

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 2023

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

**24<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

**GATHERING**

**PRELUDE**

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

One: The God of our ancestors calls us to worship.  
All: **We come to God in humility and anticipation.**  
One: Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.  
All: **God comes to us with compassion and power.**  
One: We are here. God is here.  
All: **So come, let us worship the Lord our God.**

**\*OPENING HYMN** “God Is Here!” GtG 409 (*Verses 1, 2, & 4*)

1. **God is here! As we your people  
meet to offer praise and prayer,  
may we find in fuller measure  
what it is in Christ we share.  
Here, as in the world around us,  
all our varied skills and arts  
wait the coming of the Spirit  
into open minds and hearts.**
2. **Here are symbols to remind us  
of our lifelong need of grace;  
here are table, font, and pulpit;  
here the cross has central place.  
Here in honesty of preaching,  
here in silence, as in speech,  
here, in newness and renewal,  
God the Spirit comes to each.**

*(continued...)*

**4. Lord of all, of church and kingdom,  
in an age of change and doubt  
keep us faithful to the gospel;  
help us work your purpose out.  
Here, in this day's dedication,  
all we have to give, receive:  
we, who cannot live without you,  
we adore you! We believe!**

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### **UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

**We do indeed adore you, great God Almighty.  
You are powerful and unwavering.  
We are weak and faltering.  
Doubting your loving care,  
we grab for more than we need.  
Doubting your loving purposes,  
we shrink from living as your followers.  
Doubting your loving plan,  
we become stumbling blocks in your creation.  
We need you, O God, we need you.  
We need you to strengthen our feeble commitment.  
We need you to open our hearts to the world.  
We need you to forgive us our sins  
and restore us to faith in you and trust in your grace.  
Help us, O Lord,  
for the sake of your dear Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ,  
in whose name we pray. Amen.**

### **SILENT CONFESSION**

#### **ASSURANCE OF PARDON** *(from Psalm 103)*

**One:** "The Lord is merciful and loving, slow to become angry and full of  
constant love."  
**All:** "God knows what we are made of, remembering that we are dust."  
**One:** "As a parent is kind to the children, so the Lord is kind to those who honor  
the Lord."  
**All:** **So rejoice and be glad! For in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. In Jesus  
Christ 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

### SCRIPTURE READING Exodus 3:1-12

EXODUS 3:1-12 (New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>1</sup> Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>2</sup> There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. <sup>3</sup> Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." <sup>4</sup> When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>5</sup> Then God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." <sup>6</sup> God said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

<sup>7</sup> Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, <sup>8</sup> and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. <sup>9</sup> The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. <sup>10</sup> So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." <sup>11</sup> But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" <sup>12</sup> God said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

## PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

### SERMON "Dare to Be Branded" by Pastor Bill Vincent

"Run away, Moses! You don't know what you're getting into!"

But he did not. He turned aside, caught up in the fire itself: the fiery presence of the holy, that does not consume, but does change; that does not burn up, but does burn; that claims and

brands as its own, you and I; and uses us as instruments of its fire and power, presence and purpose.

Like Moses in a later story where he has gone up on the mountain to talk with God. And when he comes down, his face is glowing, so that the people are afraid. And Moses has to put a veil over his face (see Exodus 34:29).

The glow of the fire within: the fire that burns but does not burn up.

Like Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke for God. And got tired of speaking for God. And got tired of the consequences of speaking for God – the ridicule, the antagonism; thrown into a pit...and a prison – and decided, No more speaking for God,

*For the word of the Lord has become for me  
a reproach and derision all day long.*

And yet...

*If I say, "I will not mention [the Lord],  
or speak any more in [God's] name,"  
then within me there is something like a burning fire  
shut up in my bones;  
I am weary with holding it in,  
and I cannot.*

(Jeremiah 20:7-9 NRSV)

He was compelled to speak God's word. He had to be God's instrument.

Like a group of 12 and more, several hundred years later, who had gathered in Jerusalem,  
*And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and  
it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire,  
appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were  
filled with the Holy Spirit...* (Acts 2:2-4 NRSV)

...and were sent out to proclaim and to care, and to turn the world upside down.

We, too, can be touched by the fire that burns within, that changes but does not consume.

All we need do is "turn aside," like Moses: turn aside to see, to perceive this wonder, this mystery. To take time, to give attention to, to dare to turn away from the lesser things of life. To turn aside and approach this wonder, initially out of curiosity, but then – with growing awareness – in awe.

Do we dare to approach? Do we dare to come into the presence of God? Do we dare to be branded?

Now let us be clear: here is not some curiosity to be packaged, that we sell tickets to and use for our entertainment.

Here is a mystery before which we bow down in wonder and awe, and take off our shoes, acknowledging that we are in the presence of the holy.

"God Is Here!" as we sang in our first hymn – Yes! That is cause for praise and elation. It is also cause for awe and caution.

For the holy one of the heavens appears in the midst of our mundane lives. The ultimate good of all seeks to abide in us.

Do we think too casually, too lightly, too benignly of this God of ours?

This is no lightning bug on a summer's eve that we alternately catch and release, catch and release.

This is fire, blazing fire. Fire that may not burn up, but still burns.

C.S. Lewis has it right when, in his Chronicles of Narnia, he depicts the Christ-figure as a lion. As one of the characters notes,

**"He's wild, you know. Not like a *tame* lion."** (The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, p.180)

And we may be granted to sit between his paws, but let us never forget they are the paws of a lion.

As in Moses' case, we may be granted audience with an *unconsuming* fire. But do not forget, it is fire nonetheless.

And do not think this is a far off experience, foreign to our lives.

We have known it standing alone under a clear, star-lit night, seeing the fire of those stars and sensing the vastness of that empty space ... and knowing somehow that we are not alone.

We have heard it in talking with a friend – one filled with passion, focus, the thrill of vision – and knowing somehow that here is a direction, a purpose greater than you or I.

We have experienced it in prayer, sincerely asking for the touch of God, and sensing that calm in the midst of the storm – and knowing it is not our own doing.

We have lived it, somehow being able to turn away from our own life's concerns to God's concerns, losing our life in the purpose and presence of Another.

Some do not turn aside – and sometimes we do not turn aside.

Because we don't have the time; we're too focused on other things; we're too invested in our own answers to life's questions; we're unwilling to risk letting go; we'll come back to it later – at which time it may be too late.

Some do not turn aside – and with good reason.

"The flame shall not hurt thee," the hymn has God say.

"The flame shall not hurt thee" – but it still hurts.

**"The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design  
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine."**

("How Firm a Foundation" 1787)

The fire of God, that sets us aflame to consume our dross and refine our gold on its terms, not our own.

The fiery presence of God, that sets us afloat on a journey we dare not take on our own, and sometimes dare not take at all.

Remember: Moses had his world turned upside down, sent not where he wanted to go, but where God needed him to go.

Moses gave up a settled, comfortable life

-to face a government that could have imprisoned him for murder;

-to face an army with nothing more than his walking stick;

-to wander in a wasteland for 40 years;

-to lead a stiff-necked, fickle, obstinate, thankless people, to a promised land into which he himself was refused entrance.

And all for what?

For a glimpse at a burning bush that wasn't burned up.

Why would people do this, give up all, give up the good life, for suffering and trouble?

"They cast their nets in Galilee," writes William Alexander Percy, of those who experienced firsthand that Presence walking in their midst.

**Contented, peaceful fisher[folk],**

**Before they ever knew**

**The peace of God that filled their hearts**

**Brimful, and broke them too.**

**Young John who trimmed the flapping sail,**

**Homeless, in Patmos died.**

**Peter, who hauled the teeming net,**

**Head down was crucified.**

**The peace of God, it is no peace,**

**But strife closed in the sod.**

**Yet, [Christians], pray for but one thing –**

**The marvelous peace of God.**

("They Cast Their Nets in Galilee" 1924)

It is a mystery.

And indeed it is that very sense of mystery that attracts us and calls us and compels us.

And it is facing that mystery and being addressed by it that makes all the difference.

That somehow lets us know that all the suffering is worth it, that giving up everything else is worth it; just for that glimpse of the glory, just for that taste of the presence; just for that hint of the peace inside that we know will be magnified infinitely so when God, in grace and power and God's own good time, brings all the suffering and turmoil to an end and brings to fulness and fruition the promised goodness and wholeness of life.

But for now, that glimpse of the mystery is enough, that sight of the bush – burning yet not burned up – is enough. To be addressed by the God of the Ages in the here and now; to have the God who names the stars call us by name for this day and this time – that is enough: enough of the glory, enough of the fire within.

It can give us a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction, yes. But, in reality, that is secondary.

Primarily what sweeps us up is that sense of coming into contact with the foundation and source of you and me and all that is...

- and being granted life by the one who is life;
- being embraced in love by the one who is love;
- being strengthened with power by the one who is power;
- being filled with peace by the one who is the Prince of Peace.

And that is enough.

It is, as John Bell describes it, “The Summons” – the divine summons – that asks the question,

**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?**

For Bell, our prayerful response is this:

**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.  
("The Summons" 1987)**

Look!

- a starry sky ablaze with glory;
- a call that touches us deep within;
- a vision that fills us with passion;
- a bush that burns, yet is not burned up.

Do we dare to turn aside? Do we dare to turn aside, and be branded...as God's own?

**\*HYMN “Christ of the Upward Way”**

**1. Christ of the upward way,  
My guide divine,  
Where You have set Your feet  
May I place mine;  
And move and march wherever You have trod,  
Keeping face forward up the hill of God.**

*(continued...)*

2. Give me the heart to hear  
Your voice and will,  
That without fault or fear  
I may fulfill  
Your purpose with a glad and holy zest,  
Like one who would not bring less than the best.
3. Christ of the upward way,  
My guide divine,  
Where You have set Your feet  
May I place mine;  
And when Your last call comes serene and clear,  
Calm may my answer be, "Lord, I am here."

Words: Walter John Mathams, ca. 1915; alt. Music: SURSUM  
CORDA (Lomas), George Lomas, 1876 *Public Domain*.

#### **\*AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

We trust in God the Holy Spirit,  
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.  
The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,  
sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,  
and binds us together with all believers  
in the one body of Christ, the Church.  
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: Wondrous 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*

**In thanks and praise we come before you, O God, mindful of your mercy toward us and your gifts to us. Accept these gifts we bring as reminders of our debt to you and our gratitude for you. Use them and us to touch the world with your powerful love and your stunning grace. For it is in Christ's name that we pray. Amen.**

## **SENDING**

**\*CLOSING HYMN** "Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts" GtG 494 (*Verses 1, 2, 4, & 5*)

**1. Jesus, thou joy of loving hearts,  
thou fount of life, thou light of all,  
from the best bliss that earth imparts  
we turn, unfilled, to heed thy call.**

*(continued...)*

2. **Thy truth unchanged hath ever stood;  
thou savest those that on thee call;  
to them that seek thee thou art good,  
to them that find thee, all in all.**

4. **Our restless spirits yearn for thee,  
where'er our changeful lot is cast,  
glad when thy gracious smile we see,  
blest when our faith can hold thee fast.**

5. **O Jesus, ever with us stay;  
make all our moments calm and bright.  
O chase the night of sin away;  
shed o'er the world thy holy light.**

Words: Latin, 12<sup>th</sup> cent.; trans. Ray Palmer, 1858, alt.  
Music: QUEBEC, Henry Baker, 1854  
*Public Domain.*

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

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

#### **\*RESPONSE “Go with Us, Lord” GtG 748**

**Go with us, Lord, and guide the way  
through this and every coming day,  
that in your Spirit strong and true  
our lives may be our gift to you.**

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#### **POSTLUDE**

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