

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, MAY 29, 2022

First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

SEVENTH SUNDAY of EASTER

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(from Psalm 124)*

One: Let us give thanks to the Lord.
All: **For “our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”**
One: Even when our mortal structures fail and fall...
All: **“Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”**
One: In all of life, and even in death...
All: **“Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”**

***OPENING HYMN** “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” GtG 39

1. **Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
there is no shadow of turning with thee.
Thou changest not; thy compassions they fail not.
As thou hast been thou forever wilt be.**

Refrain:

**Great is thy faithfulness!
Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see.
All I have needed thy hand hath provided.
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!**

2. **Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
sun, moon, and stars in their courses above
join with all nature in manifold witness
to thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.
(Refrain)**

3. **Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow:
blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!**
(Refrain)

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***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

Dear God, we proclaim your greatness, yet cower in weakness. The powers in life that assail us are monstrous, and we are afraid. You tell us to trust in you, yet we hunker down in fear. We are scared of being hurt and what we might lose. We are afraid of rejection and being laughed at. We are fearful of being wrong and making things worse. We do not trust that you will be with us, to guide us and protect us, to give us courage, and to help us do your work. Forgive us, gracious God. Renew our faith in you. Restore us to your hope. And reclaim us for your message of love made bright and true by the power of the resurrection. For it is in Christ's name that we pray. Amen.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

One: The proof of God's amazing love is this: that while we were yet sinners,
All: **Christ died for us. Christ rose for us. Christ reigns in power for us.
Christ even prays for us.**

One: My friends, rejoice and celebrate in the good news we claim and embrace.
All: **That in Jesus Christ we are forgiven, we are loved, we are given new
life. 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

RESPONSIVE READING Psalm 46

One: God is our refuge and strength,
All: **a very present help in trouble.**
One: Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved,
and though the mountains be toppled
into the depths of the sea;

Well, God. Here we are again.
19 children killed, and 2 teachers in Uvalde TX.
Senseless. Tragic. Why?
All too shortly before that, 10 killed in a grocery store in Buffalo NY; and one killed at a
Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods CA.
Senseless. Tragic. Why?
And in between those all-too-frequent events, I attended a conference on preaching
and...trauma.
How sad, and painfully ironic, the relevancy is.

Trauma: an event that assaults the senses and challenges us mightily to make sense of the
senseless.

Like yet another shooting. And another. And another.
And, yes, I am aware that this weekend is Memorial Day weekend, where we remember
and salute those who died in service to this country. Their deaths (at least we presume) were in
some sense noble. Yet still traumatic.

The deaths in the three recent shootings we have referenced are, sadly and simply, tragic.
And traumatic.

Trauma: an event that overwhelms our ability to cope.
Like a two-year pandemic that has thrown so many assumptions about life out the
window (the original trauma referred to in the conference title). And lest we forget: over a
million people have died in this country alone.

Trauma: an event that throws our life into turmoil. And is there a way out of the storm?

Why, O God?
How long, O Lord?

The events are senseless, tragic.
And our response is anger and confusion, grief and agony, fear and numbness.
Sometimes out loud; other times, inside.
Sometimes together with others; other times, alone.
Sometimes fierce; other times, frozen.

Why, O God?
How long, O Lord?
And, How do we move on?

Part of our response to the trauma is the lingering, sinking feeling that our questions will
go unanswered.

Imponderable questions to imponderable tragedy.
Leaving us pondering, and stupified, and overwhelmed.

Why, O God?
How long will this go on?
And, Now what?

Evil invades our senses and our sensibilities.
Pain and grief overwhelm our hearts.
And the earth seems to shake beneath our feet and crack the foundation upon which we stand.

And we cry out, "Lord, help us! Lord, have mercy!"

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present" -- an ever-present -- "help in times of trouble."

"Therefore we will not fear, though the earth shake and the mountains quake and the waters roar and foam."

Only problem is, we do fear. And we do quake, along with the earth beneath our feet.
And our lives do stumble, and our hearts do tremble.

Then we hear that word -- a call, a command, even an invitation: *"Be still! And know that I am God."*

But it's hard to 'be still' when we are frightened.

We are frightened by the thought that someone we may know or someone that simply and suddenly appears out of the corner of our eye could reach out seek to kill us (regardless of the method); or simply seek to do us harm, whether in the streets or on the road or in the grocery store or in the courtroom (whether actual or that of public opinion). That someone, or something, might seek to kill or harm us, or someone we love.

And we are frightened.

And we are mad.

And we are deeply saddened.

And we are confused.

And we are overwhelmed.

And we are stunned.

The truth is, we have been here before. Oh, the details have been different, our proximity to the situation may have been different. But we have been here before.

With drive-by shootings in St. Louis.

With a massive explosion outside the Federal building in Oklahoma City.

With twin towers falling in New York City.

With devastation in the Ukrainian countryside.

With the murder of a friend outside his office.

With the death of a long-time spouse.

With a terminal diagnosis.

With betrayal by a close friend.

And our world is shattered and shaken.
And our assumptions about life are rattled.
And our heart is broken.
And our senses are dulled.
And our lives seem crushed.

“Be still! And know that I am God.”

In some ways, it seems such a lame word.
What difference can this make?

“Be still”? “I don’t want to be still. I want to do something.”

“Know that I am God”? “I know that, I presume. I want to know what I can do to make it stop, to make the pain go away, to make things better, to take away the tragedy.”

Then another blow with the heavy realization that I can’t undo the tragedy.

And life seems to collapse in upon itself. In upon me.

And the tragedy is all I see.

Part of the struggle with our response to trauma is the difficulty of tunnel-vision: being blinded to the rest of life; being so overwhelmed, and having the waves of the tragedy sweep over us again and again and again that we come to think that the tragedy, the trauma (and our response) are the only things there are in life. That the pain is the only thing there is. That the unanswered questions are all there is. That the agony and despair are all there is.

But at some time -- at some point -- we have to open our eyes and open our ears and open our hearts to hear and see and know that there is more than the tragedy and more than the trauma.

That the sun -- even though we may not see it through an overcast sky -- that the sun still rises in the east and sets in the west. That there are still people around us who care for us and love us, even though, in some situations, all the familiar ones I knew of are gone. That there is still breath in me and life in me. And that God is still God, and God is still here.

“Be still! And know that I am God.”

Perhaps it does make a difference.

For the earth may shake...and indeed it has.

And the mountains may tremble...and indeed they have.

And the waters may roar and foam and wash over us again and again and again.

But, even in the midst of all of that, *“God is our refuge and strength, a very present”* -- an ever-present, an always-present -- *“help in times of trouble.”*

“Therefore we will not fear.”

Even though we may still fear, just a little...if not a lot.

But we need not be overwhelmed by fear. For *“God is our refuge and strength...”*

I realize this does not answer all our questions. It may not even answer one of them.

Why, O God?

How long, O Lord?

The questions still remain.

But we can stand in the questions and live into them and live with them, because we know we do not do so alone. We know we do not do that on the basis of our own meager resources. And we know we do not stand in those questions with a presence that does not understand.

For we remember another cry: "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Mark 15:34).

The one who stands with us in our agony and tragedy, in our pain and our numbness, in our struggle and our questions -- the one who stands with us knows, and understands; and understands us, and knows what we are going through...even through the valley of death's dark, deep shadow.

And in all of this, he does not leave us to our own devices, does not leave us alone. But stands with us nonetheless. And stands with us no less when the sun shines than when it does not.

So, Now what?

Well, crying, and crying out, are still very appropriate. Because it hurts, we hurt. And the pain and emptiness are still there.

We are human. Tragedy and trauma affect us.

So crying and crying out are appropriate.

That's who we are.

All too often, it seems, we forget that at the very center of our faith -- the crux -- stands trauma: the cross.

The cross was a traumatic event. Don't let any sweet, syrupy take on the 'beauty' of the cross mislead you.

The cross was a traumatic event.

But the trauma was not the end of the story. The trauma is crucial, vital, an indispensable part of the story.

But the trauma -- the cross -- is not the end of the story.

So, as Paul reminds the Thessalonians, "*we will not grieve like those who have no hope*" (I Thessalonians 4:13).

Oh, we will still grieve. That is who we are.

But "*we will not grieve like those who have no hope.*"

Now please, please, please hear me.

This does not dismiss the pain -- not in any way, shape, or form.

This does not ignore the tragedy.

This does not somehow seek to leap over the trauma and minimize its impact.

No.

But the trauma is not all there is.
And the trauma does not have the final word.

The trauma may be the story of our life, or the story of our life right at this moment.
But, as someone reminded us at the conference, **“We have a better story”** (Nadia Bolz-Weber, 2022 Festival of Homiletics).

“We have a better story.”
A story that does not ignore the pain.
A story that does not dismiss the tragedy.
A story that has trauma smack dab in the middle of it.
But a story where trauma is not the final word.
For, even in the midst of the trauma, life remains. Love remains. God remains.

So, we can affirm, as the Apostle Paul does -- a man who was intimately acquainted with pain and tragedy and trauma in his own life -- we can affirm with him, with confidence, that nothing,

not life or death, no angels or rulers, that nothing that happens today and nothing that happens tomorrow, that neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation -- that nothing has any power to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And in this hope, by this faith, with this love, we can carry on.
And we can cry our tears and comfort our neighbors.
And we can help our friends and lobby our representatives.
And we can speak our peace about peace and justice.
And we can do what we can where we are with what we have. And trust that God is working, not only in our midst but in the midst of lives and hearts beyond ours.

For we remember that dark Saturday when hope seemed to have died and faith lay gasping on the ground and love appeared buried and gone.

But that was not the end.

For hope was not dead. And faith was only beginning. And love burst forth from the tomb.

So Gloria and Bill Gaither can sing, as we can too, **“life is worth the living just because he lives”** (“Because He Lives” 1971).

And so we carry on in the hope of the resurrection, even though all we see around us is death.

And we carry on with faith in a resurrected Lord, even as we see the nail-prints in his hands.

And we carry on through the love and mercy of God, even though all about us speak of hatred and vengeance.

And we can do this because *“God is our refuge and strength”* and *“nothing can separate us from God’s love.”*

For we know the better story.
We claim the better story.
We will live the better story.
By the grace of God.

Thanks be to God.

***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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***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.**

**Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.**

**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)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pastor: Lord, in your mercy, by your strength, with your grace...
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.**

MINUTE FOR MISSION - Carol Gruber: Pentecost offering

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

Eternal God, you bring joy out of sorrow, plenty out of want, life out of death. For your grace in the midst of adversity, we give you thanks. For your sustaining presence in times of emptiness, we give you thanks. For your peace in storms of turmoil, we give you thanks. Accept our gratitude and these tokens of our thanks. May our lives be beacons of faithfulness and love, reflecting the light and life of your glory. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN “How Firm a Foundation” GtG 463**

- 1. How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
is laid for your faith in God's excellent Word!
What more can be said than to you God hath said,
to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?**
- 2. "Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed,
for I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.**
- 3. "When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
for I will be near thee, thy troubles to bless,
and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.**
- 4. "When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
my grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
the flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.**
- 5. "The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to its foes;
that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no, never, 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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