

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2023

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

25th SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

- One: Welcome, my friends. What brings you here today?
All: **We come to have our eyes open. We come to have our ears
unstopped. We come seeking the presence of God in our midst.**
One: Come, my friends, and see. The glory of God is manifest all about us.
God is in our midst and all around us.
All: **So come, let us rejoice, give thanks, and sing.**

***OPENING HYMN “For the Beauty of the Earth” GtG 14**

1. **For the beauty of the earth,
for the glory of the skies,
for the love which from our birth
over and around us lies:
Lord of all, to thee we raise
this our hymn of grateful praise.**
2. **For the wonder of each hour
of the day and of the night,
hill and vale, and tree and flower,
sun and moon, and stars of light:
Lord of all, to thee we raise
this our hymn of grateful praise.**
3. **For the joy of ear and eye,
for the heart and mind's delight,
for the mystic harmony
linking sense to sound and sight:
Lord of all, to thee we raise
this our hymn of grateful praise.**

(continued...)

4. For the joy of human love,
brother, sister, parent, child,
friends on earth, and friends above,
for all gentle thoughts and mild:
Lord of all, to thee we raise
this our hymn of grateful praise.
5. For thyself, best gift divine
to the world so freely given;
for that great, great love of thine,
peace on earth and joy in heaven:
Lord of all, to thee we raise
this our hymn of grateful praise.

Words: Folliott Sandford Pierpoint, 1864, alt.
Music: DIX, Conrad Kocher, 1838; abr. William Henry Monk,
1861; harm. *The English Hymnal*, 1906
Public Domain.

UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

O God, we sing of your beauty and the grace of your giving, yet still we are blind to your working in our midst. We want quick answers and easy decisions, and we are frustrated when we discern neither. We expect you to lift our burdens, yet we do little to help carry the burdens of others. Forgive us for being slow to understand and immune to your presence. Open our hearts to your transforming power. Heal our blindness by your tender touch. Restore us as your people and remake us in the image of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

- One: God's mercy comes to us in our disobedience. God's gracious favor answers our cry for help.
- All: **God hears our complaining and provides for us in unexpected ways in the desert places of our lives.**
- One: Come to the saving waters. Taste the bread God gives us to eat. We are a people forgiven and blessed.
- 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 READINGS Exodus 16:2-15; 17:1-7

EXODUS 16:2-15 (New International Version)

² *In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. ³ The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."*

⁴ *Then the Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. ⁵ On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days."*

⁶ *So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, ⁷ and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord, because the Lord has heard your grumbling against the Lord. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?" ⁸ Moses also said, "You will know that it was the Lord when the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because the Lord has heard your grumbling against the Lord. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord."*

⁹ *Then Moses told Aaron, "Say to the entire Israelite community, 'Come before the Lord, for the Lord has heard your grumbling.'"*

¹⁰ *While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the Lord appearing in the cloud.*

¹¹ *The Lord said to Moses, ¹² "I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, 'At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.'"*

¹³ *That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴ When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. ¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was.*

Moses said to them, "It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat."

EXODUS 17:1-7 (New International Version)

¹ *The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² So they quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink."*

Moses replied, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?”

³ But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?”

⁴ Then Moses cried out to the Lord, “What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

⁵ The Lord answered Moses, “Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.” So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “Crisis of Food, Crisis of Faith” by Pastor Bill Vincent

There's something about the Old Testament. I like it. I sense an affinity with it. Take the psalms, for instance. I can see myself in its anger and anguish; its joy, sometimes loneliness.

Or maybe David and Goliath, when up against some big obstacle.

Of course, I also experience something of a tension with the Old Testament, and even anxiety about it. Something that I don't like about it, that sets me on edge.

All this violence, and backsliding, and faithlessness; and, well, down right stupidity: don't they ever get it?

And perhaps the reason for my dis-ease is because I see myself in these things as well: a mirror whose reflection hits too close to home.

Kind of like a "love/hate" relationship: I like what I see...but then I don't.

The people were hungry.

I can identify with that. Maybe more often than I should.

At the end of a long day – when one thing after another has put off getting away to dinner: "I'm starving."

The people were thirsty.

I can identify with that, with some of those hot summer days. With stories of people heading off on a hike in the arid southwest, then having to be rescued due to exhaustion and

dehydration. There are signs everywhere: be sure and drink plenty of water and carry plenty of water with you.

Obviously the Israelites did not have the benefit of such signs, for they hadn't carried enough water with them into the desert.

In both instances – hunger and thirst, the need for food and water – I can identify with their need.

But then, there is more to the stories than simply bodily hunger and thirst.

I may not like to admit it, but I can also identify with their lack of trust and not such a good way of asking for the needs of life: complaining, whining; arguing, demanding, quarreling.

As Moses pointed out, they were really testing God (which is a no-no).

H.L. Ellison remarks,

We constantly think that we can tie God down to our formulations and expectations. (Daily Study Bible Series, p.91)

We have our demands, our list of expectations of God. Like a Christmas wish list, complete with Brand name, model number, and link to the website.

To put it prosaically:

**Oh Lord, won't you buy me
A Mercedes Benz?
My friends all drive Porches
I must make amends.**

(Words by Janis Joplin, Bob Neuwirth, Marc McClure; 1970)

“Is God among us or not?”

Translation: Where's my Mercedes Benz?

Why isn't God meeting my expectations?

Why is God messing with my time table?

The good news is that God addresses our need in spite of our foolishness, though not encouraging our complaining and anxiety, our distrust and demands.

For God does not always meet our needs in the way we think God should, the way we expect, even the way we demand.

We want God to meet us on our terms, to do it our way.

But God will be with us on God's own terms.

So God remains God. And that is definitely good news.

What we are left with is being fed the way God chooses to feed us.

Words of wisdom, words of Jesus:

“But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will God not much more clothe you – you of little faith?”

(Matthew 6:30 NRSV)

Notice: Jesus does not promise lavish living, superabundance; he promises needs met.

And that is enough ... more than enough.

The people experience a crisis of food, which gives rise to a crisis of faith.

Yes, it may be easy for me to affirm God's care and provision, here where I am, in a land of great plenty. But they were in the desert – a crisis of food.

Terence Fretheim suggests the crisis of faith is due, in large part, to a failure to see. So the people are not only hungry and thirsty, they are blind as well. And it may be their blindness exacerbates their hunger and thirst.

The people ask, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

And they look about them, and all they see are rocks.

And that may be part of the problem: that all they see are rocks.

The discernment of the people ... so clouded by physical difficulties that they cannot see that God is much involved in providential ways in their everyday lives. (Exodus, Interpretation series, Fretheim, p.183)

And once again, we can identify.

Hunger pangs grip us. And we cry out, "I'm hungry! I need food! I'm starving! Where's my steak?"

When we look around us and don't find "our steak," we're disappointed. God has obviously let us down.

When all along, right beside us, lies a peanut butter sandwich – not even any jelly, just peanut butter.

It may not be what we asked for. It may not be what we want. But it may be God's providing for us nonetheless.

"Is the Lord among us?" The overwhelming scriptural witness says Yes. The overwhelming witness of the saints before us says Yes.

Do we see God's working? providing?

We open the refrigerator to look for some food, when maybe we should open the Bible. As Moses would remind the people much later,

"God humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." (Deuteronomy 8:3 NRSV)

Frederick Buechner notes,

[We] do not live by bread alone, but [we] also do not live long without it. To eat is to acknowledge our dependence – both on food and on each other. It also reminds us of other kinds of emptiness that not even the Blue Plate special can touch. (Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking, p.12)

For sometimes our "hunger pangs" are not so much of the stomach as of the heart: yearning for God; yearning to sense that familiar, comforting presence.

And in our yearning, our hunger, God gives us Christ, who said,

"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty...." (John 6:35 NRSV)

Of course, we do well not to over-spiritualize the issue. For God will provide physically as well in the everyday, ordinary stuff of human life.

Abraham was given that agonizing choice to give up his son. And as he was about ready to do it,

Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide".... (Gen.22:13-14 NRSV)

"It is a common...experience," writes Ellison

that God's special giving is very often linked with the natural, marked out only by the timing of the gift. (p.89)

Something that could easily be dismissed as a coincidence. Yet by opening our eyes in faith, we discern God's provision in the ordinary:

...the seemingly little things in daily lives ... undergirded by the sustaining care of God. (Fretheim, p.187)

A walk in the growing autumn air [*--deep breath--*] is a quick and immediate reminder that God provides for me the air I breathe, provides every breath I take.

Robert Grant writes in the hymn:

**Thy bountiful care what tongue can recite?
It breathes in the air, it shines in the light;
It streams from the hills, it descends to the plain,
And sweetly distills in the dew and the rain.
("O Worship the King, All Glorious Above!" verse 4; 1833)**

Enjoying that breath of fresh autumn air.
Enjoying the taste of a good breakfast to start the day.
Enjoying the satisfying refreshment of a drink of cold water.
Hearing the rain on the roof (I know it's been scarce lately).
Seeing a sunset.
Watching a butterfly flitting about.
Experiencing the simple presence of a loved one.

If we have known one of these gifts, then we know God's provision.

If we have known many of these gifts, then we are wondrously blessed indeed.

If we have known them all, then we must be stunned by the astounding grace of the all-giving God.

But have we opened our eyes to see? Opened our eyes to appreciate the fullness and richness of these gifts: to drink them in, drink of their fullness; to feast upon these delights of life, to eat our fill of them.

For if we are only wolfing down this abundance without recognizing it and tasting it for what it is, then we are going too fast in our own wilderness of life; we are too busy. And that is another word for being distracted and blind, like the Israelites: not looking in the right place, not seeing what we should; not perceiving, not paying attention to God and God's providing for us.

Is the Lord among us? Yes!

Will we look and see? Only we can answer that question.

"Is the Lord among us?" the people asked in the wilderness.

And the Lord rained down upon them manna, and gushed forth before them water from a rock. All this and more to provide and protect, to supply and sustain.

Is the Lord among us?

[--take a deep breath--]

What do you say?

***HYMN "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah" GtG 65**

- 1. Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
pilgrim through this barren land.
I am weak, but thou art mighty.
Hold me with thy powerful hand.
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven,
feed me till I want no more;
feed me till I want no more.**
- 2. Open now the crystal fountain,
whence the healing stream doth flow.
Let the fire and cloudy pillar
lead me all my journey through.
Strong deliverer, strong deliverer,
be thou still my strength and shield;
be thou still my strength and shield.**
- 3. When I tread the verge of Jordan,
bid my anxious fears subside.
Death of death, and hell's destruction,
land me safe on Canaan's side.
Songs of praises, songs of praises
I will ever give to thee;
I will ever give to thee.**

Words: William Williams, 1762; stanza 1, trans. Peter Williams, 1771; stanzas 2-3, trans. William Williams, 1772
Music: CWM RHONDDA, John Hughes, 1907
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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH** (from “*A Declaration of Faith*”)

We believe in one true and living God.

**We acknowledge one God alone,
whose demands on us are absolute,
whose help for us is sufficient.**

**That One is the Lord,
whom we worship, serve, and love.**

God is greater than our understanding

We do not fully comprehend who God is or how God works.

God's reality far exceeds all our words can say.

The Lord's requirements are not always what we think is best.

The Lord's care for us is not always what we want.

**God comes to us on God's own terms
and is able to do far more than we ask or think.**

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PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: Providing 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*

Our offerings are an expression of our faith, O God. They tell of our thankfulness; they speak of blessings received and cheerfully shared. What a privilege is ours, what riches we possess, to be able to give with joy for the work of your church! We worship you with our offerings and the rededication of our lives and work to your will. Amen.

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “Let All Things Now Living” GtG 37

- 1. Let all things now living
a song of thanksgiving
to God our Creator triumphantly raise;
who fashioned and made us,
protected and stayed us,
by guiding us on to the end of our days.
God's banners are o'er us;
pure light goes before us,
a pillar of fire shining forth in the night:
till shadows have vanished,
all fearfulness banished,
as forward we travel from light into light.**
- 2. By law God enforces,
the stars in their courses,
the sun in its orbit obediently shine;
the hills and the mountains,
the rivers and fountains,
the depths of the ocean proclaim God divine.
We too should be voicing
our love and rejoicing;
with glad adoration, a song let us raise,
till all things now living
unite in thanksgiving:
to God in the highest, hosanna and praise!**

Words: Katherine K. Davis, 1939, alt.; © 1939, 1966 E.C. Schirmer Music Company

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Music: ASH GROVE, Welsh folk melody; harm. Gerald H. Knight, 20th cent.

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

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

All: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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