

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, JANUARY 21, 2024

First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

**THIRD SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME**

**GATHERING**

**PRELUDE**

**CALL TO WORSHIP** *(from Psalm 62)*

One: "For God alone my soul waits in silence."  
All: **"God alone is my rock and my salvation."**  
One: "Trust in the Lord at all times, O people."  
All: **"God is a refuge for us."**  
One: "Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this:..."  
All: **"...That power belongs to God, and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord."**

**\*OPENING HYMN** "Praise, My Soul, the God of Heaven" GtG 619 *(Verses 1-3)*

1. **Praise, my soul, the God of heaven;  
glad of heart your carols raise;  
ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,  
who, like me, should sing God's praise?  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
Praise the Maker all your days!**
2. **Praise God for the grace and favor  
shown our forebears in distress;  
God is still the same forever,  
slow to chide, and swift to bless.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
Sing our Maker's faithfulness!**
3. **Like a loving parent caring,  
God knows well our feeble frame,  
gladly all our burdens bearing,  
still to countless years the same.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
All within me, praise God's name!**

*(next page...)*

Words: Henry Francis Lyte, 1834; adapt. Ecumenical Women's Center and Ruth Duck, 1974.

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## UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

**The praise of your name is still on our lips, O Lord, even as we turn to confess our sin to you. When we perceive your mercy and patience, we know we are not merciful, we are not patient. As we come to know your loving kindness, we know we are not loving, and we are not very kind. We say we obey you, but our deeds betray us. By your grace, forgive us, heal us, and lead us back to you, that we might show mercy to others even as we know mercy from you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

## SILENT CONFESSION

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

One: "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast 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 Jonah (selected verses)

JONAH (New Revised Standard Version)

*<sup>1:1</sup> Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." <sup>3</sup> But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.*

<sup>3:1</sup> The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup> “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” <sup>3</sup> So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. <sup>4</sup> Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” <sup>5</sup> And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

...

<sup>10</sup> When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed God’s mind about the calamity to be brought upon them; and God did not do it.

<sup>4:1</sup> But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. <sup>2</sup> He prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”

## PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

**SERMON** “Not Me, Not This, Not Yet” by Pastor Bill Vincent

I remember a movie when I was growing up entitled "The Reluctant Astronaut" starring Don Knotts in the title role. He loved space and rockets, and fancied himself an expert. But there was one hitch: he was terrified of heights, even low heights. So that even the rocket slide on the playground presented him with a frightening encounter.

I do not remember much more of the story line, except that, of course, in true Hollywood fashion, he ends up on a rocket, shot up into space, and somehow, in his famously bungling fashion, ends up a hero, having done a marvelous job ... in spite of himself.

We read in our scripture passage this morning of a kindred spirit to the Don Knotts figure, except this one is a reluctant prophet.

Jonah receives instructions from God. And the minute he hangs up the phone, he's off and running ... in the opposite direction. "Not me," he says loud and clear with his feet. "Not me. You've got the wrong guy." Reluctant indeed. At the first sign of a job, he takes the first ship out of town, and hightails it out of there. "They'll never find me in Tarshish," he thinks to himself.

But the ‘they’ he was fleeing was not the mortal kind that we can hide from in some sort of witness protection program. The ‘they’ he was fleeing was none other than the Lord of the Universe, who is present everywhere, knows all and sees all.

So finally, the reluctant prophet – after spending some time being seasick on a storm-tossed boat; after baring his soul to some ruffian sailors about his running out on the job; and finally (the disgrace of it all) after doing time, not in the brig or the county jail, but inside the gut of some local giant fish – after all this, finally, our reluctant prophet sets out on his way – or God's way, to be more precise.

And wonder of wonders, the response to his message is fantastic, beyond anyone's wildest dreams – well, maybe not beyond God's. The people are told of their wicked ways and the great displeasure of God, and they repent of their evil, turn from their wickedness, and are truly sorry. And God has compassion on them, and foregoes the planned destruction. Everything sounds hunky dorry. Everyone's happy.

Almost. For now Jonah is a reluctant participant even more so. "I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!" I picture him shouting; stomping his feet, jumping up and down, ranting and raving in a childish tantrum. "I knew you were slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Now look what you've done!" Reluctant indeed. Reluctant even to celebrate God's kindness and compassion.

Jonah: Not the first, nor the last, reluctant servant of God.

Moses, too, was reluctant. Even with a burning bush that was not burned up. "Who am I that I should go to Egypt?" "Who shall I tell them sent me?" "Suppose they do not believe me!" "I'm not a good speaker; send someone else." Until finally, God got angry with him and said, "Go – now!"

Peter was, in his own way, reluctant. Sure at first he answered the call as Jesus walked by the lakeside. But then he was reluctant to follow to the bitter end ... at least initially. So he denied even knowing Jesus. And ended up weeping bitterly for it.

Paul, too, was reluctant. So reluctant that he couldn't – wouldn't – believe that God had come and was with this man named Jesus and his followers. So he persecuted the followers of Christ: hounded them and hunted them down, threw them in jail. Until God made it clear – in a way strangely reminiscent of Jonah – knocked him off his feet – literally. And Paul finally understood, and said, "Yes, I'll go, Lord." "Yes, I'll follow." "Yes, I'll believe."

Maybe you identify with their reluctance? Uncertain about carrying through to the bitter end. Unwilling to admit you are wrong and God was right all along. Hesitant to answer the call of God in the first place, however clear or muddy the reception is. Reluctant to do God's bidding, however simple or complicated it may seem, no matter how much God assures you that you're not on your own and God will be with you and help you.

We spoke last week of listening to God speak to us. But even when God speaks, and we finally discern the voice, we're not always so sure we want to listen all that much.

What about our reluctance? Why are we reluctant to serve, to answer the call?

What can we learn about our own reluctance from these stories?

Peter was reluctant to bear witness – to claim knowing Jesus – out of fear of harm and death, most likely.

We can understand. We, too, might respond as he did. The risk can be great. When put to the test, we too might deny we know Jesus ... and maybe, in our own way, we already have.

Paul was reluctant because of his dearly held beliefs. He couldn't believe he was wrong. At least this seems a safe assumption.

What pet beliefs do we cling to that we are unwilling to let go of, even when God makes it clear otherwise?

Moses was reluctant, at least in one way, out of fear: he feared his own inadequacy, his own inability. "I can't speak very well," he said. How ironic: he who was to become one of the great speakers of the word of God. But he feared failure

What about our own inadequacies? Our perception of our inadequacies? Our fear of failure?

Jonah, on the other hand, was reluctant, not out of fear of failure, but out of fear of success ... and maybe some good, old-fashioned prejudice. It seems Jonah didn't want to succeed; he didn't want the Ninevites to experience God's compassion, and to be saved.

*"...I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing...."*

Maybe he believed they didn't deserve it.

Are there times when we might say the same? – that others don't deserve it – forgetting all along that we don't deserve God's mercy either?

Reluctant disciple. Reluctant apostle. Reluctant leader. Reluctant prophet.

Reluctant us.

Reluctant Jonah.

Yet – surprise, surprise – God accomplishes great things through Jonah – in spite of Jonah himself. That's amazing news, not only for us, but especially for those people to whom Jonah – and you and I – are called to minister. The success of God's working is not totally dependent upon you and me – Thank God! – bungling, bumbling, reluctant servants that we be. Paul makes this explicit when he writes,

*But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. (II Corinthians 4:7 NRSV)*

And that should even give us some comfort – even as we are humbled by being called common clay pots. For yes, God calls us, just as surely as did Jesus call the disciples by the lakeside. And yes, God gives us a task, just as surely as did the voice from the bush give a task to Moses. But God does not leave it at that. God helps us on the way ... in spite of ourselves. And God works through us ... in spite of ourselves. We are not left alone to the task. God is with us. We are called to respond and obey – to do our part – and then to trust in God for the rest.

But even when we find it hard to believe this, and turn away from God and run – as Jonah so masterfully tried to do – we somehow, somewhere end up bumping into God anyway – or God bumps into us. And that, too, is good news, though we may not think so at first.

*Where can I flee from your presence?*

...

*Where can I go from your spirit?*

(Psalm 139:7 NRSV)

the psalmist asks. And the answer is unequivocal: nowhere. That can be down right frightening, especially when the one place we don't want to be is in the presence of God, especially when God is in the midst of laying a job on us. But the ever-ready presence of God is also comforting. For no matter where we run – whether we run in hope or in fear, with clear

intentions or with cloudy, away from God or toward God – God is with us. To redirect us. To refocus us. To reclaim us. To receive us. Like the father receiving the prodigal back home.  
God blesses us with God's presence, even when we don't want that blessing.

Maybe it's like the fish receiving Jonah into its belly for some forced time for reflection and rethinking. Maybe that's what we need.

When we say, "I can't" we need to spend some time in the belly of a smelly fish, to remind us that we cannot flee from God's gracious presence, and to hear God say, "Remember Moses, Peter, Jonah, Paul"...and how many others.

You see, maybe when the call comes, we need to focus, not so much on the one who is called (us), but the one who calls (God).

For call God does.

For called are we.

How will we answer?

God wants to work miracles through you and me, reluctant though we be.

Who knows? Maybe God will save some modern-day Ninevah through one of us ... in spite of us. One can only hope ... and trust...and believe ... and go.

**\*HYMN** "I, the Lord of Sea and Sky" (Here I Am, Lord) GtG 69

**1. I, the Lord of sea and sky,  
I have heard my people cry.  
All who dwell in dark and sin  
my hand will save.  
I, who made the stars of night,  
I will make their darkness bright.  
Who will bear my light to them?  
Whom shall I send?**

*Refrain:* **Here I am, Lord.  
Is it I, Lord?  
I have heard you calling in the night.  
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.  
I will hold your people in my heart.**

**2. I, the Lord of snow and rain,  
I have borne my people's pain.  
I have wept for love of them.  
They turn away.  
I will break their hearts of stone,  
give them hearts for love alone.  
I will speak my word to them.  
Whom shall I send? (Refrain)**

*(continued...)*

3. **I, the Lord of wind and flame,  
I will tend the poor and lame.  
I will set a feast for them.  
My hand will save.  
Finest bread I will provide  
till their hearts be satisfied.  
I will give my life to them.  
Whom shall I send?     *(Refrain)***

Words: Daniel L. Schutte, 1981, alt.

Music: HERE I AM (Schutte), Daniel L. Schutte, 1981; harm. Alfred V. Fedak, 2011

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**\*AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**     *(from “A Declaration of Faith”)*

**Christ calls us to be disciples.  
In forming his people and sending them into the world  
Jesus called individuals to be disciples.  
They were to share the joy of his companionship,  
to understand and obey his teachings,  
and to follow him in life and death.  
We confess that Christians today are called to discipleship.  
Life shared with Christ and shaped by Christ  
is God's undeserved gift to each of us.  
It is also God's demand upon every one of us,  
never perfectly fulfilled by any of us.  
Forgiven by God and supported by brothers and sisters,  
we strive to become more faithful and effective  
in our daily practice of the Christian life.**

“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*.

#### **INSTALLATION OF OFFICERS**

One:            “There are varieties of gifts.”  
All:            **“But it is the same Spirit who gives them.”**  
One:            “There are varieties of service.”  
All:            **“But it is the same Lord who is served.”**  
One:            “There are varieties of working.”  
All:            **“But it is the same God who inspires them all in every one.”**  
One:            “Each one is given a gift by the Spirit...”  
All:            **“...To use it for the common good.”**

*(continued...)*

One: "Together we are the body of Christ..."  
All: "...**And individually members of him.**"

*(from I Corinthians 12)*

Constitutional Questions to Officers

Constitutional Questions to the Congregation

*Do we, the members of the church, accept these people as ruling elders, chosen by God through the voice of this congregation to lead us in the way of Jesus Christ?*

*Do we agree to pray for them, to encourage them, to respect their decisions, and to follow as they guide us, serving Jesus Christ, who alone is Head of the Church?*

Prayer

## **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

One: As we lift up our prayers to you...

All: .....**our souls wait in silence.**

## **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*

**By your grace, you have chosen us, O God. By your grace, you have showered us with blessings in abundance. By your grace, accept the gifts we offer to you. Use them and us for your holy work of transformation, as we seek to go where Jesus leads us, where Jesus calls us. Amen.**



## SENDING

**\*CLOSING HYMN “O Jesus, I Have Promised” GtG 724**

1. **O Jesus, I have promised  
to serve thee to the end;  
be thou forever near me,  
my Master and my friend;  
I shall not fear the battle  
if thou art by my side,  
nor wander from the pathway  
if thou wilt be my guide.**
  
2. **O let me feel thee near me!  
The world is ever near:  
I see the sights that dazzle;  
the tempting sounds I hear.  
My foes are ever near me,  
around me and within;  
but, Jesus, draw thou nearer  
and shield my soul from sin.**
  
3. **O let me hear thee speaking  
in accents clear and still,  
above the storms of passion,  
the murmurs of self-will;  
O speak to reassure me,  
to hasten or control;  
O speak, and make me listen,  
thou guardian of my soul.**
  
4. **O Jesus, thou hast promised  
to all who follow thee  
that where thou art in glory  
there shall thy servant be.  
And, Jesus, I have promised  
to serve thee to the end;  
O give me grace to follow,  
my Master and my friend.**

Words: John Ernest Bode, 1866, alt.

Music: ANGEL'S STORY, Arthur Henry Mann, 1881  
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## **\*CHARGE AND BLESSING**

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

## **POSTLUDE**

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