

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2023

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

**FIRST SUNDAY in LENT**

**GATHERING**

**PRELUDE**

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

One: Come, people of God, to be refreshed and renewed for the journey of life.  
All: **We come to embrace the one who embraces us.**  
One: Come, people of God, to hear again the call to discipleship.  
All: **We come to hear God speak and to relish the presence of the Lord.**  
One: Come, people of God, come.  
All: **We come in joy to worship the Lord.**

**\*OPENING HYMN** “Bless Now, O God, the Journey” StF 2191 [*Tune GtG#321*]

1. Bless now, O God, the journey  
that all your people make,  
the path through noise and silence,  
the way of give and take.  
The trail is found in desert  
and winds the mountain ‘round,  
then leads beside still waters,  
the road where faith is found.

2. Bless sojourners and pilgrims  
who share this winding way,  
whose hope burns through the terrors,  
whose love sustains the day.  
We yearn for holy freedom  
while often we are bound.  
Together we are seeking  
the road where faith is found.

3. Divine Eternal Lover,  
you meet us on the road.  
We wait for lands of promise  
where milk and honey flow.

*(continued...)*

**But waiting not for places,  
you meet us all around.  
Our covenant is written  
on roads, as faith is found.**

*Bless Now, O God, the Journey, Text by Sylvia G. Dunstan.  
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### **UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

**There are times, Lord, when we are weighed down by grief or illness, and doubts crowd out our steadfast faith in you. During times of stress and struggle, we confess the neglect of our faith. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves, we have not done the things that we intend to do, and we have not loved you. Forgive us, gracious God. Renew our direction and heal our broken intentions. Set us free from a past that we cannot change; open to us a future where we can be changed; and grant us grace to grow more and more in your likeness and image, strengthened by our faith in your wondrous love made known to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.**

### **SILENT CONFESSION**

#### **ASSURANCE OF PARDON** *(based on I John 1 & Galatians 1)*

**One:** “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

**All:** **In humility and faith, we proclaim the good news we have received: that our Lord Jesus Christ loves us and gave his life to set us free from our sins.**

**One:** In Jesus Christ we are forgiven!

**All:** **Thanks be to God!**

### **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** John 4:46-54

JOHN 4:46-54 (New Revised Standard Version+)

<sup>46</sup> Then he came again to Cana in Galilee where he had changed the water into wine. Now there was a royal official whose son lay ill in Capernaum. <sup>47</sup> When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. <sup>48</sup> Then Jesus said to him, "Unless you people see signs and wonders you will not believe." <sup>49</sup> The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my little boy dies." <sup>50</sup> Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way. <sup>51</sup> As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his child was alive. <sup>52</sup> So he asked them the hour when he began to recover, and they said to him, "Yesterday at one in the afternoon the fever left him." <sup>53</sup> The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." So he himself believed, along with his whole household. <sup>54</sup> Now this was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee.

## PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

**SERMON** "Signs of Progress" by Pastor Bill Vincent

This story is actually less about healing (wondrous as that may be) and more about having faith (as difficult as that may be).

The royal official comes to Jesus with at least some level of believing, in his initially asking Jesus to heal his son.

There is what seems to be a parallel story in Matthew (8:5-13) and Luke (7:1-10). In that story, Jesus gives a very positive response to a centurion's faith and request for healing. But here in John, Jesus very bluntly challenges, and indeed questions, the faith of "you" (plural), including the royal official and bystanders.

But the royal official has already demonstrated some level of trusting, and here reiterates his faith by again asking Jesus to heal his son.

Jesus "relents" (so to speak) and gives the word that the royal official's son will live. And the official, without the benefit of the "*signs and wonders*" that Jesus has previously mentioned, "*believes the word that Jesus spoke to him.*"

Whereas Jesus speaks, almost disparagingly, about people not believing without signs and wonders, this man believes before he sees a sign or wonder.

Then, after the royal official has left Jesus and been met by his servants and heard that his son is alive and confirmed that his son began to recover at "*the hour when Jesus had said to him, 'Your son will live'*" – then after this "*sign and wonder*" does "*he himself believe, along with his whole household.*"

Maybe a "fuller" belief than before?

There's almost a progression to his having faith.

The royal official starts out, and continues, with some beginning level of trusting, if only in Jesus' ability to heal and in Jesus' word.

The royal official (and his whole household) ends with a fuller belief in light of the sign of the actual healing.

It is as if the sign (and wonder) does not initiate his having faith, but does strengthen and confirm it.

There is indeed a progression – an aspect of growth – to our having faith, our believing in Jesus Christ, our trusting him.

The royal official demonstrates this throughout the story.

Kathleen Norris describes her experience by saying,

**I began to appreciate religious belief as a relationship, like a deep friendship, or a marriage, something that I could plunge into, not knowing exactly what I was doing or what would be demanded of me in the long run. (Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith, p.66)**

A relationship that we grow into; a journey that takes time.

And what are some of the sign posts of this relationship?

What are some of the signs of progress on this journey of growth in having faith?

This having faith, this believing, this trusting includes an openness to faith (or the object of faith): a willingness to see, to perceive, to discern.

Novelist Doris Betts asserts that

**faith is “not synonymous with certainty...[but] is the decision to keep your eyes open.”** (found in Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith, by Kathleen Norris, p.169-170)

John Calvin refers to it as a “**reverent attention,**” a “**teachableness, with the desire to learn**” (Institutes of the Christian Religion, III 2 (5) p.547).

Perhaps part of the experience of belief is an openness to seeing, perceiving, discerning: a receptivity to being touched, an openness to being shaped and formed.

So that a “sign and wonder” can make a difference in a life with this nascent belief because something is already there to be touched and shaped, formed and nurtured.

And this beginning faith can perceive the work and wonder and glory of God in Jesus Christ because this beginning trust is open to that possibility.

For someone without even a beginning belief, they only see the varied wavelengths of light reflecting on and through the clouds.

For someone with even a beginning belief, they see the wonder and awe of a sunset.

Are we open?

Will we be attentive?

Do we want to believe?

This having faith, this believing, this trusting involves risk: a willingness to step out and try.

William Barclay notes,

**There could be no more improbable scene in the world than an important court official hastening twenty miles to beg a favour from a village carpenter.**  
(Daily Bible Study Series, revised edition, p.174)

Yet he was willing to risk it.

I once overheard a phone call where a friend was offering a husband a ride on his acrobatic plane. And in the background his wife said, "Not me!"

I'm not sure I'd be willing to ride on an acrobatic plane either.

But are we willing to risk faith/believing/trusting? To step out and try? To step out with even a minimal faith in order to grow more faith?

This having faith, this believing, this trusting includes persistence.

Even after Jesus' perceived "rebuff", the official persisted: "*Come down before my little boy dies.*"

I am reminded of the Canaanite woman who came to Jesus crying to him to heal her daughter. The disciples wanted to send her away. Jesus at first ignored her. Then – did he really refer to her as a 'dog' as opposed to "*the lost sheep of the house of Israel*"? But she persists. And finally her daughter is healed. (See Matthew 15:22-28)

Larry Need, in this year's Lenten Devotional, notes,

**The heart of her belief was that God could be trusted. She believed in the goodness of Jesus and was sure that there was a place in his heart for her. That was why she could be so persistent in asking for his help. She trusted the promise that God is both faithful and compassionate....** (The Road Back to God, Creative Communications for the Parish, 2021, p.13)

Are we willing to persist? To keep plugging along, even in the face of obstacles, opposition, resistance?

Not being stubborn or pig-headed. But willing to say, "Yes, this is true, and I will bank my life on it through thick and through thin."

This having faith, this believing, this trusting can be nurtured in community by others, even as, in the end, it must become one's own.

In the story before today's passage, the Samaritan woman Jesus talks to at the well runs back to the village and tells the people everything. They then come out to see Jesus for themselves, and say to the woman,

*"It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."* (John 4:42 NRSV)

But it began with the woman's sharing her faith.

As Arthur J. Gossip says,

**to associate with those who know him, to breathe that atmosphere, to be constantly played upon by these gracious influences, makes it far more likely**

**that one will come to meet God...and be really [God's].** (Interpreter's Bible, 1952, "Exposition," p.534-535)

This having faith, this believing, this trusting is active.

The word translated as faith/belief/trust occurs 98 times in the Gospel of John: once as an adjective; zero times as a noun; and 97 times as a verb.

The royal official went; he spoke; he risked; he persisted. He did, and took action.

So Frederick Buechner writes,

**Faith is better understood as a verb than as a noun, as a process than as a possession.** (Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC, p.25)

We speak in the church of spiritual disciplines, spiritual practices: like worship, prayer, Bible study, service. They are things we do to encourage and nurture faith. And in the doing, grow...or at least provide the opportunity for growth to occur.

Sign-posts of growth.

Signs of progress on our journey of believing, trusting, having faith.

-with an attitude of openness

-a willingness to risk

-a courageous persistence

-in a community of faith, where faith is yet our own

-and active – doing.

Jesus says to the royal official, "*Go; your son will live.*" It was an assurance to him, to be sure.

Perhaps it was also a challenge, an invitation to the official – and to us – for us to grow into faith, to live having faith.

**\*HYMN** "Faith Begins by Letting Go" GtG 684 [*Tune 220*]

**1. Faith begins by letting go,  
giving up what had seemed sure,  
taking risks and pressing on,  
though the way feels less secure:  
pilgrimage both right and odd,  
trusting all our life to God.**

**2. Faith endures by holding on,  
keeping memory's roots alive  
so that hope may bear its fruit;  
promise-fed, our souls will thrive,  
not through merit we possess  
but by God's great faithfulness.**

(continued...)

**3. Faith matures by reaching out,  
stretching minds, enlarging hearts,  
sharing struggles, living prayer,  
binding up the broken parts;  
till we find the commonplace  
ripe with witness to God's grace.**

*Faith Begins by Letting Go, Text by Carl P. Daw, Jr.  
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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 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**

**One:** In your mercy, O God...  
**All:** ...hear the prayers of your people.

**THE EUCHARIST**

**OFFERING**

*Invitation*

*Reflection*

*\*Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**Thank you, gracious God, for walking with us and providing for us and loving us all along the way. We bring our gifts to you as tokens of our gratitude and symbols of the offering of our lives in thanksgiving to you. In Christ's 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, to remind us of our participation in this sacrament as a community in unity with Christ. Please drink the cup as you are served, reminding us of our individual participation in this sacrament and our personal commitment to our Lord.)

*Prayer*



## SENDING

**\*CLOSING HYMN** “My Faith Looks Up to Thee” GtG 829

1. My faith looks up to thee,  
thou Lamb of Calvary,  
Savior divine!  
Now hear me while I pray;  
take all my guilt away;  
O let me from this day  
be wholly thine!
  
2. May thy rich grace impart  
strength to my fainting heart,  
my zeal inspire;  
as thou has died for me,  
O may my love to thee  
pure, warm, and changeless be,  
a living fire!
  
3. While life's dark maze I tread  
and griefs around me spread,  
be thou my guide;  
bid darkness turn to day;  
wipe sorrow's tears away;  
nor let me ever stray  
from thee aside.
  
4. When ends life's transient dream,  
when death's cold, sullen stream  
shall o'er me roll;  
blest Savior, then, in love,  
fear and distrust remove;  
O bear me safe above,  
a ransomed soul!

Words: *Ray Palmer, 1830. Public Domain.*  
Music: *Lowell Mason, 1831, alt. Public Domain.*

### **\*CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...  
All: ...Amen.

### **POSTLUDE**

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