

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, MARCH 19, 2023

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

FOURTH SUNDAY in LENT

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(based on Psalm 145)*

One: Your creation gives thanks to you, O God.

All: **And we, your faithful, bless you.**

One: We shall speak of the glory of your realm and tell of your power.

All: **We shall let all people know your mighty deeds and glorious splendor.**

***OPENING HYMN** “Creator of Mountains” StF 2061

1. **Creator of mountains, of glaciers and streams,
Great Splasher of fountains and Dreamer of dreams,
we gather in wonder and praise for your grace.
Responding, we ponder our work in this place.**

2. **Creator of peoples and races and tribes,
not bound by church steeples or what myth describes,
we celebrate now our diversity here,
in penitence vow to accept and not fear.**

3. **Created for caring for all human need,
we seek to be daring in thought and in deed.
Turn us from all strife that demeans or divides.
Reform us for life that empow’rs and abides.**

4. **Creator of river and forest and snow,
Eternal Life-giver whose presence we know,
your voice is resounding in storm, wind, and wave.
Your love is abounding, embracing to save.**

5. **Great God, now we come, our hearts grateful for days
when faith, like a drum-beat, keeps steady our praise.**

(continued...)

**In song and rejoicing hopes stir and arise,
our spirits now voicing their hymns to the skies.**

*Words: Creator of Mountains, Text by Jane Parker Huber.
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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

**Gracious God,
we sing praise to you for your grace and your power,
Yet our lives too often fall by the wayside.
Forgive us when we fail to recognize, or heed, your call.
Forgive us when we hesitate to follow
and choose instead the easy path...away from you.
Forgive us, gracious God,
and restore us as your people.
Strengthen us in our faith.
Steady us in our following.
And unite us with Christ in his life and his love and his way.
For it is in his name that we pray. Amen.**

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

One: Relentlessly, God seeks us out.
All: **With abundant grace and boundless mercy, God seeks us out.**
One: This is good news!
All: **In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!**

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 6:16-21

JOHN 6:16-21 (Today's English Version +)

¹⁶ When evening came, Jesus' disciples went down to the lake, ¹⁷ got into a boat, and set off across the lake for Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. ¹⁸ By then a strong wind was blowing and stirring up the water. ¹⁹ The disciples had rowed about three or four miles when they saw Jesus walking on the water, coming near the boat, and they were terrified. ²⁰ But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." ²¹ Then they willingly took him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON "Which Storm?" by Pastor Bill Vincent

This storm may be fairly simple.

We've all heard, and perhaps even used for ourselves, that image: a life battered by the winds of adversity, swept away by the waves of ill-fortune, beset by the storms of life.

And we like to think that Jesus, our Lord, will come to us in our storms: that he has the power – and the will – to bid the wind be still and calm the battering waves and bring peace in the midst of the stormiest situation.

The storms may be actual tornado winds or waves of atmospheric rivers.

The storms may be rivers of flowing lava or blizzard-driven snow.

The storms may be banking misfortunes or pandemic woes.

The storms may be the loss of a job...or the loss of a life.

But in all of these we look across the heaving seas and spot through the blowing rain Jesus, our Lord, and he coming toward us. And we yearn for his presence and his company; we cry out for his helping hand and reassuring voice; and we look to him for guidance, support, life.

"It is I; do not be afraid," we hear him say.

And we know an inner calm.

And the winds seem not as strong and fierce.

And the waves appear not quite as tall and fearsome.

And we are assured. And we are calm...-er.

And it feels like we have arrived at some unforeseen sanctuary – a protected harbor, if you will – a haven for our lives. At least for a time: a long enough time so we can catch our breath and regain our footing, and center ourselves, and our sights, on the life, and the Lord, that really matters.

And thus equipped, face the waves that may still batter, the winds that may continue to blow.

Easy? No.

But maybe fairly straightforward, in a manner of speaking.

But what of more complex, or complicated, storms?

I mean, we tend to think of our storms as brought on by forces outside of us, situations beyond us. An assault from which we need protection.
And that is right on target much of the time.
But what of storms that blow from within?
What of the storm of uncertainty and confusion?
What of the storm of self-doubt and even self-loathing?
What of the storm that blows away our sense of purpose or undermines our self-worth?
Not to engage in sermonic psycho-therapy. Or to attempt to replace appropriate psycho-therapy with an inappropriate sermon.

But in the midst of such inner storms, can we – do we – still perceive our Lord drawing near even across this vastly different landscape – or seascape.

Does he – will he – still come to us in a real way and speak his *“It is I; do not be afraid”* in the midst of clouds of doubt and downpour of expectations and lightning bolts of self-criticism?

Does he – will he – still calm the winds of mis-fortune and still the waves of self-hatred?

Does he – will he – still guide us to a place of serenity and security, in his presence, with the blessing of his comfort?

Even with such inner storms, it is still a matter of perceiving the storm as an assault on us: an assault on our worth and our presence of mind; an assault on our safety and our sense of belonging to him.

But what if we push it even further: are their times when the storm is not so much an assault – a crisis – as it is – dare I say it – an opportunity?

You see, this imagery of the storm on the sea serves as a reminder of the first creation story in Genesis:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. (Gen.1:1-2 RSV)

Almost a picture of a stormy sea, with the vast chaos of the waters and the wind and the waves.

The Spirit brooding over the waters; and, with the word of God *“Let there be...,”* bringing into being light from darkness, form from void, order from chaos.

Could it be that there are times when the storm we experience – or what we experience as a storm – is not really an assault upon us from outside (or even inside) by forces that threaten our existence and seek to tear us apart; but instead is the breath of God blowing in our midst, not to assault us but to assist us, not to threaten us but to encourage us, not to tear us apart but to build us up in the direction and the way that God yearns for us to grow and to go?

Is God possibly stirring things up in our lives...for our good?

Is God mixing things up...for our growth?

Is God putting obstacles in our way to steer us clear of unseen shoals of selfishness and unforeseen reefs of entanglement?

Is God blowing us in another direction than the direction we always rowed and always sought to go?

I admit the signals are not readily clear and the evidence is not always plain to distinguish when a wind assaults us and when another assists us.

The determination is not always clear and the choice is not plainly evident when to fight the waves and when to surf them.

The situation is not simply laid out when to go with the wind and when to tack back and forth against the wind.

But is it possible that there are times and situations in our lives when those are indeed the questions to be asked and the choices to be made and the decisions to discern?

Maybe what I initially perceive as a threat is instead God's invitation to hear and heed God's voice...for a new day and a new direction and a new way.

Maybe the wind blowing in my face that I initially consider a storm blowing me off course from my appointed destination – maybe that wind is instead God's encouragement to embrace a different destination and a new life and a new purpose.

"If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (II Corinthians 5:17 NRSV) Paul writes: a new creation brought about by the Spirit brooding over the waters of our life and calling into existence a new me, a new you, a new way, a new life.

And in the midst of the storm that seeks to blow the roof off my house and my life,
and in the midst of the waves that well up within and seek to drown me in their wake,
and in the midst of the wind that fills my sail to bursting...and fills my heart with the spark of life,

– in the midst of it all: storm, wind, waves –
we see with eyes of faith our Lord drawing near,
and we hear with hearts laid open his voice, *"It is I; do not be afraid,"*
and we invite him into our boat and into our life,
and his very presence is the haven we seek,
as he seeks to protect us from wind and wave that assault,
and as he steers us toward the wave we are to surf and the wind we are to sail.

***HYMN** "Be Still, My Soul" GtG 819 (*Verses 1-2*)

**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.**

(continued...)

**Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
his voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.**

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Text: Katharina von Schlegel, 1752; trans. Jane Laurie Borthwick, 1855, alt.

Music: Jean Sibelius, 1899; arr. *The Hymnal*, 1933, alt.

***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.**

**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: We put our trust in you, O God...

All: ...for you alone can save us.

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*

With thanks in our hearts and praise on our lips, we give ourselves to you, O Lord. Receive our offerings as tokens of our commitment to you and your will. Use them, as you use us, to accomplish your purposes in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “Eternal Father, Strong to Save” GtG 8

1. **Eternal Father, strong to save,
whose arm has bound the restless wave,
who bade the mighty ocean deep
its own appointed limits keep:
O hear us when we cry to thee
for those in peril on the sea.**
2. **O Savior, whose almighty word
the wind and waves submissive heard,
who walked upon the foaming deep,
and calm amid its rage did sleep:
O hear us when we cry to thee
for those in peril on the sea.**
3. **O Holy Spirit, who did brood
upon the chaos wild and rude,
and bade its angry tumult cease,
and gave, for fierce confusion, peace:
O hear us when we cry to thee
for those in peril on the sea.**
4. **O Trinity of love and power,
all travelers guard in danger's hour;
from rock and tempest, fire and foe,
protect them wheresoe'er they go;
thus evermore shall rise to thee
glad praise from air and land and sea.**

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Text: William Whiting, 1860, alt.

Music: John Bacchus Dykes, 1861

***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

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

All: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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