

First Presbyterian Church, Thunder Bay

<https://fpresbyterian.ca> Rev. Joyce Yanishewski

Fifth Sunday in Lent – March 21, 2021

Call to Worship

Even in these uncertain times, especially in these endless days,
God is fulfilling the promise of the new covenant.

Wherever we are, wherever we worship, at home, outside,
in every sacred space, may our hearts be filled with love.

Through quarantine and lockdowns, through lonely days and hopes that fizzled,
God has held tight to our hands to lead us through.

God's Word continues to shape us, to encourage us,
to challenge us to faithful lives in these times.

In new ways, sometimes uncomfortable, we have learned
to reach out to neighbors, friends, family, even strangers.

Beyond these moments and days, we remain ready
to serve all of God's people, to share in this covenant of grace.

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Hymn

In the bulb there is a flower

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1. In the bulb there is a flower,
in the seed, an apple tree,
in cocoons, a hidden promise:
butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter
there's a spring that waits to be,
unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.
2. There's a song in every silence,
seeking word and melody;
there's a dawn in every darkness,
bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will come the future;
what it holds, a mystery,
unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.
3. In our end is our beginning,
in our time, infinity;
in our doubt there is believing,
in our life, eternity,
in our death, a resurrection,
at the last, a victory,
unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.

"In the bulb there is a flower," words and music by Natalie Sleeth © 1986 Hope Publishing Co. All rights reserved. Annual License with podcasting OneLicense.net A-723877

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Creating God,
Loving Son,
Guiding Spirit,
With springtime sun and the promise of new life,
you wake us from our slumbers.
We glorify your name for you are faithful to us
through every season of the year and every season of life.
We are grateful for your patience and persistence,
drawing near to us even through the times we cannot draw near each other.
Your promise of hope in Jesus Christ,
drawing life out of the grip of death, means so much to us.
Even as his cross looms on the horizon in this season of Lent,
we praise you for Jesus' courage and compassion
which bring renewal to us in the midst of our challenges.
We praise you, O God, for the love that never lets us go.

Jesus, our friend and Saviour,
As we ponder your sacrifice,
we recognize the self-centred ways in which we lead our lives.
You entrust us with the task of sharing your love in this world,
yet so often we fall short.
We get lost in our own plans and worries and neglect to show love,
even to those right beside us.
We find some people too difficult to care for.
We think some people unworthy of your love and ours.
Our own needs seem insurmountable and we cannot reach out to someone else.
Forgive us, Lord Jesus.
Renew a right spirit within us,
so that we find the courage to go on
and the compassion to reach out in your name.

Loving God, by the power of your Spirit, open our hearts to receive and understand
your Word, speaking through the scriptures. Teach us your wisdom and reveal your
truth for our lives and our times, through Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Amen.

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Assurance of Pardon

In this time of Lent,
know that God understands how we struggle to stay open and compassionate.
The invitation is not to focus on our inadequacies, but on God's gift of grace and love
which transforms our hearts and minds. That gift is given to us again, here and now.
Be encouraged. May the peace of God be with you

~ written by Ann Siddall, and posted on the website of the Stillpoint Spirituality Centre. <http://www.stillpointsa.org.au/>

Scripture Reading John 12:20-36

²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. ³⁴The crowd answered him, “We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?” ³⁵Jesus said to them, “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. ³⁶While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

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The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message Drawn to God

It has been a long time since I have been in a crowd. I am not a big crowd person anyway, but there are times that being with a large group of people can be exciting and have a lasting impact. Every time I see a large crowd in a video, I find myself recoiling a little, as it is a jarring image in this time of pandemic. It is like watching old movies where everyone smoked and now props of cigarettes, cigars, and pipes seem out of place unless the film is set in a prior decade or two. Now it is so with crowds. Between that and facemasks we will forever be able to pick out shows and movies made in 2020 and 21 and maybe even longer.

The image of crowds also stuck with me as I prepared to write this message. Though no crowd is mentioned in the scripture read today, the scene is set in the paragraphs that come before. A great crowd of Jews had gathered a couple of days prior because they had heard that Jesus had raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. In the crowd, chief

priests were planning to not only to put Jesus to death, but Lazarus too “since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus” (John 12:11).

The next day was the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Again, a big crowd, and yes, the scripture read from John 12 skips over that part, getting a little ahead of itself as next week is when we celebrate Palm Sunday. And the city is overflowing with people who have come to celebrate the Passover Festival, among them Greeks. Not unheard of, as many people, not just Jews, were attracted to the Jewish faith and would be there to learn and commemorate the history of the Hebrew people, even take steps to be adopted into the faith.

For the writer of the Gospel of John, these Greeks, who were among “those who went up to worship at the festival” (Jn 12:20) and who now approached Philip to ask if they could see Jesus, these people represented the world being drawn to Jesus. This is an overarching theme of scripture, God drawing people to himself, desiring to be in relationship with the people God created and loved.

It is not until the Greeks come that Jesus then says, “it is for this reason that I have come to this hour” (Jn 12:27). The hour being his death. Jesus is preparing himself for death, a death that he knows will have him nailed up on a cross, a death in which he says, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (Jn 12:32). The purpose of Jesus coming as a baby, growing up, his ministry with all its teaching and healing, his death, resurrection, and ascension, are all about being in relationship with people...you and me and every other person walking the face of the earth, in all times, and in all places.

Jesus talks about driving out the ruler of this world, because what rules us internally and externally has the power to cause us to die. It may be a hundred deaths of regret and shame, pain and sorrow, or our physical death. It may be the death that comes from systems of oppression including racism, gender violence, agism, and domination through an economic system that rewards those that have and takes even more from those who have little. Jesus drives out death, death that comes internally or externally from injustice or hate.

Jesus’ death is and will be for the sake of the world and to establish the God kingdom that will rule the world. This work of establishing a kingdom for God will continue until Jesus’ return. Jesus was the grain of wheat that fell to the earth and died, but in that death, Jesus was able to bear much fruit. We are the fruit of that promise. In this in-between time of Jesus ascension and coming again, each of us as individuals and collectively as the people of God, are the light of the world that draws people to Jesus...to God. Those of us who have come to believe in the power of Jesus, who daily desire to be in relationship with God and are in relationship with God are the ones who can bring seeds of hope to an aching world.

As people who know and read scripture, we have the words of Jesus, words that have the power to heal. Acting as agents of God's love in the world, we have the ability to give voice to the disadvantaged, giving them opportunity to thrive. Jesus is the light of the world, but each of us can shine with God's love and power to transform ourselves, be companions for those who are transforming, and extend that transforming love and power into every place and space where darkness, places where God's love is absent, can also become places of hope, love, and grace.

This is a high calling, but also one that is attainable. When we experience God's hope, love, and grace, when we trust it, even if it is a little or maybe a lot scary, we can live into it. It goes back to the words of verses 25 and 26 "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor."

Jesus doesn't mean here to hate your life, as if it has no value, rather its value comes in being in relationship with God, in living in a way that serves God and others. Remembering that the one calling us to serve is the Jesus who got down on his knees and washed the feet of others, healed the sick, and fed the hungry.

It may be helpful to hear words credited to St. Ignatius of Loyala, often referred to as a prayer of generosity.

Jesus, teach me to be generous,
to serve you as you deserve:
to give without counting the cost,
to fight needlessly of the wounds,
to work and not seek for rest,
to toil and not seek for reward,
save the reward of knowing I am doing your will.

We are called to serve Jesus, to be light, hope, and grace in the world. It is as simple and as difficult as that, but living in this way brings meaning and purpose to our lives and to the lives of those we interact with.

A word of caution; living in this way will transform you, you will never be the same, you will be changed, challenged, touched, fearful, amazed, and always on an adventure. You will also know joy, hope, and love through your ever deepening relationship with God who goes with you, prepares your way, and never leave you orphaned.

This is life and having life in abundance. In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Steadfast God,
in the midst of unending change and challenge,
we give you thanks for your presence to sustain us.
While we find it hard to understand why things happen,
we are grateful that you are with us.
You understand our fears; you support and guide us;
and you give us courage to face the unknown.
We give thanks that you intend goodness for us;
that your gift of faith is a solid rock which supports us;
and that prayer gives us the hope you keep working in ways seen and unseen
for goodness to prevail.

Loving God,
in this time of uncertainty when there is much to be anxious about,
we pray for the world you love.
Send your healing Spirit to guide countries and communities
as they respond to COVID-19.
Bless the work of medical researchers and frontline health care workers
in these stressful times.
Bless the plans to offer vaccine to all who want it
and give us patience and common sense as we wait our turns for vaccination.

Send your healing Spirit to bring peace with justice to the troubled places,
(Here you can name any places currently in the news...)

Bring care and comfort to those who have been hurt in conflict,
wisdom to those who offer leadership in their communities,
and courage to those who advocate for the most vulnerable.

Send your healing Spirit to mend relationships
between religious groups and cultural groups
who find themselves in tension or turmoil.
We pray for mutual respect to grow
between peoples who look at each other with suspicion
and among people who have experienced painful histories with each other.
Open our hearts and minds
to those whose situations and concerns we don't understand
and bring your gift of reconciliation to us all.

Send your healing Spirit to people we know and the earth you love.

We remember before you friends in grief...

(Hold a brief pause)

relationships marked by tension...

(Hold a brief pause)

those facing difficulty at work or finding work...

(Hold a brief pause)

disagreements in our church or community...

(Hold a brief pause)

concerns about the environment we depend on...

(Hold a brief pause)

We pray for the continuing ministry of the church
in our neighbourhoods and around the world.

As we prepare to celebrate Easter and Christ's resurrection,
help us plan safely and creatively.

Send your healing Spirit to raise our hearts and our hopes
with the promise of new life in Christ.

Restore to us the joy of your salvation and sustain in us all a willing spirit.

We pray through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who taught us to pray, saying:

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Lord's Prayer

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.

Invitation to make an offering

Jesus reminds us that a seed surrenders its life to the ground in order to bear much fruit. What we surrender to God in our offering will also bear much fruit in the world, for the sake of Christ, our Lord.

There are people from different churches and places following this service. As springtime begins, sow the seeds of God's love as you offer your gifts to God to your church community.

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1. Now the green blade rises from the buried grain,
wheat that in the dark earth many days has lain;
love lives again, that with the dead has been:
love is come again like wheat new-springing green.
2. In the grave they laid him, love by hatred slain
sure that he would never, never wake again,
laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen:
love is come again like wheat new-springing green.
3. Forth he came at Easter, like the risen grain,
he that for these three days in the grave had lain;
raised from the dead my living Lord is seen,
love is come again like wheat new-springing green.
4. When our hearts are wintry, grieving or in pain,
then your touch can call us back to life again,
fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
love is come again like wheat new-springing green.

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Benediction (based on Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33)

Go now, to serve Christ and follow him.
Let your old life fall like a grain of wheat into the earth
so that you may bear much fruit
as you allow God to reshape your heart
and live in obedience to the law written within you.

And may God centre you in truth and steady your spirit.
May Christ renew your joy and strengthen your will.
And may the Spirit teach you God's hidden wisdom
and fill you with songs of rejoicing.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

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