there have been the “Left Behind” series of books and movies. All speaking about what happens in “the end times,” the last days of history, the great apocalypse.

Turns out there are those who care what time it is.

The disciples also seem to care what time it is, as Peter, James, John, and Andrew ask Jesus (privately, mind you):

“When will these things happen, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?”

Ironic thing is, though: Jesus never really answers their question – nor ours.

As one person points out,

The first word [in Jesus’ response] **is not a statement answering the question “When?” but an imperative, “Watch out”....** (Eugene Boring, *Mark*, p.362)

Jesus’ response points out that the disciples are focusing on the wrong thing. Not “When?” but “Watch!” Not ‘Sometime when’ but ‘What now?’

Jill Duffield, former editor of the Presbyterian Outlook, once wrote,

I do not know what time it is. What I do know is this: Many are perishing. Wars rage on for generations. God's good people and God's good creation are in peril. (“Looking into the Lectionary,” November 18, 2018)

We could add to her list...with ease.

So what can I do now?
How do I live now?

Charles Cousar reminds us that

all this chaos [Jesus speaks about] **is understood to be “the beginning of the birthpangs” (13:8). The image is striking.** (*Texts for Preaching*, p.595)

he notes.

Striking indeed.
And insightful.

Now, before we proceed further, let me be clear: I am not saying we’re living in “the end times.”

I’m not saying we’re not.

I’m simply saying I don’t know.

And the truth is, Jesus himself will go on to say he doesn’t know either.

“But about that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (Mark 13:32 NRSV)

Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ question focuses far less on the future they ask about and far more on the present they are warned about. He invites them to

redirect their focus to the present moment ... to be present with and partner with Christ right now. (*Lectionary Homiletics*, November 2015, Pastoral Implications, p.53)

What signs he speaks of he says are but the *beginning* of the “birthpangs.”

“When you hear of wars and reports of wars... nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.”

Those signs are alarming, yes. But, if you don’t mind my saying, those signs are also fairly generic.

Eugene Boring reminds us that in this apocalyptic way of thinking, in this talk about the end times,

wars, earthquakes, and famines are the standard signs that the end of history is drawing near.

He reminds us further that

They are also the persistent ingredients of history’s pageant of suffering..., and the list fits any period of history. (Boring, p.363)

Wars? Seen it.

Earthquakes? Got it.

Famines? Been there, done that.

They are not signs of the end.

They are constant, consistent, continuous signs of human life and history.

So what now?

Jesus says, “This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.”

Remember: “birthpangs” suggest a coming birth: that God really is up to something, even in the midst of the pain and suffering; that the kingdom of God is coming; the birth of new life is coming.

“But the end is not yet.”

So Matthew Emery asks this question:

How are we, then, to midwife? How, in the midst of what God is birthing among us, do we find the hot water and the towels? (*Lectionary Homiletics*, “The Beginning of the End,” p.57)

What do we do now, in the meantime...which really is a very mean time,

I suggest to you that we can learn a lot from that image of “birthpangs,” labor pains, the ‘throes of childbirth’.

Now, let me say up front: I do not speak from personal experience...or at least not direct personal experience, though maybe indirect.

But consider this: when it comes to “birthpangs,” we bear some responsibility for the situation we are in.

Not all the responsibility. But at least some.

That may be clearer when it comes to actual child birth. It may be less clear when it comes to other “birthpangs.”

-Last weekend at the meeting of the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy, we discussed, debated, and passed an action that reiterated an Apology that had been passed previously by the presbytery, and now sent it on to the General Assembly for their consideration: “An Apology to Our African American Brothers and Sisters for the Sin of Slavery and Its Legacy.”

Now, I am very aware that can be a controversial subject. ‘Why should I feel responsible for something that supposedly took place long time ago?’ But crucial to the point of the whole action is the recognition that you and I do bear responsibility for the situation in which we live right now, which relies upon that history that we all too often want to forget.

To be very personal, right at home: I, as a white male, benefit from the system that was built on the backs of Black Africans. I benefit from that system and those assumptions that white tends to be better than black. I benefit from that system with those assumptions that are so ingrained that we don’t even think about them. And I bear some responsibility for what I will do and how I will live and how I will seek to combat those assumptions that are false.

I may not bear all the responsibility, but I bear some.

-The U.N. Climate Summit very recently. All too often do we take a cavalier attitude, a devil-may-care attitude; an attitude where, “If I don’t see it, it’s not real.”

When it comes to the devastation of this planet, I bear some responsibility in that. How will I carry that responsibility? How will I stand up to it?

-And what about the atmosphere of our society? The continuing visceral comments, vicious acts, the entrenched responses. Every time that I respond in the same way, I bear

responsibility – I bear *some* responsibility – for the continuation of entrenched ideas, ‘us vs. them’ thinking. We bear some responsibility.

So now what?

Let us also be clear that when it comes to these “birthpangs,” this pain and suffering, that some people definitely bear the brunt of the pain more than others.

To state the obvious, the woman bears more of the pain than the man.

But so too do the marginalized bear more of the pain of climate change, far more than those of us who can afford to live in places that climate change does not affect nearly as much.

And so too does the African American bear the brunt of the pain of the sin of slavery far more than those of us who are not of color.

So maybe I’m not that directly affected by the birthpangs, or someone else’s birthpangs; I do not feel it nearly as much, the pain and the sufferings of wars, and earthquakes, and the famines of life.

But this is not an excuse for me to “wash my hands” of the situation and to walk away from the pain, be it my pain or theirs.

Which leads us to another crucial point.

How can we support and encourage one another through the pain? What can we do now? How can we minister now? How do we live faithfully now?

As Emery questions,

How are we, then, to midwife?

In Jesus’ day (and in many small communities even today), the birth of a child was a community event. The time was obviously coming, and the women of the community would gather together to support, encourage, guide, teach, and hold a hand. It was a community event.

“How are we, then, to midwife?”

Perhaps we begin by realizing and claiming and living the truth that we are all in this together. Which, I would note, is the exact opposite of the divisiveness and splitting into factions we experience so often in life.

When it comes to the fate of this world, when it comes to systems of racism and other forms of oppression, when it comes to cultural rancor, we are all in this together.

How will we work through this pain together?

And maybe one reason that question is so important is something more that Charles Cousar points out. He loves that image of “birthpangs,” writes that the image is “striking.” But he goes on to say this:

It takes seriously the reality of the present sufferings. There is no Pollyanna denial of pain. But in the economy of God the sufferings have a purpose. They signal the end of a long time of waiting and the coming birth of new life.

(*Texts*, p.595)

“The sufferings have a purpose.”

That is a dangerous statement to make.

But I suggest to you that it is a statement that can be made and needs to be made.

But it is best made as a personally *descriptive* statement rather than an other-oriented *prescriptive* statement.

It is best said as my own personal statement of how I have seen and experienced God's redemptive work in my life and in my suffering, and my testimony of my own experience. That is a far better take than to stand at a distance and point out someone else's suffering and say, "There there, now; God has a purpose for you in your suffering."

To say that "The sufferings have a purpose," and even a purpose in God's plan, is less a *prescription* for someone else in their suffering; and more a *description* for me regarding my experience of God at work in my suffering. And in that testimony, in that witness, I can become an encouragement and support to others; and that testimony can also move me toward others in their pain, so that I am motivated to walk with them and stand by them in their pain and suffering.

What can we do now to partner with the work and purpose – the birth – God is seeking to accomplish in our midst?

Can we give to the local food pantry to ease the pain of those that go hungry?

Will we reach out to a friend and be present with them to ease the pain of their loneliness and suffering?

Can we speak out and take action to acknowledge the pain of those who are treated as less than human, and will we give our lives and our time and our action so that they will be treated fairly and equitably and respectfully?

So, does anybody really know what time it is?

No.

But I do know that God's mercy is too often overlooked, and God's compassion is too often buried, and God's justice and peace is all too often forgotten.

So, if I could have your attention:

We need somebody to 'find the hot water', and somebody to 'find...the towels'.

Because we have a birth in which to assist.

***HYMN** "When We Are Living" GtG 822 (*Verses 1, 3, & 4*)

**1. When we are living,
it is in Christ Jesus,
and when we're dying,
it is in the Lord.
Both in our living
and in our dying,
we belong to God;
we belong to God.**

3. 'Mid times of sorrow
and in times of pain,
when sensing beauty
or in love's embrace,
whether we suffer,
or sing rejoicing,
we belong to God;
we belong to God.

4. Across this wide world,
we shall always find
those who are crying
with no peace of mind,
but when we help them,
or when we feed them,
we belong to God;
we belong to God.

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***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 a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.**

**In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"**

**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)

RECEPTION OF NEW MEMBERS

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pastor: Lord, in your mercy...

People: ...hear our prayer.

THE LORD'S PRAYER *(Contemporary)*

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

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

How can we thank you, O God, for all that you have done?

You give us life; you give us hope; you give us your very self.

Take and use the offering of our lives and our very selves

that your will may be done

in our church, in our community,

and throughout your wide and beautiful world.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** "Be Still, My Soul" GtG 819

1. Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side.

Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.

Leave to thy God to order and provide,

who through all changes faithful will remain.

Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heavenly Friend

through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

2. **Be still, my soul: thy God doth undertake
to guide the future surely as the past.
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;
all now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
his voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.**
3. **Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on
when we shall be forever with the Lord;
when disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past
all safe and blessed we shall meet at last.**

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

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

People: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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