

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2023

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

THIRTIETH SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: We are drawn to worship by a Reality unseen.
All: **The One we call God is beyond human description.**
One: God is more than we can ever imagine.
All: **We sense God's presence as we meditate.**
One: The Creator of all things has given us life.
All: **We gather in awe to bring our songs of praise.**

***OPENING HYMN** "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise" GtG 12

1. **Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.**
2. **Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might:
thy justice like mountains high soaring above;
thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.**
3. **To all, life thou givest, to both great and small.
In all life thou livest, the true life of all.
We blossom and flourish like leaves on the tree,
then wither and perish; but naught changeth thee.**
4. **Thou reignest in glory; thou dwellest in light.
Thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight.
All praise we would render; O help us to see
'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee!**

Words: Walter Chalmers Smith, 1867, alt.

Tune: ST. DENIO, Welsh folk melody; arr. *Caniadau y Cyssegr*, 1839
Public Domain.

UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

We come before you gladly, dear God,
for you are wonderful and we worship you.
We also come before you sadly,
for we know we have not done what you want us to do,
we know we have not said what you want us to say,
we know we have not lived the lives you desire us to live.
Yet we also come before you trusting in your love and grace.
Forgive us, O God, for our sinful ways.
Renew us and restore us in the likeness of Jesus Christ.
And make us glad once again to follow in his way.
For it is in his name that 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 33:12-23

EXODUS 33:12-23 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹² Moses said to the Lord, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' ¹³ Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." ¹⁴ The Lord said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." ¹⁵ And Moses said to the Lord, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favor in

your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

¹⁷ The Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." ¹⁸ Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." ¹⁹ And the Lord said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰ But," the Lord said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." ²¹ And the Lord continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²² and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³ then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON "No Peeking!" by Pastor Bill Vincent

Would you have peeked?

Given the same set of circumstances, would you have stolen a look – just for a peek – to see as God passed by?

Our curiosity reflects our deep desire to know, to have it all revealed.

I have heard the story of a prestigious university whose seal includes 3 books. Initially, two books were open, one was not. Until more recently, the third book was also opened, as if to suggest it is possible for us, given time and opportunity, to know everything.

"You shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen"

says the Lord.

We want to know: to see it all and know everything before we have to make a decision, before we commit. Yet, try as hard as we might, there remains mystery in life.

Of course, there are mysteries in life, and then there are mysteries.

Some "mysteries" we can explore and discover and resolve till they are mysteries no longer.

Like a murder mystery that can be resolved in an hour...including commercials.

During the initial attempt at building the Panama Canal, malaria struck so many workers, the whole project seemed a death trap. Until the mystery was solved of how the disease spread. Then they could address the spread, significantly lower the infections, and move on with the project.

Or the mystery of life that the parent hides when she or he responds to the child, "You'll understand someday when you are older." Sometimes, we simply have to wait for certain mysteries to be revealed.

But others are mysteries in the truest sense, and we may experience them and touch them, but we will always fathom them only in part.

Moses said, "Show me your glory...."

But God does not reveal all.

God reveals what is needed.

Even true regarding Jesus Christ, the one in whom we see "*glory as of the only Son of the Father*" (John 1:14).

As one person observes,

the Incarnation, in which [we see] as much of the divine being as [is] intelligible by [us] and practical for [us] to live by.... (J. Edgar Park, The Interpreter's Bible, (1952) vol.1, p.1075)

But not everything.

God reveals to us what is sufficient for us and our faithful living. And the rest is mystery. Which may not be particularly satisfying for some of us.

Part of the issue of mystery is trust: a willingness to trust the mysterious one. A willingness to accept what has been revealed in order to trust what has not been revealed.

For Paul reminds us,

we walk by faith, not by sight. (II Corinthians 5:7 NRSV)

So that one person notes,

our desire to know is not nearly so important as our need to trust. (John W. Kloepfer, *Journeyers*, 2002 No.1, Columbia Theological Seminary)

This is not to suggest that we blindly and blithely follow someone who would suggest a particular course of action and offer no adequate rationale for such a course because "it's a mystery."

This is not to offer mystery as an excuse for not applying our minds.

But it is to suggest that our minds are finite, that we are finite; and that there are simply some things in the universe that are beyond our comprehension.

Sometimes, in life and in death, I need not to know.

This is something of what it means for me to be human and for God to be God.

So that an important component of faithful living in relationship with this God is a willingness to live with mystery and live into mystery.

Like living into the mystery of forgiveness.

We still want to earn it.

We want to live by 'tit for tat', especially when someone owes us the 'tat'.

And that maybe the reason we have such a difficulty with forgiving others because we forget the mystery of it. We want it cut and dry, added up and subtracted out on a ledger; we want it all laid out for us and explained to us. And it's not, and it won't be.

My mother's oldest sister was a missionary who got caught up in the conflagration that was World War Two. She and her husband, and their newborn child, spent several years in a Japanese concentration camp in the Philippines. They were separated: the men on one side, the women and children on the other. When the Allies landed in the Philippines, and as they made

their way toward the concentration camp, a ditch dug around the camp was filled with oil. The guards were instructed to torch the ditch, and the camp, before they withdrew...which never happened. After the war, my mother asked her sister if she harbored resentment. "No," was the answer. "How?" And the answer was simply, "By the grace of God."

The key is probably less a matter of forgiveness making sense to us and more a matter of allowing God to work the mystery of forgiveness within us.

Not only in our offering forgiveness, but also in our accepting forgiveness ourselves.

We still tend to believe either that we didn't do anything all that wrong, so there's nothing to forgive. Or that the forgiveness offered isn't sincere and we – sometime, somewhere – will have to earn the supposed "forgiveness." Or we don't believe the offer of forgiveness given and so go ahead and punish ourselves anyway because we think it's what is expected, because deep down it's what we would expect.

But there is a mystery to this forgiveness: that God truly does move on beyond the injury to pardon and true reconciliation.

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways,
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

(Isaiah 55:8-9 NRSV)

Such is the mystery of forgiveness.

Are we willing to live into that mystery?

Or living into the mystery of hope.

Especially in a world such as ours.

Hope for peace for nations and peoples in a world where we are too eager to strike back – "an eye for an eye" – or blame another – "he hit me first!" – too eager to learn war and unwilling to learn peace.

Hope for security for all – a life without fear – in a world where some use others as shields; some use themselves as bombs; and some will keep others at a distance by flinging bullets their way.

Hope for justice, fairness, in a world where some hunger too much for power and see only themselves and their way, and not another.

Admittedly, sometimes our hope is mere stubbornness: refusing to let go of a dream of ours, no matter how unrealistic or foolish or even selfish the dream is.

But the hope that is a mystery is a hope that is (seemingly) humanly impossible, that arises out of nothing. Like the mythical phoenix that springs forth from the ashes of long lost and long forgotten dreams.

It is the hope for healing in the face of not simply broken, but shattered lives.

It is the hope for peace, standing in the rubble of one more bombed out building.

It is the hope for reunion standing beside an open grave.

It is the hope of resurrection standing at the foot of a cross.

Hope springs eternal, so they say. And that is a mystery.

Which doesn't mean we can't work for peace, or strive for healing, or be, ourselves, agents of reconciliation.

But hope springs eternal when it comes to the hope for a world of peace and a future of justice and an earth filled with compassion.

And we cling to that hope and yearn for that hope and invest in that hope...and that is a mystery.

Living into the mystery of forgiveness, of hope, to mention only a few.

Living into these mysteries may be a sign, an image for living into the future. A future that is unknown, a future that is uncertain; a future for which we might be able to prepare and plan to some extent, yes, but a future that ultimately is a mystery.

That can be unsettling, frightening even.

Where do we get the courage to get up in morning, to keep on living, to face that future?

The Lord said, "My presence will go with you."

And we can live into that mystery of the future because we know – just as Moses did, just as the disciples did – we know that the God whose back we can see but whose face we cannot, this God who is partially revealed to us but who is still a mystery – we know that this God will, and does, go with us...always.

And that is no mystery – even as, in some ways, it is.

***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.
Tune: DUNDEE, Scottish Psalter, 1615
Public Domain.

***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.**

“A Declaration of Faith” is Copyright 1977, 1991, the Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); adopted (1977) “as a contemporary statement of faith, a reliable aid for Christian study, liturgy, and inspiration, with the clear understanding that” it is not approved as a part of the *Book of Confessions*.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: Awesome, wonder-filled God...
All: ...hear our prayer.

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.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**We thank you, O God,
for the forgiveness we receive from you,
for the hope we have in you, and
for the life we know with you.
In thanks and praise we offer our gifts
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 “God of the Sparrow” GtG 22**

- 1. God of the sparrow
God of the whale
God of the swirling stars
How does the creature say Awe
How does the creature say Praise**
- 2. God of the earthquake
God of the storm
God of the trumpet blast
How does the creature cry Woe
How does the creature cry Save**
- 3. God of the rainbow
God of the cross
God of the empty grave
How does the creature say Grace
How does the creature say Thanks**
- 4. God of the hungry
God of the sick
God of the prodigal
How does the creature say Care
How does the creature say Life**

(continued...)

5. **God of the neighbor**
God of the foe
God of the pruning hook
How does the creature say Love
How does the creature say Peace

6. **God of the ages**
God near at hand
God of the loving heart
How do your children say Joy
How do your children say Home

God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale.

Text by Jaroslav J. Vajda.

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

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

All: ...**Amen.**

POSTLUDE

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