

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, JULY 16, 2023

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

15th SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: In this place, we gather to turn our hearts and minds to God.
All: **We rejoice that the Triune God meets us here.**
One: We gather this day to hear the Word of God...
All: **...to offer prayers and sing songs of praise.**
One: We gather this day, to acknowledge wonder and mystery.
All: **We gather this day to worship God!**

***OPENING HYMN** “O God, in a Mysterious Way” GtG 30

1. **O God, in a mysterious way
great wonders you perform.
You plant your footsteps in the sea
and ride upon the storm.**
2. **Deep in unfathomable mines
of never-failing skill,
you treasure up your bright designs
and work your sovereign will.**
3. **O fearful saints, fresh courage take.
The clouds you so much dread
are big with mercy and shall break
in blessings on your head.**
4. **Our unbelief is sure to err
and scan your work in vain.
You are your own interpreter,
and you will make it plain.**

Words: William Cowper, 1773, alt.
Music: DUNDEE, Scottish Psalter, 1615
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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

All-knowing God, we know you understand us more deeply than we understand ourselves. You know how much the cares of this life weigh us down. Our thoughts and actions are often very shortsighted. We take so much for granted, failing to value the wonder of life all around us, the gift of family and friends, the amazing reality of your Spirit dwelling in us. Open all the hidden places of our lives to the light of your forgiving love, that we might be set free from our sin and nurtured in our trust in your love and our joy in your service. Amen.

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

One: The God of hosts has shown love for all people...
All: **...even when we have acted as enemies of one another and of our Creator.**

One: While we still were sinners...
All: **...Christ died for us.**

One: While we were rebelling...
All: **...Christ was reconciling.**

One: While we were focusing on fragments...
All: **...Christ was making whole.**

One: Rejoice in all the gifts we receive from God's hand, for we are a forgiven and forgiving people.
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 Genesis 25:20-28

GENESIS 25:20-28 (New Revised Standard Version - updated edition)

²⁰ Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. ²¹ Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife because she was barren, and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. ²² The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. ²³ And the Lord said to her,

*“Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other;
the elder shall serve the younger.”*

²⁴ When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵ The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle, so they named him Esau. ²⁶ Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau’s heel, so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. ²⁸ Isaac loved Esau because he was fond of game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “Rebekah’s World ... and Ours” by Pastor Bill Vincent

Her first encounter with Isaac’s family had been initiated by a question: *“Will you give me a drink of water from your jar?”* (Genesis 24:17). Dutifully, as a good host, she responded ‘Yes’, and gave the man a drink of water. Which led to her introduction to the servant of Abraham, who was tasked with finding son Isaac a wife. (That’s the way it was done in that day.)

All of which (eventually) led to another question to her, *“Will you go with this man?”* (Genesis 24:58): go with the servant of Abraham to be the wife of Isaac (whom she had never met). Again dutifully, she responded ‘Yes’. Maybe she perceived that there was something to this encounter with this man from far away.

Which led to her meeting Isaac, getting married, and finding herself in her present situation where, now, it’s her turn to ask the question.

With two *“children struggling within her”* (battling it out, more accurately), she asks, *“If it is to be this way, why do I live?”* So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her,

*“Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other;
the elder shall serve the younger.”*

That response – that insight into the mind of God – guides her decisions and choices, directs her responses and actions, so that she *“loved Jacob,”* the younger one. She directs and helps Jacob deceive his father to trick him into giving Jacob the blessing due to the elder son, Esau. She puts the idea into Isaac’s head to send Jacob away to get a wife elsewhere, all to protect Jacob from the well-deserved wrath of Esau.

And though it may appear that Rebekah is little more than a small person trying to get her way, some see it differently.

As Robert Ratcliff writes,

...Rebekah employs the means available to her to assert her own agency. When the servant of Abraham shows up to offer a beneficial marriage, she employs the means of the dutiful host and prospective wife. When Isaac is about to give his blessing [to Esau], she takes on the role of the trickster to make certain that the son *whom God had revealed to her as the heir of promise will receive it.* (Connections: Year A Volume 3, p.123)

It may not have been the position she would have chosen for herself (or that we, in our day and age, would have chosen for her).

But she used what she had available to her to do what she could to be of service to her Lord and God.

Another woman was living her life...as best she could. Probably not looking for any excitement or anything out of the ordinary. In fact, she may have been living a very down-and-out life, on the outskirts, at the edges of her community...literally, since *“her house was on the outer side of the city wall”* (Joshua 2:15).

Which, some speculate, may be why she had turned to prostitution: it was a way to get by.

Then there came yet another knock at the door. But this knock – these ‘patrons’.... When Rahab opened the door, she knew they were different. Somehow, she knew.

Spies from the enemy had come to her. What would she do? How would she respond? She probably did not have much time to consider her dilemma. For

the king of Jericho was told, “Some Israelites have come here tonight to search out the land.” Then the king of Jericho sent orders to Rahab, “Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come to search out the whole land.” But [Rahab] took the two men and hid them. Then she said, “True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they came from. And when it was time to close the gate at dark, the men went out. Where the men went I do not know. Pursue them quickly, for you can overtake them.” (Joshua 2:2-5 NRSVUE)

She lied to the king of Jericho. Flat out lied to his face.

That’s gutsy.

But she knew. Somehow she knew:

Before they went to sleep, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men, “I know that the Lord has given you the land and that dread of you has fallen on us and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt.... As soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal kindly with my family.” (Joshua 2:8-12 NRSVUE)

“Promise me this,” she said.

She may have been at the mercy of others. Even so, she demonstrated mercy toward others.

And ever after Rahab “the prostitute” was celebrated among the people, “*For she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.*” (Joshua 6:25)

She did what she could with what she had to be of service to the God she was just then beginning to see and know and understand.

She hadn’t asked for any of this. She, along with all the other ‘eligible’ young women, had been taken to be groomed and primed for the king, depending upon his liking.

Now she finds herself in the elevated position of queen (whether she asked for it or not). But even as queen, she has tentative – very tentative – access to the powers that be: i.e., the king.

And Esther finds herself in an untenable position. For her cousin, Mordecai, has just informed her of the plot to destroy all the Jews in the Persian Empire.

Then Esther spoke...and gave...a message for Mordecai: “All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that, if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law: to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.” When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. ... Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.” (Esther 4:10-16 NRSVUE)

“I will go to the king, even if I perish.”

And she did – go to the king, unsummoned.

And the king did – extend the golden scepter and spare her life.

And after two – not one, but two – invitations and feasts together, Esther finally reveals her crisis, and the plot against her and her people. And the people are saved.

But not without much anguish and much turmoil and much personal risk.

In a position she did not ask for, in a crisis she did not invent, she used what she had to do what she could to be of service to her God.

We suspect she was excited about part of her life. But not so sure she was excited – at least initially – with this.

She was promised in marriage: that was exciting, though maybe a little scary (as many of us can attest).

So: promised in marriage, looking forward to a life together, with plans and expectations.

Then this. It was not what she expected. It was not what anyone expected. It was not...well, kosher, if you catch my drift.

An angel appeared to her. How it was manifested, we don’t know, but the experience has come to be described as the appearance of an angel to one Mary by name.

Mary: young, promised in marriage.

And then this announcement from the angel: you will become pregnant.

Well, she might have been expecting that in the not-too-distant future, but not in the all-too-soon future, i.e., the present.

But there it was, this announcement:

“You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, *“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”* The angel said to her, *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”* (Luke 1:31-35 NRSV)

There it was, this pronouncement, this promise.

And here she was.

So,

“Here I am, the servant of the Lord,”

she replied.

“Let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38)

Did she know what she was getting herself into? No. She may have had some suspicions, but she didn't fully understand the implications of her 'Yes'.

But she said it anyway.

And gave herself. The best she knew how. With all she had. Whether she fully understood or not. Ever *“treasuring all these words and pondering them in her heart.”* (Luke 2:19 NRSV)

And giving of herself.

We know very little about her, except that her name means “gazelle,” in whatever language you choose: ‘Tabitha’ (in Aramaic), or (in Greek) Dorcas, as we usually refer to her.

What we do know comes from other people's response to her death.

We often respond with fond memories regarding those who have recently died.

However, this response seems almost excessive...which perhaps is a clue to its significance:

All the widows stood beside [Peter], weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. (Acts 9:39 NRSV)

Dorcas: a woman who *“was devoted to good works and acts of charity.”* (Acts 9:36)

Dorcas: a woman who had made *“tunics and other clothing”* for *“the widows”* ... and others?

Dorcas: who had taken what she had, what she could find, and used it as best she could to help others.

Rebekah. Rahab. Esther. Mary. Dorcas.

Their encounter with God may not have been exactly the same from one to the other.

But their response to their encounter was similar.

They tended to risk.

Risk losing their stance in the community, their position in life, their family, their very life. And to do so willingly.

They tended to exercise a certain creativity in their response.

Rebekah dresses up Jacob in sheep's skin to trick his father. (Genesis 27:16)

Rahab hides the spies on her roof under the "*stalks of flax.*" (Joshua 2:6)

Esther invites the king to dine with her, not once, but twice, to peak his interest in what she will ask of him. (Esther 5 & 7)

Dorcas uses whatever materials are at hand to craft and create to better others' lives.

They tended to go against what is expected, the societal, community norms.

Rebekah helps the younger son grab the privilege of the older son.

Rahab takes a stand against the very community in which she lived.

Esther goes to the king when all others wait to be summoned.

Mary carries the child while others think she should be stoned.

And in each case, they give of themselves: willingly, from the heart, giving their whole selves. And so serve as agents of change, vessels of God's work.

We do not always like the position we find ourselves in in life.

And while, yes, it is appropriate for us to yearn and pray for a better world where positions are more equitably shared and roles are more fairly distributed and lives are more caringly cherished; still we acknowledge where we are and how life is now. And we use what we have at our disposal to do what we can within our capabilities, within the sphere of our influence, to be of faithful service to our living, loving God.

The God who loves you, and me, and us all. The God who lives in you, and me, and us all.

This was their calling. This was their life.

This was the offering of themselves, the gift of their life.

This was their faith: the belief in their God that shaped their decisions and formed their choices and molded who they were.

So that they used what they had, to do what they could, to be of service to their living, loving God.

That was their faith. That was their life.

Will it be ours?

***HYMN** “For All the Faithful Women” GtG 324

- 1. For all the faithful women
who served in days of old,
to you shall thanks be given;
to all, their story told.
They served with strength and gladness
in tasks your wisdom gave.
To you their lives bore witness,
proclaimed your power to save.**

- 2. We praise your name for Miriam,
who sang triumphantly
while Pharaoh’s vaunted army
lay drowned beneath the sea;
for Ruth, who left her homeland
and ventured forth in faith,
who pledged to serve and worship
Naomi’s God till death.**

- 3. We sing of busy Martha,
who toiled with pot and pan
while Mary sat in silence
to hear the word again.
We praise the other Mary,
who hastened to the tomb
and found her Lord arisen,
dispelling doubt and gloom.**

- 4. Lord, hear our praise of Dorcas,
who served the sick and poor.
Her hands were cups of kindness,
her heart an open door.
O God, for saints and servants,
our fervent prayer we raise,
that, faithful in your service,
our lives may sing your praise.**

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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,
engages us through the Word proclaimed,
claims us in the waters of baptism,
feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.**

**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!"**

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

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: Gracious God...
All: ...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*

Gracious Creator, you have laced our lives with blessing. As we share our offerings, we also tender our lives. Make us your bold and faithful people, willing to go forward in faith wherever you would lead us, that we might be a blessing in the world. We pray in the name of Jesus, by the gift of your empowering Spirit. Amen.

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “Will You Come and Follow Me” (The Summons) GtG 726

1. **“Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown;
will you let my name be known;
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?”**
2. **“Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare
should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?”**
3. **“Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean,
and do such as this unseen,
and admit to what I mean in you and you in me?”**
4. **“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?”**

(continued...)

5. **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**

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

POSTLUDE

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