

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2024

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

FIRST SUNDAY in LENT

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(based on Psalm 25)*

One: To you, O God, we lift up our souls. O God, in you we trust.
All: **Lead us in your truth and teach us,**
One: for you are the God of our salvation;
All: **for you we wait, for you we worship.**

***OPENING HYMN** “I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art” GtG 624 *(Verses 1, 3, & 5)*

1. **I greet thee, who my sure Redeemer art,
my only trust and Savior of my heart,
who pain didst undergo for my poor sake;
I pray thee from our hearts all cares to take.**

3. **Thou art the life, by which alone we live,
and all our substance and our strength receive;
sustain us by thy faith and by thy power,
and give us strength in every trying hour.**

5. **Our hope is in no other save in thee;
our faith is built upon thy promise free;
Lord, give us peace, and make us calm and sure,
that in thy strength we evermore endure.**

Words: *Psalms*, Strasbourg, 1545; trans. Elizabeth Lee Smith, 1868
Music: TOULON, Genevan Psalter, 1551
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RESPONSIVE PRAYER OF CONFESSION & ASSURANCE OF PARDON

(from Psalm 25)

(next page...)

One: "Remember, O Lord, your kindness and constant love which you have shown from long ago."
All: **"Forgive the sins and errors of my youth. In your constant love and goodness, remember me, Lord! Keep your promise, Lord, and forgive my sins, for they are many."**
One: "To you, O Lord, I offer my prayer. In you, my God, I trust." In these moments of silence, hear us, as we make our personal confession to you.

--time for silent, personal confession--

One: "Because the Lord is righteous and good, the Lord teaches sinners the path they should follow. God leads the humble in the right way and teaches them God's will."
All: **"Teach me your ways, O Lord. Make them known to me. Teach me to live according to your truth. For you are my God, who saves me. I always trust in you."**
One: The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. In the cross of Christ we discern the height and length and depth and breadth of God's love and forgiveness.
All: **So let us rejoice in the good news, for in Jesus Christ we are forgiven, we are loved. 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 Mark 11:12-25

MARK 11:12-25 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹² *On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. ¹³ Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.*

¹⁴ *He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.*

¹⁵ *Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; ¹⁶ and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷ He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written,*

*'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?
But you have made it a den of robbers."*

¹⁸ And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. ¹⁹ And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

²⁰ In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. ²¹ Then Peter remembered and said to him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.” ²² Jesus answered them, “Have faith in God. ²³ Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. ²⁴ So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

²⁵ “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.”

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “Hungering for More Than Just Figs” by Pastor Bill Vincent

At face value, the story sounds harsh, Jesus appears irrational, and we are confused.

Jesus was hungry: probably not surprising. He sees a fig tree with leaves on it. But there are no figs: also no surprise, for it was “*not the season for figs.*” So Jesus curses the fig tree.

Then he goes into Jerusalem and into the temple where he chases out the buyers and sellers. Then teaches about the Temple as a place of sincere worship.

Then the next day, they find the fig tree withered.

Seems kind of harsh, irrational. What’s going on?

First thing to notice: This passage involves an instance of bracketing or ‘sandwiching’: a favorite tool of Mark’s. Inserting one story into another, and one story serves to illuminate the other.

In this case, the fig tree serves as an acted out metaphor, full of rich symbolism.

You see, when Jesus approaches the fig tree, Jesus hungers for something more than just figs.

Jesus hungers for faith.

The question is: Will he find it?

When he goes searching in the temple, faith is found missing. In the very place you would assume to find faith, it is nowhere to be found.

Where he thought he would find a “*house of prayer,*” he found instead a “*den of robbers.*”

He goes looking for people searching for God, and finds instead people searching only for profit and for their own self-interest.

Faith is found missing in the temple. So the fig tree has no fruit.

What about us?

Will Jesus find faith in us, here? Will we have faith? Will we bear the figs of faith? For as he once said elsewhere, *"You will know them by their fruits."* (Matthew 7:16,20)

"Well, we are here this morning," you say. Yes, we are. We have given up that extra bit of sleep or yet some other activity, and we are here.

But are we here this morning for faith? Or is it all for show, going through the motions because it's the routine we're used to or it's simply the thing to do, or we maybe don't have a clue why?

Are we maybe here for some extraneous reason – even though it may be a noble one – that actually gets in the way of our growth in faith, our expression of faith?

Of course we note, Jesus seems to set the standard kind of high.

"Have faith and say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea', and it will come to pass."

That's something else!

Of course, literal mountains may not be so bad: with enough dynamite and earth-moving equipment and time, we can move this mountain into the sea and build a breakwater, with a harbor, and a complete city.

But it's the figurative mountains that are harder. Like the chip on the shoulder or the grudge we bear: all too often less like a molehill and more like a real mountain. Which maybe why our story ends with those words on forgiveness – now that's a mountain to move.

Will Jesus find the figs of forgiveness in us?

"Of course he will," we say. "We're faithful people, forgiving people. You said you're sorry. That's good enough for me. Let's move on."

Then we hear Jesus tell another story:

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" (Matthew 21:28-31 NRSV)

The one who said he would forgive, but did not? Or the one who said he would not forgive...but actually did?

We say, "No big deal," when someone hurts us. We want to go on, only we don't. We have this resentment and bitterness, and we lug this load around with us, ready to hammer somebody when the opportunity arises.

We say one thing; we do another.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." (Matthew 7:21 NRSV)

"By their fruits you will know them."

And bearing the fruit of faith is not easy. It is certainly not a foregone conclusion.

You may have noticed that we used Psalm 25 this morning for our Call to Worship and Prayer of Confession and Assurance of Pardon.

In your constant love and goodness, remember me, Lord!

Teach me to live according to your truth.

For you are my God, who saves me.

I always trust in you.

Teach me your ways, O Lord.

Words that speak of a depth of relationship, reliance upon God.

But even more, a hunger for God: a hunger that bears fruit.

Jesus hungers for faith.

The question of whether or not Jesus will find faith may very well be answered in our response to the question of what it is that we hunger for.

Do we hunger for something more than just a small cube of bread and a sip of juice?

Have we come simply for a break in our daily routine? Or have we come for something deeper?

Have we come to hear words that sound nice and maybe even provide comfort because they are familiar? Or have we come to hear something further: to hear God speak to us and challenge us, enrich us and change us?

Our hunger can only be met in and through that for which Jesus hungers: faith.

For it is by faith that we rest assured in God's forgiveness and provision.

It is by faith that we truly believe that God is here to meet us; that God comes to us and speaks to us, works with us and embraces us, and wants to partner with us.

It is by faith that we are nourished in our souls and bear fruit in our lives.

But that 'mountain' thing still stands there.

And if it is up to us, then we're out of luck. We're not capable of moving mountains.

But it may be important to hear that the belief to move mountains is always a belief, not in our own power, but in the power of God to move the mountains that stand before us.

And the good news in the story? The power of God to wither a fig tree...or even bring it back to life. Like the power of God to resurrect one crucified.

If we seek to rely on our own power, then we will be disappointed. But the power of God? that's another story altogether.

Even so, we still may not be sure.

Life can still be difficult, because the mountains in front of us are huge. Sometimes mountains of our own making; sometimes mountains of others' making; sometimes mountains that just are the way life is. And we're not sure we can bear this fruit; we're not sure we can trust this God; and sometimes we're not sure we want to. For to say we trust God and to live that

way, means we will change; and control of our life will be not in our hands but in God's; and we're not always sure we want to do that.

So we vacillate back and forth: sometimes we want to, sometimes we don't; sometimes we're committed, sometimes we're not.

So a father brings his son to Jesus: a son who has fits and seizures. And the father of the boy pleads with Jesus,

"if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus said to him, "If you are able! – All things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:22-24 NRSV)

And yes, we can all too easily identify with his cry.

But maybe sometimes wanting to have faith is enough.

It may be a small bit of faith – small as a mustard seed – but God can and will do marvelous things, not the least of which is to help us with our unbelief.

"I believe; help my unbelief!"

"I have faith; help my unfaith!"

With this prayer on our lips and in our hearts, then we too will hunger for something more than just figs.

And, by the grace of God, we will not be disappointed.

And, by the grace of God, neither will our Lord.

***HYMN** "My Faith Looks Up to Thee" GtG 829 (*Verses 1-3*)

- 1. My faith looks up to thee,
thou Lamb of Calvary,
Savior divine!
Now hear me while I pray;
take all my guilt away;
O let me from this day
be wholly thine!**

- 2. May thy rich grace impart
strength to my fainting heart,
my zeal inspire;
as thou has died for me,
O may my love to thee
pure, warm, and changeless be,
a living fire!**

(continued...)

3. **While life's dark maze I tread
and griefs around me spread,
be thou my guide;
bid darkness turn to day;
wipe sorrow's tears away;
nor let me ever stray
from thee aside.**

Words: Ray Palmer, 1830
Music: OLIVET, Lowell Mason, 1831, alt.
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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH** (from "*A Declaration of Faith*")

**It is not our faith but God's grace in Jesus Christ
that justifies us and reconciles us to God.
Yet it is only by faith that we accept God's grace
and live by it.
We believe the Holy Spirit works today
whenever believers grow toward maturity in Christ.
As long as we live we struggle with sin,
but the Spirit's presence assures us
God will complete what God has begun in us.**

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PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: To you, O Lord, we lift our souls.
All: O God, in you we trust.

THE EUCHARIST

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**God of steadfast love and faithfulness,
we are humbled as we try to do what is right
and to walk in your ways.
Receive, we ask, our offerings
as tokens of our faithfulness;
and use them for your own good purposes
in the church and in all creation.
We pray in Jesus Christ. Amen.**

SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Invitation to the Lord's Table

Prayer of Thanksgiving

One: The Lord be with you.
All: **And also with you.**
One: Lift up your hearts.
All: **We lift them to the Lord.**
One: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
All: **It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

...

One: And so we pray:
All: **Holy One, we glorify your name.**

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.**

Breaking of the Bread

Communion of the People

(Please hold the bread so that we might partake of it together, to remind us of our participation in this sacrament as a community. Please drink the cup as you are served, reminding us of our individual participation in this sacrament and our personal commitment to our Lord.)

Prayer

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “So Let Our Lips and Lives Express” [*Tune 738*]

**1. So let our lips and lives express
the holy gospel we profess;
so let our works and virtues shine,
to prove the doctrine all divine.**

**2. Thus shall we best proclaim abroad
the honors of our Savior God,
when his salvation reigns within,
and grace subdues the power of sin.**

Words: Isaac Watts, 1707

Music: MARYTON, Henry Percy Smith, 1874
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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

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

POSTLUDE

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