

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

September 27, 2020

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

SONG “*For the Beauty of the Earth*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning! And welcome again to worship. As fall arrives, the rains return and water the earth, gardens offer up their latest and last gifts of the season, colors change and days shorten, it is good to gather together again for worship and prayer in the presence of God. It’s good to be reminded of the ongoing ways that we are bound together as the people of God, held together in the hand of God, knit together as the Body of Christ. May the Spirit of God join our hearts and minds as one as we join in this time of worshipping God.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Way beyond all journeying, Truth behind all mystery, Life within all living:

We praise you.

Salve for every soreness, mender of every brokenness, midwife of a better future:

We praise you.

Ground of all being, judge of all nations, conscience of the universe:

We praise you.

Maker, Redeemer, confessor, companion, befriender, inspirer, God beyond all names:

We praise you. (A Wee Worship Book, Fifth Incarnation, Wild Good Worship Group)

SONG “*O God, Our Help in Ages Past*”

O God, our help in ages past, Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast, And our eternal home!

Under the shadow of Thy throne Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone, And our defense is sure.

Before the hills in order stood, Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting Thou art God, To endless years the same.

OPENING PRAYER

Let us pray:

From before the world began and after the end of eternity, you are God. From the sea bursting from its womb to the wind ceasing from its chase, you are God. In the vastness of the universe and the forgotten corners of our hearts, you are God.

You are our God and we bless you.

Because the world is beautiful, and beauty is a tender thing, and we are caretakers of creation,

We need you, God.

Because human knowledge seems endless, the world is our oyster and we do not know what we do not know,

We need you God.

Because we can live without you and are free to go against you and could worship our wisdom alone,

We need you, God.

Because you came among us and sat beside us and heard us speak and saw us ignore you and healed our pain and let us wound you and loved us to the end and triumphed over all our hatred,

We need you, God.

Because you, not we, are God,

We need you, God.

Pause

Listen, for the God who created us says: “Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name: you are mine. You are precious to me. I love you. I honor you. I am with you.”

Pause

So we respond:

Maker of all, we are your children, the creatures of your kindness, the bearers of your image. This day, we will walk by your light, follow your Son, and live by your Spirit. This day, we will not offer to you offerings that cost us nothing. For this is the day that the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.
(A Wee Worship Book)

SCRIPTURE READING Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” The LORD said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

SERMON

It's true: I've been known to call them a bunch of whiny malcontents. Do you blame me? Let me know if you think I'm being unfair. I totally understand that being on the road and living out of a suitcase can get old. It's one thing to set out on an adventure to wander your way around the continent seeing sights you haven't seen before; if all goes smoothly, it can be the experience of a lifetime, and you may even decide to stay out longer than originally planned. On the other hand, I can tell you from personal experience that if you've exited one house expecting to settle in another, nicer house the next week, six weeks of living out of a suitcase can get old. Fast. And when there's no end in sight, it gets even older faster. I understand that. But they seem to have forgotten what the old place was like, and how desperate they were to get away. And they clearly have no idea how long this little trek across the desert is going to take. If they did, they'd admit that their only choice is to just hunker down and keep their complaints to themselves. It's hard to tell how long they've been out, but from where I sit, it is definitely time to get a grip. They, on the other hand, don't seem inclined to admit that.

What they know is that the party's over, and has been for awhile. The suffering of slavery and the creepy crawly mess of the plagues is well behind them. The drama of the parting of the Red Sea is yesterday's news, and Miriam's tambourine has long since stopped echoing off the mountains. They've been out here wandering their way around in the relentless heat of the endless desert sands long enough to begin to wonder if they've been sold a bill of goods. Three days into the wilderness of Shur and

there was no water; a little further, and there was water but it was too bitter to drink. They leveled some serious complaints in Moses' direction, who apparently took it up with God; some wood was added to the water, the bitter became sweet and all was well. Crisis one averted, and followed by a little respite in Elim beside twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees. That worked wonders in soothing frayed nerves, so they got back on the road and struck out again.

At the end of six weeks, while they were in the wilderness of Sin, the food supplies ran out and things turned really nasty. Without a glimmer of Harvest Foods or Walmart, a food truck or mini-mart anywhere, they were hungry, scared about their options and more than a little anxious to know if there was a game plan. Their minds tricked them into longing for the good old days of familiarity and comfort, while blocking out the brutality of slavery and dead babies floating in the Nile River. We know they were lying to themselves, but the people truly believed that Egypt had been better than this rotten, arid desert in which they found themselves. They weren't at all sure what they'd gotten themselves in to, so they murmured, whined, fussed, and grumbled up a storm. A leadership summit between Moses, Aaron and God resulted in a plan: every night, you shall eat the quail that the winds force out of the sky and down to our tables. And in the morning, when the fog lifts, you will find a fine flaky substance covering the ground. You can gather up enough for the day and let that be your supply of bread. Don't try to accumulate a stockpile or leftovers for your bedtime snack; just collect enough for the day, and trust that there will be more tomorrow.

From there, they traveled on and while the writer is vague about how much time passed, I'd be pretty sure the people knew. When you're on the kind of endless trek they were on, you keep a running count of how long it's been, something a little more concrete than seems-like-forever. When they set up camp in Rephidim, they took three looks around and went back to Moses – again – and made their needs clear: give us water to drink! When Moses asked why they were always quarreling with him, they made it very clear that without water, the whole thing was off. And then they started back in on the same old complaint: why did you bring us out of Egypt and out here to this empty wasteland of a desert, just to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?

I don't mean to sound harsh. They weren't asking for luxuries or cushy comforts. If they were going to survive the desert heat, they needed water – as they had needed food. They were expressing valid concerns about basic necessities absolutely essential to life, but I tend to suspect their volume and tone grew more intense each time they brought them to Moses. They were tired, they were scared, they were sick and tired of being out of control and vulnerable. No, in their rational minds they knew they didn't want to go back to Egypt. Not for a minute. But something familiar would have been nice, something they could recognize and count on at the end of the day, instead of this vast, endless string of days where one stretched into another. They were anxious and weary and so very done with living in limbo land for some undefined amount of time, headed for who knows where. Everything about them screamed the question that echoes at the end of our reading: Is the Lord among us or not?

Is the Lord among us or not? Have you ever asked that question? Do you remember the first time you asked it? The most recent time? It's a question that we may or may not say out loud, but can get triggered by any number of experiences: a time when circumstances seemed dire, when hope was all but lost, and we were filled with fear: 'You have cancer.' 'I never loved you anyway.' 'No one will believe you.' 'You have thirty days to vacate the premises.' Or any number of the crazy, unthinkable dynamics we're currently clawing our way through, be it Covid cautions and restrictions, or the risks and dangers of sending children to school or keeping them home, the financial chaos triggered by closed businesses and layoffs and lack of benefits; unprecedented wildfire and hurricane seasons, racial tensions and outrage, a campaign season that appears to threaten the very fabric of our nation. Need I

go on? Whether or not we've wondered, are there any of us who don't understand why others might wonder if indeed God is still among us? Or if God has turned away and left us to fend for ourselves?

The questions and feelings are logical and purely understandable, so if we recognize them in ourselves or in others, that's okay. Be gentle with them. One of the pieces of this time of online worship that I appreciate is that fact that every Sunday, one of my best friends and I share our videos with each other. It's a gift to have a chance to hear anyone else preach, but it's especially important to me right now, to have that connection with this friend. A couple of weeks ago, one of the elderly members of her congregation offered the pastoral prayer and I was blown away by the honesty of her words: "... God, I don't know about others gathered with me this morning, but my generation was taught to be polite to you, God; it's not our place to scold you or demand your attention. But we learn from the book of Psalms that you welcome our honesty and forthrightness. You don't take it personally, but like we would say to a pouting child: it's okay, I understand, so you respond to us. And so God I vent. We've about had it with this virus; our patience is running short. We want back our lost freedoms and we want back our sense of control. And we want the restraints lifted. Our list of Covid disappointments is maddeningly and increasingly long. There God, I've said it. And hopefully I've calmed down enough to know that you do understand..." (Betty Edson, Bethany UCC, Randolph VT, 9/13/20) And from there, she went on to wonder how they can help, who needs care, where we go from here. It's not the same as wondering if God is still among us, but it's honest and forthright, and I believe that's fine. God hears us, meets us, receives us and cares for us.

Moses took the complaints of the people and their need for water to God, and God responded with patience and mercy, love and water. God told Moses to take the same staff he had used to part the waters of the Nile, and to go on ahead of the people. And God said, I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock and you will have water. Walter Brueggemann describes the gift this way: "Israel can remember not only that water was given by God, but remembers how it was given. Like blood from a turnip, like a purse from the ear of a sow, water from rock, food from hunger, life from death, joy from sorrow, Yes from No, well-being from anxiety. The story does not explain, any more than we explain Easter after Friday... And the reason we do not explain it is that we are looking to God, the one who holds all circumstances and all emergencies, all possibilities and all needs and all gifts in God's own hand, the one who says 'yes'. The story is about God's inexplicable capacity to do well-being in a world that has been shut down. Yes even in wilderness,... yes from rock, yes to thirst. Yes to us, yes to the world, the story is about being dazzled beyond every explanation. Yes, Yes, Yes! (*Inscribing the Text*, page 139)

The wilderness is never an easy place to be. The people were scared and hungry, anxious and thirsty. Nothing in their emotional world offered them the ability to confirm that God was present with them. But God met them there in the wilderness and in their anxiety. God offered them the water they needed for life, and helped them to relax and to remember. Once they were breathing again, they could recall that it was God who brought them out of Egypt, led them through the waters of the Red Sea, sweetened the water in the wilderness of Shur, gave them manna and quail in the wilderness of Sin and provided water from the rock in Rephidim. It was up to them to trust that God would continue with them as surely as God had brought them this far.

The wilderness in which we find ourselves these days is not an easy place to be either, but God meets us there as surely as God met Moses and his entourage in Rephidim. God provides for us and meets our needs. God helps us to remember all that we have been carried through, the ways we have been loved and cared for, sheltered and embraced. God says yes to us, and yes to the world, and yes to life. Let us, by grace, say yes to God. Amen.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Nancy is having hip replacement surgery on Monday.

Pray for our democracy as it is in peril

For a second surgery on Dena's left eye on Oct 1. May it be successful so she can see again out of that eye

Continued healing for Christi's nephew Rhayman

Continued thanksgiving for all firefighters. Police, and first responders....continued safety for their well being as they do their jobs.

Continued prayers for students going back to school and all the transitioning that is going on with them and their parents.

Prayers of appreciation for all Alice and Ben do for our church and church family.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God, You are a God of compassion and love. Time after time we have experienced your care and provision. Time after time You've answered our prayers and met our needs— often in ways we could never have dreamed possible. We praise You for Your faithful love toward us.

Because we have known Your love, we come to You with confidence, offering our prayers for the world that You love.

We see so much pain and suffering, so much violence and poverty and despair. It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the needs around us. But we continue to bring our prayers to You in faith, because we know that nothing is impossible for You. You are the God who rained down bread from heaven, and made water flow from a rock in the desert; the God who resurrected Jesus Christ from the dead, and who brings new life and hope to all who believe. For You, all things are possible. Hear our prayers.

We pray for those suffering the effects of recent natural disasters: the wildfires that have burned and continue to consume homes and communities, trees and forests in the west, for the onslaught of hurricanes and tropical storms in the Gulf Coast, in Puerto Rico and throughout the Atlantic, for flooding and record heat, droughts and wind storms across the land. Because nothing is impossible for You, O God, **hear our prayer, and in Your love, answer.**

We pray for all who are involved in education: teachers, administrators, staff members, custodians and bus drivers; for students of all ages, and families who are doing the best they can to balance too many needs. We pray for the ability to learn and grow, to teach and encourage, to stay safe and prosper. Because nothing is impossible for You, O God, **hear our prayer, and in Your love, answer.**

We pray for the regions of our country and of our world caught up in violence and threats of violence: for protests that are too often interrupted by acts of violence, for shootings on streets and in homes, in confrontations and disagreements, for acts of terrorism and fear, heartbreak and hatred, for a country and an election that feel poised for harm and unrest, for a free and fair election, the ability and willingness to make decisions, to lead the nation, to work together for the common good. Because nothing is impossible for You, O God, **hear our prayer, and in Your love, answer.**

We pray for those who live with serious illness, for Nancy, Dena and all those facing surgery, those with chronic pain, those without access to proper medical care, those who are vulnerable to, battling or struggling to recover from Covid, those for whom treatment is no longer an option. Because nothing is impossible for You, O God, **hear our prayer, and in Your love, answer.**

Merciful God, You sent Your Son, Jesus Christ, to show us a different way to live— the way of deep humility and obedience. You've called us to love one another, and to work together with one heart and

mind, balancing our needs with the needs of those around us. Give us courage to follow faithfully, and with integrity— with actions that bear witness to the words we speak, and worship that overflows into our daily tasks and relationships— so that our lives will bring glory and honor to You, our Maker, Redeemer and Comforter. Hear us as we join in the prayer your Son taught us, saying: **Our Father...**
(revised from re: Worship.blogspot.com, Proper 21A)

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

Once again, I want to say thank you to you for all of the ways that you give of yourselves for the sake of others. Thank you for your gifts of money to support our life together as a congregation. We received another gift this week to One Great Hour of Sharing, so our gift to that vital ministry in the United Church of Christ continues to grow, so thank you for that. Thank you for your acts of kindness and compassion, generosity and welcome, patience and courage. Thank you for notes of gratitude and care, for phone calls and offers to help, for a readiness to run errands and deliver food, tend flowers and rake leaves. Thank you for loving God and your neighbor, this community and yourself. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you!

SONG “*Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah*”

Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah, Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but Thou art mighty; Hold me with Thy powerful hand;
Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven, Feed me till I want no more. Feed me till I want no more.

When I tread the verge of Jordan, Bid my anxious fears subside;
Bear me through the swelling current, Land me safe on Canaan’s side;
Songs of praises, songs of praises I will ever give to Thee, I will ever give to Thee.

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)