

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

July 5, 2020

SONG “*My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning! And welcome to worship. We may be scattered, but we gather as the United Church of Christ Congregational in Wallace. Whoever you are, wherever you are, you are welcome here as we come together for worship and prayer, as we bring our joys as well as our needs, as we seek God’s word for our lives, gather at Christ’s table to be fed by his grace, and open ourselves to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we can be sent out to share God’s love in the world. Welcome together as the people of God, into the presence of God that we might receive the blessing of God.

As we come together, let me remind you that we will celebrate the Sacrament of Communion later in the service. If you haven’t brought something with you to eat and drink when we gather around the table, I invite you to pause the recording so that you can. It can be a slice of bread and a cup of juice, a donut and a cup of coffee, a cracker and a glass of water – whatever you have available. God will bless whatever you bring as we join together in the shared meal of mercy and love. I am also sending along a PDF of this service, which will allow you to more fully participate in the liturgy and music of our worship. Let us worship God.

CALL TO WORSHIP

In this land of freedom and beauty, let us give thanks to God.

Let us praise the Holy One who created the blue lakes and grassy prairies, the vast desert lands, and the breathtaking mountains of our country.

Let us unite in worship of the Creator who formed all lands and all people,

and who declared, without hesitation, “It is good.”

Come, let us worship God.

(Mary Susan Gast, *Flames of the Spirit*)

CALL TO PRAYER

We gather in God’s name and we claim Christ’s promised presence. My sisters and brothers, not out of dread and fear, but believing in the understanding and forgiveness of God, let us rid ourselves of what we need to carry no longer.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION AND RESTORATION

Eternal Maker of the endless heavens; lowly Christ, befriender of the changing earth; Holy Spirit, wind over the flowing waters: in earth, sea and sky, you are ever present. O hidden mystery, sun behind all suns, soul within all souls, in everything we touch, in everyone we meet, you are there, and we give you thanks. But where we have not touched but trampled you in creation, where we have not honored but avoided you in one another, where we have not received but rejected your goodness, forgive us, and hear our plea for your pardon. Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal, have mercy on us.

Know that God is good, and that to those who are truly sorry, God forgives what is past and enables us to begin again. Once we were no people, now we are God’s people. Once we were beyond God’s mercy; now that mercy has been given to us. So let us live as those who treasure God’s costly

generosity, by safeguarding God's earth, delighting in its people, and loving our Maker to whom be glory for ever.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

(Iona Abbey Worship Book)

SCRIPTURE READING Zechariah 9:9-12

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you;

triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim

and the war-horse from Jerusalem;

and the battle bow shall be cut off,

and he shall command peace to the nations;

his dominion shall be from sea to sea,

and from the River to the ends of the earth.

As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,

I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.

Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;

today I declare that I will restore to you double.

SERMON

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

You know, there are times when you just don't feel like rejoicing. And if you're going to shout, it's not going to be for joy. So to have somebody come along in the midst of those times and tell you to rejoice feels either cruel or insensitive or like they just haven't been paying attention. Like when the 4th of July plans you've been working on and looking forward to for a year get canceled. First some folks backed out because travel didn't seem like a good idea. Then the fireworks were canceled, then the parade. The beach was closed and the barbecue was loudly discouraged. And along comes somebody to tell you to go out there and have the best 4th ever. Rejoice greatly! Wouldn't want to be standing too close when that suggestion was made.

There was a woman who, in the nightmare span of less than two years, was confronted with her husband's death, her son's incarceration for drug possession and her daughter's suicide. The woman was inconsolable, drowning in grief and despairing of her empty future. In the midst of that, her pastor dared to say something to her that was so bold and outrageous that she never forgot it. "Thank God every day," he counseled her, "even and especially when you can scarcely find a reason to do so." When she reflected on it later, she admitted that there were many days when she couldn't bring herself to thank God for anything, but she summoned the courage to try, and in time thanks became a daily practice for her, as well as a source of strength, hope and eventually joy. (Brian Hiortdahl, *The Christian Century*, June 28, 2011, page 20)

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion" was originally spoken by a bold, apparently insensitive prophet to a people mired in the desolate aftermath of exile. Those who had been under Persia's benevolent but powerful thumb had come home to find it a gaunt skeleton of its former glory. God's temple was rubble; the infrastructure had crumbled; the landscape had been ruined by destruction, decay and

disorder. Local politics were unstable, and rebuilding efforts were slow and ineffective in a sagging, unsteady economy. The glorious past was over and done, and the future was bleaker than bleak. Just how much more screechingly off key can you get than a prophet who opens with, Rejoice greatly? Thank God every day!

The bold, insensitive, barely believable counsel of this morning's lesson from Zechariah looks at the future not through the eyes of our present time, but through the eyes of God's future. This is especially difficult when the present is dark and the future is so far beyond the horizon that we can barely make out even the faintest glow of its light. It is especially then that we have to rely on God to send us prophets who can point us toward a reality beyond our reach, who remind us of the cause and the case for faith, the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

As is typically the case with prophets, Zechariah handed his listeners a counter-cultural, upside down kind of answer. They longed for things to be made right, for their nation and their homeland to be restored, and we all know that means resources and strength, might and victory. We all know that, but apparently Zechariah didn't, anymore than did the God who sent him. The people were told to rejoice greatly, but when they looked to the horizon to see the King who was coming to save and lead them, they didn't see a royal and majestic king, seated upon a glimmering steed, surrounded by a mighty army or the chariots of war. What they saw on the horizon was a humble king, riding on a donkey, a work animal much more suited to work the fields and carry people and goods into town than to lead the people in victorious battle. Totally inadequate for the dire straits the people found themselves in, and yet this was what they were given, and this was the promise in which the people were called to rejoice greatly, and for which they were encouraged to thank God every day.

I was struck a few weeks ago to hear the Lutheran preacher Nadia Bolz-Weber talk about her struggle adjusting to life in a pandemic world. Like a lot of us, she accepted her new reality slowly saying, okay, we'll go to our houses for now, but be back in church by Easter. And then she started looking toward Pentecost. Then she focused on June, then September. A festival she was supposed to speak at was postponed until the fall of 2021 and then she heard that singing... well, who knows when we'll be singing together again? She was just a smidgen away from despair when she learned about the Stockdale Paradox. It comes from the experience of James Stockdale, an Admiral in the US Navy who spent 8 years as a POW in a North Vietnamese prison camp. When he was asked who of his fellow prisoners struggled to make it out alive, he replied, "The optimists... they were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart..." The Stockdale Paradox is the ability to hold two opposing but equally true things at once: you must have faith that you will prevail in the end, and at the same time, you must confront the brutal facts of your current reality. Armed with that information, Nadia concluded that she believes we will prevail. She said, "I have faith in the power of human love and creativity and resilience and kindness and humor. And I believe God to be the source of our love and creativity and resilience and kindness and humor, which means there is an eternal supply on which to draw when we just don't have what it takes. Also, I have faith that God is already present in the future we keep pinning our hopes and fears to..." (*The Corners*, "Optimism won't save me...")

Both Nadia's and Zechariah's words call us to not let our present reality determine what we expect of the future, but the other way around: to accept and work with our current reality through the eyes of God's future. To not fall into the optimist trap of making light of the pandemic or hoping it will just go away, or of trying to drown out the protests but of digging deep to find hope, of doing the work of this day in order to get to the future that God has promised us. Zechariah calls us to the humility of a work

horse rather than chariots of war; he urges us to trust that God will indeed set the captives free, while at the same time pleading with us to be prisoners of hope. That despite all evidence to the contrary, we hold fast to the hope and promise and trust of a new day and a restored future. Joan Chittister describes it this way:

Hope is not a matter of waiting for things outside us to get better. It is about getting better inside... it is about allowing ourselves to believe in the future we cannot see... about trusting in God... then we can hope because we have no reason to hope. Hope is what sits by a window and waits for one more dawn, despite the fact that there isn't an ounce of proof in tonight's black, black sky that it can possibly come... Hope is the last great gift to rise out of the grave of despair. (*Feasting on the Word*, page 199)

Daring to look at the future not through the eyes of our present time but through the eyes of God's future, and a willingness to watch for the dawn, even or especially when there is not an ounce of proof that it will ever come... What does that look like? I believe it means taking very seriously the situation we are currently in, rolling up our sleeves and getting to work to tend the wounds, feed the hungry, slow the spread, grieve the dead, bring about the end of brutality and injustice. As prisoners of hope, we can sit in a black, black night that holds no promise of a new day and hold fast to the conviction that the dawn will break. We can thank God every day, even and especially when we can find no reason to. Zechariah speaks God's call to us to ride in humility, to live in trust and to be a prisoner to hope. By the grace and power of God, may it be so. Amen.

PRAYER REQUESTS

For Geoff and Alice, who will be leaving Florida in about a week and driving to Wallace. Prayers that the hand of God goes before them so they can make the trek safely.

Evy May asked to be remembered to everyone

Dallas has requested prayers for Michelle Marie, a friend of her daughter's, facing a recurrence of breast cancer

For Alice and Ben's niece, Nicole, who is in Houston and at risk of infection by the virus

As we approach our time of prayer on this July 4th weekend, I invite you to sing a couple of verses of "*America, the Beautiful*" with me, one now and one later, as we lift up our country in prayer.

O beautiful for spacious skies, For amber waves of grain,

For purple mountain majesties Above the fruited plain!

America! America! God shed full grace on thee,

And crown thy good with servanthood From sea to shining sea!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, as we celebrate the 244th birthday of our country, we give you thanks for all that is good and exemplary about our land and our life together. We celebrate the broad expanse of territory that ranges from rocky coast land and sandy beaches to everglades and glaciers, from potato fields and redwood forests to desert cactus and vast underground reserves of minerals and gems. We give thanks for our founders who dared to imagine the bold experiment that is democracy, and a life together organized around such principles as equality, inalienable rights, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We give thanks for a land where people of all faiths and no faith can come together as one; for the rich heritage that is ours because immigrants from all over the world made their home here, found shelter and sought opportunity, bringing traditions and cultures with them, adding color and spice, dance and song for all to enjoy. We celebrate the notion that each one has a voice and a vote, that together – north, south, east and west, rich and poor, young and old, skilled with the hands as well as the mind, artist and laborer, scientist and farmer, miner and engineer, doctor and teacher – together, we become a people. And together we care for each other, volunteer our time, give of our selves, share what we have.

Loving and holy God, there is so much for which we are thankful and by which we are blessed. And at the same time, it is excruciatingly clear to us that all is not well in our country, and so we come to you in search of healing and wisdom, courage and compassion. We pray for the divisions that separate us from each other, for rhetoric that erects walls and creates camps, for a tendency to point fingers and assign blame rather than sit together and create new alternatives. We confess our reticence to acknowledge the consequences of our actions on others, or the inclination to care; our longing for quick fixes and easy answers and our reluctance to do the hard work of building cooperation and fostering reconciliation, waiting out a virus and healing centuries old wounds of racism. Teach us when to encourage the patience to temporarily set our rights aside to protect the health and well-being of others, and when to express an impatience that says no in the presence of racism and cruelty. Open our ears and hearts to listen eagerly to another person's story, and tell us when to open our mouths and speak a word of truth. Pour out your wisdom and courage on those in positions of leadership that they might truly lead. Move among us that each of us and all of us may come to see the role we can play, the difference we can make, especially when guided and empowered by you.

O beautiful for pilgrim feet, Whose stern impassioned stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat Across the wilderness!
America! America! God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self control, Thy liberty in law!

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

Hear us as we join our hearts and voices in the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

OFFERING

We come again to the time of the offering. Last Sunday, I introduced you to the Camp Campaign that our Conference is holding as a way to help our camps deal with the consequences of the pandemic. Both N-Sid-Sen on the shores of Lake Coeur d'Alene and Pilgrim Firs on the Olympic Peninsula have had to cancel their spring, summer and fall activities out of a concern for the health and well-being of those who were planning to participate in their programs, and so individuals, churches and other organizations that use the camps are working together to help bridge the gap. As I told you in my email, our church has voted to send the \$200 we budgeted for camp scholarships; and I'm glad to report that an additional 4 gifts were received from members of the congregation this week. Thank you to those who have given, and a reminder to others of you who may be interested that gifts can still be made through the church; just mark you gift clearly for N-Sid-Sen or the camps if you'd like it split between the two.

Also, an ongoing word of appreciation and reminder that your gifts to our church are always gratefully received. Ben continues to find some gifts to deposit every week when we check the church mail, but it's also fair to say that deposits are smaller than in previous times and less than is needed to meet our expenses. We welcome your support of our life and ministry together.

SACRAMENT OF COMMUNION

Song "Eat this bread"

Eat this bread, drink this up, come to me and never be hungry.

Eat this bread, drink this cup, trust in me and you will not thirst.

Invitation

We meet once again at our separate tables, and as we come together, for this moment they are not our tables. In this moment, they belong to Jesus.

It was at table that he met people, heard their stories and shared his. It was at table that he deepened his friendship with poor folks and prostitutes, the business class and puzzled bystanders. It was at table that he shared profound insights into who God is and what God wants.

And it was at table, with bread and cup, that he initiated the sacrament we now celebrate.

Jesus joins us now at our tables, and encourages us to leave behind any baggage of arrogance or unworthiness. Do not think, 'This is not for me.' Think rather of Jesus saying, 'I am for you.' and accept his invitation to be the friend he cherishes and longs to feed.

The story

Long before our buildings were erected, in open spaces and hard places, people heard of how on the night of his arrest, and aware of what lay ahead of him, Jesus sat at supper with his friends.

During the meal, he took a piece of bread, blessed and broke it and said to his disciples, 'This is my body, given for you.'

Later in the meal he took a cup of wine, saying, 'In this cup is the new relationship with God made possible because of my death. Drink it, all of you. I will not drink wine again until I do so in the coming kingdom of God.'

So we take our bread and our cups and offer them to God for blessing, so that through them the goodness of God may bless, enrich and enlighten us.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

God be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to God.

Let us give thanks to God Most High.

It is right to give God thanks and praise.

For you, Creator God, the valleys laugh and sing, and the trees of the field clap their hands. Your earth summons us to break silence and be one with the song of creation.

We give you thanks and praise.

For you, God of all, the church in its myriad forms and places and countless languages honors its Savior. Millions upon millions invite us to be one with them in the drama of worship.

We give you thanks and praise.

In heaven, beyond our seeing, the angels and saints are caught up in song. And those we have loved and lost are part of that great company. They call us to be one with the harmony of heaven.

We give you thanks and praise.

So gladly we join our voices to those of earth, sea and sky, in the universal hymn of praise which echoes through time and eternity.

Holy, holy, holy God of love and majesty, the whole universe speaks of your glory, O God Most High. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God! Hosanna in the highest!

Come now, O Christ, bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, forever bound to us in promise and mystery; breathe your Spirit on us and on our bread and cups. Let them become, for us, the seal and sign of your love healing, redeeming, making us whole.

And through them, let us together become, for you, your body, loving the world as God loves, serving its people as God wills and always being transformed until we and all humanity resemble the One whose food we now share.

Let us at our many tables receive the gift of God, blessed, broken and shared: the Bread of Heaven.

Jesus meets us in the Bread we share.

Let us at our many tables receive the gift of God, blessed, poured out and shared: the Cup of Blessing.

Jesus meets us in the Cup we share.

Prayer of Thanksgiving (in unison)

Savior, Jesus Christ, you have put your life into our hands; now we put our lives into yours. Take us, renew and remake us. What we have been is past; what we shall be, through you, still awaits us. Lead us on. Take us with you. Amen.

(Iona Abbey Worship Book)

BENEDICTION

So now we leave this time of worship. And while so much of the road ahead is uncertain, the path constantly changing, we know some things that are as solid and sure as the ground beneath our feet, and the sky above our heads.

We know God is love.

We know Christ's light endures.

We know the Holy Spirit is here, found in the space between all things, closer to us than our next breath, binding us to each other, until we meet we again,

Go in peace. Amen.

(Rev. Nora Vedress, Calvary United Church in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Canada)