

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL  
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

January 24, 2021

Third Sunday after Epiphany

PRELUDE “*God of Grace and God of Glory*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends! And welcome to worship. It’s good to be together again as the people of God. I hesitate as I say that because I’m well aware that you may not feel like we’re together again, but I assure you that God is at work among and between us, stirring things up, knitting us together, drawing us close and keeping us connected through the movement and grace of the Holy Spirit. True, you can’t look down the pew or around the room and see both old and new friends; if you see anyone right now, it’s probably the people you see every day, the ones who share your days and your meals with you – and what a gift those people are. I’m confident that God is at work between others of us, and that movement isn’t about us being in the same place at the same time nearly as much as it’s about hearts and heads, spirits and prayers being bound up together, sharing the same concern, focused on the same task. If you’re missing someone you used to see in church on a regular basis, call them up, send a text, or write a letter. I know that two of you recently met together to share a cup of tea; sure, you did it over the phone, but that didn’t make it any less meaningful. And an average of 6 of us meet every Sunday for Fellowship; many of us even drink coffee and enjoy goodies while we’re together. Our bodies tend to be scattered from Wallace to Post Falls, and as far as Florida and Texas – while our hearts and minds gather as one over Zoom. Later today, Ben and I are going to a birthday party with family members; invitations have gone to people in Vermont, Minnesota, Wyoming and Idaho and we’ll have a wonderful time celebrating two birthday boys. No, none of that is the same as being in the same place at the same time, but these aren’t days that ask us to do the same old, familiar thing. These are days that call us out of our routines and comfort zones, and encourage us to explore new ways of being God’s people, the body of Christ, the Church. Wherever and however two or three gather together in Jesus’ name, God is there, stirring things up, knitting us together, drawing us closing, keeping us connected by the movement and grace of the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God!

CALL TO WORSHIP

The invitation is given to every person by Jesus Christ: "Come to me! Follow me! Be my disciples!"

**We come to this place, to this time, at the invitation of Jesus Christ.**

In the name of Christ,

**we accept the invitation to discipleship.**

In the name of Christ,

**as his disciples, we worship and praise God.**

In the midst of a world where cruelty abounds,

**we proclaim the God of Compassion.**

In the midst of despair that threatens to swallow up whole lives, whole peoples,

**we proclaim the God of Hope.**

In the midst of indifference and apathy,

**we proclaim the God of Love.**

Come, let us worship together

**and share our witness of God's living presence in the world.**

(from the *On Earth Peace* website. <http://www.onearthpeace.org/>)

SONG “*Jesus Calls Us*”

Jesus calls us; o’er the tumult Of our life’s wild, restless sea,  
Day by day his sweet voice soundeth, Saying, “Christian, follow me.”

Jesus calls us from the worship Of the vain world’s golden store,  
From each idol that would keep us, Saying, “Christian, love me more.”

In our joys and in our sorrows, Days of toil and hours of ease,  
Still he calls in cares and pleasures, “Christian, love me more than these.”

Jesus calls us: by thy mercies, Savior, may we hear thy call,  
Give our hearts to thine obedience, Serve and love thee best of all.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

**You call us, Wanderer of seashores and sidewalks, inviting us to sail out of our smug harbors into the uncharted waters of faith; to wander off from our predictable paths to follow You into the unpredictable footsteps of the kingdom; to leave the comfort of our homes and accompany You into the uncomfortable neighborhoods we usually avoid. As we wait, in our simple, sometimes crazy, constantly uncertain lives, speak to us, Spirit of Grace: of that hope which is our anchor; of that peace which is our rock; of that grace which is our refuge. Amen.**

(Rev. Bob Gibson for the London Conference of the United Church of Canada)

SCRIPTURE READING Mark 1:14-20

Gretchen Ehram

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

SERMON

Is it just me, or do any of you have trouble getting around to projects that seem like a good idea but are never quite compelling enough to rise to the surface so they can claim attention and realize some progress? Trust me: if I wasn’t relatively confident that some of you would recognize what I’m talking about, you’d never hear about it. Here or anywhere else. I remember last spring, when we all got sent to our homes and told not to come out until some unspecified voice told us we could, I began hearing about closets cleaned and projects completed. You didn’t hear that from me, though. I can frump and squander my time away with no problem; productivity is overrated.

I’ve got a good sized closet and a window seat both completely packed with treasures from my mother’s house. Some other non-treasure stuff, too. I’ve tried to do some sorting, but never gotten very far before company was on the horizon and I had to stuff everything back where it came from. Clearly, company isn’t the issue these days, but the bins and boxes haven’t surfaced. Ben and I’ve talked about how to store and sort the generations of photos – and share them with family scattered between Vermont, Missouri, Texas and New Zealand – but I haven’t gotten around to any of that. I really want to organize and read all of the letters and papers I have from my long deceased aunt, and even write her story, but of course, I haven’t gotten to that either. Every once in awhile, I sit myself down and give myself a serious talking to, saying, do you think you have forever? That you can just keep putting this

off – and off – and still get it done one day? Just how much time do you think you have? Even as I say all of this, I have a vague sense that I’ve said it before. Sad. I should either keep these things to myself or find a way to get myself in gear. Maybe that would be a good Lenten discipline this year. Or some year... No reason to rush...

Debie Thomas wrote that, “Maybe, once upon a time, there was *time*. Time to dawdle. Time to procrastinate. Time to delay. Maybe, in that idyllic yesteryear, there was leisure to tell ourselves that we don’t need to hurry. That we can afford to hang back. That someone else will come along and fix this mess. Because *we’ve got time*. If such a “once upon a time” ever existed — and honestly, I doubt it did — it doesn’t exist anymore.” (“I Will Make”, Journey with Jesus, posted 17 January 2021) As our gospel reading for this morning makes abundantly clear, time’s up. “The time is fulfilled.” The time is now.

As I said a couple of weeks ago, the Gospel of Mark opens differently than any of the other gospels. The book begins with a description of John the Baptist and what he’s up to, and then offers a concise version of Jesus’ baptism, followed by an even more abbreviated version of his temptation. Two verses to tell us he spent 40 days in the wilderness, accompanied by the wild beasts and waited on by angels. Thirteen verses and so far Jesus hasn’t spoken a word or done a blasted act of ministry as far as we’ve been told. Until John was arrested, at which point Jesus appears to have decided that the time for silence is over and gone. He’s up and out, headed for Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, saying to every Tom, Dick and Harry; Jane, Martha and Susan who come within earshot that the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe.

Just what was it that lit a fire under him? Because clearly, he is on fire as he heads out and starts up. It seems clear to me that John’s arrest played some part in launching Jesus. We don’t know either the details or the outcome yet; that story comes in chapter 6 and is definitely one of those stories that these days would come with a warning: what you are about to hear contains graphic details that may be disturbing. So far, all we know is that John has been arrested – one of the good guys doing God’s work, fulfilling ancient prophecy, shut down and locked up because of the neuroses and paranoia of the king. It flips a switch in Jesus and sets him off: enough is enough, something has got to be done, it’s time for me to go to work.

The very first words that Jesus speaks in the Gospel of Mark tell us that the time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near. The word that Mark uses there is not the sense of time of counting days on a calendar, hours on the clock or years in a term of office. This kind of time is God’s time, *kairos*: a time that is pregnant with possibility, ripe and ready for harvest. It’s a time that calls followers to move from procrastination or preparation and into action. Time to stop hoping for change or that others will fix things; time to start laboring for what we’ve been longing for.

As soon as Jesus announces that it’s time, he goes on to call people to repent and believe. I shouldn’t try to speak for you, but I think we tend to hear the call to repent as a kind of scolding; some days and from some people, it’s a slap on the wrist; some days and from some people it’s the eternal fires of condemnation. But in the Greek and in Jesus’ mouth, repent, *metanoia*, means to turn around and to turn toward the vision, the promise, the peace of what is yet to come and is already beginning to come into view. *Metanoia* is an invitation to live with a new mind and a new heart, to wrap our heads around the new and unprecedented thing that God is doing in Jesus, the new reality that is coming together before our very eyes. And it calls us to do that with others, in community. We may have personalized the notion of belief and repentance, something that happens between me and Jesus, but *metanoia* is a plural word, a word that insists that repentance and belief, that Christian life happens in community, that we are most able to see and do, accomplish and fulfill the work of God when we do it together.

And so Jesus begins his ministry by calling people to join him in the work he's been sent to do. It's a general open-door invitation to anyone who will listen, but then he goes a few steps further and begins to form a community, an inner circle of followers that he can work with. He has no intentions of doing this work alone, and he doesn't ask his followers to do it alone either. In this story, he even recruits in pairs. As he's walking along the Sea of Galilee he sees two brothers, Simon and Andrew casting a net into the sea. He calls them to come and follow him, promising he will give them a new identity. A little ways further, he sees James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and he calls them too: to come and see, to leave who they've been in order to join him in the work of God's kingdom, changing lives, healing brokenness, envisioning a new way of being in the world, transforming the past into something new and as yet unseen – and doing it together.

Jesus continues to walk along the Sea of Galilee, but also in the streets and villages of our 21<sup>st</sup> century world. He continues to call us out of our lackadaisical, disengaged thoughts that it might be nice if things were worked on. He calls us away from our complacency and fondness for the status quo, away from our wish that someone else would do something to make some things better, to stop the mounting death toll of COVID losses, to bring an end to homelessness and food insecurity, to bring an end to racism and violence, hatred and hostility. He comes to us with a sense of urgency and a call to turn our hearts and minds toward him and the work God is doing in our midst, to the presence and promise of the new world that is taking shape even now. He calls to us to join in the community of faith that is dedicated to the work of bridge building and hope planting and peace promoting. To come and follow him as he leads us into the new tomorrow of joy and love.

Like a host of other people, I was totally captivated by the poem “The Hill We Climb” that Amanda Gorham wrote for and read at Wednesday's Presidential Inauguration. I want to share a piece of that in closing, because of the power that I hear in her vision of what our life together could look like, and the ways we just might accomplish pieces of that vision if we work together.

...And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us,  
but what stands before us.  
We close the divide because we know, to put our future first,  
we must first put our differences aside.  
We lay down our arms  
so we can reach out our arms  
to one another.  
We seek harm to none and harmony for all.  
Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true,  
that even as we grieved, we grew,  
that even as we hurt, we hoped,  
that even as we tired, we tried,  
that we'll forever be tied together, victorious.  
Not because we will never again know defeat,  
but because we will never again sow division.

My friends, the time has indeed come. The time is now – time to repent and believe, time to turn our hearts and minds more fully toward God and God's ways, time to turn and follow and dedicate ourselves anew to walk in God's way – and with one another – and help usher in God's new day. Amen.

#### PRAYER REQUESTS

- Evy May asked me to say “howdy” to you. And I'm very glad to report that she's had her first dose of the vaccine and will be eligible for the second one later this week.
- Thanksgiving for calm in the Capital

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Speak, God, for your servants are listening. Meet us where we are and in what we're doing, and speak your word to us. Plant your call within us that, by your grace, we might know what you would have us do, where you might have us serve, how we can most faithfully share your love, reflect your light, spread the great good news of your presence among us. Speak to us individually, and speak to us collectively. Help us to dream new dreams about the life and witness, ministry and outreach that we can offer as a congregation – sharing our building, serving in our community, extending your welcome and living your love. Spark our imaginations, energize our ministries and lead us into this day with the grace and mercy you would have us share.

We give you thanks for all of the beauty that grows around us, for the joy of winter adventures and the warmth of comfortable homes, for the gift of family and friends and the creative ways we find to be together even while keeping our distance, for the surprise of phone calls and note cards, acts of kindness and gestures of mercy. We are grateful for medical personnel who continue to serve and care for the sick, for all who work to distribute the vaccine, donate food, share their resources, go out of their way to make others' lives better.

We continue to pray for our country, mindful that we have miles to go and much work to do. We are deeply grateful for the calm in Washington DC during this week's festivities, and ask that you lead us in ways that can deepen and expand that calm into real peace. We pray for President Biden, Vice-President Harris, all of our Senators and Congresspersons – for safety and protection, for wisdom and courage, for a willingness to listen deeply and speak truthfully, for a commitment to working together for the well being of all rather than playing politics at other people's expense. Lead us into the days, months and years of this administration, and help us to live together in harmony and respect, kindness and care.

Hear our prayers, O God, spoken and unspoken. And hear us as we join together in the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

## PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

### OFFERING

What an abundance of gifts we have to offer: musical talents, the melody of laughter, the use of our hands in cooking and repairs, painting, wood prints, and jewelry making; the use of our minds in problem solving; curiosity, compassion, patience, urgency; spiritual reservoirs, financial resources, obedience and courage to act. All these gifts, and others which bear our personal marks, are represented in our offering for the work of the church. All of our gifts build up the body of Christ and strengthen our life together. Thank you for doing what you do, being who you are, sharing what you can.

### SONG *“Here I Am, Lord”*

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?

CHORUS: 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.

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? CHORUS:

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? CHORUS:

#### BENEDICTION

There is a people sent from God whose name is Hope. And the people named Hope shall bear witness to the light; despair shall not overcome us.

There is a people sent from God whose name is Love. And the people named Love shall bear witness to the light; hatred shall not overwhelm us.

There is a people sent from God whose name is Life. And the people named Life shall bear witness to the light; death shall not overpower us.