

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

February 21, 2021

First Sunday in Lent

PRELUDE “*This Is My Father’s World*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends. And welcome to Lent. Lent is the 40 day period between Ash Wednesday and Easter, when we watch Jesus’ steady progress toward the cross while also reflecting on our own faithfulness, or lack thereof. In case you go to the calendar, count the days and come up with 46, let me spare you the trip back to ask what that’s about. When the early church moved our day of worship from the Jewish Sabbath on Saturday to Sunday, the day of the resurrection, it was so that we could celebrate every Sunday as a “Little Easter”. Then they decided that you can’t appropriately observe Lent and Easter on the same days, so the season of Lent is actually 40 days plus Sundays. One more tidbit relates to the word “Lent”, which is an old English word for lengthen, as in the days lengthening as spring approaches. Interesting that we would finally be living with real winter about the time a season that celebrates spring begins. We live now with a clear and visible reminder that, despite all evidence to the contrary, spring is coming. Despite all evidence to the contrary, there is always reason to hope and trust where God is concerned. And so, we gather to worship God.

CALL TO WORSHIP

We come, so God might open our eyes,

that we may discover the wonders surrounding us;

that we may embrace the joy deep within us.

We gather, so Christ might widen our hearts,

that we may hear the sounds of brokenness around us;

that we may sing the melodies of hope.

We are here, so the Spirit might teach us the ways of humility,

that we may walk that street named Enduring Love;

that we may wait at the corner called Faithfulness. (Thom M. Shuman, *When the Broken Gather*)

SONG “*Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*”

Come, thou fount of every blessing, Tune my heart to sing thy grace;

Streams of mercy, never ceasing, Call for songs of loudest praise.

Teach me some melodious sonnet, Sung by flaming tongues above;

Praise the mount, I’m fixed upon it – Mount of God’s redeeming love.

Hither to thy love has blest me; Thou hast brought me to this place;

And I know thy hand will bring me Safely home by thy good grace.

Jesus sought me when a stranger, Wandering from the fold of God;

He, to rescue me from danger, Bought me with his precious blood.

O to grace how great a debtor Daily I’m constrained to be!

Let thy goodness, like a fetter, Bind my wandering heart to thee:

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love;

Here’s my heart, O take and seal it; Seal it for thy courts above.

CALL TO RECONCILIATION

God takes our broken promises and turns them into vows of faithfulness. God takes our biggest failings and shapes lives of service. God listens to our prayers of confession and changes them into songs of mercy. Let us come to the One who pours forgiveness into our lives, praying:

PRAYER FOR FORGIVENESS (in unison)

We admit we are hesitant to walk to Jerusalem and beyond with you, God of Glory. In a world where we worry about tomorrow before enjoying today, we race by your moments of silence, of learning. In that flood of worries, which can overwhelm us, we may miss that assurance that you have not cut us off from your grace. In the deserts of our desires, we may ignore that feast of hope, of joy, of life you offer to us.

Forgive us and have mercy on us, Gentle Guardian of our souls. In humility, may we offer our lives to others. In love, may we share your grace with everyone we meet. In hope, may we wait for you all our days, as you come to us in the life and joy of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Silence is kept.

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

In this place we find God's word, God's way, God's love, God's forgiveness. What more do we need to sustain us as we continue as pilgrims along the Way?

In every wilderness, on every road; in every moment, in every life; in every journey, in every heart, we receive the daily bread we need – God's hope, God's mercy, God's joy. Thanks be to God, we are forgiven. Amen.
(Thom M. Shuman, *When the Broken Gather*)

SCRIPTURE READING Genesis 9:8-17

Christi Theilman

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

SERMON

I wouldn't have thought of God as someone who needed help remembering things. The rest of us, yes. We need all kinds of help. And all those jokes about getting older and not being able to remember why we went downstairs, to the garage or the bedroom aren't nearly as funny as they used to be. I don't know that I've ever tied a string around my finger as a prompt – I'd probably forget what it was supposed to prompt. But I do know how to make lists and leave notes, and that it's a good idea to put all of the things I want to take with me beside my car keys; that dramatically increases the chances that I'll get out of the house with all of it, and not have to come back 3 or 4 times before I really go. But that's me. And maybe some of you. But God? I don't see it. Why would God need to put a rainbow in the sky as a reminder? And of what?

As I read the story of the flood, and of Noah and the ark, it seems to me that remembering is the underlying foundation for a whole lot of what's going on. Back in chapter 6, we're told that God looked around at humankind and was overwhelmed at the wickedness and evil that were flourishing everywhere. God remembered all of the beauty and promise that overflowed the days of creation, the longing desire, once the mountains and mole hills, trees and plants, animals, fishes and birds were created, to make humans in the same image as God; creatures that could care for the rest of creation but also like each other, live in harmony with each other and in relationship with God. God had such hopes for all that could come from the wonderful, generous, exquisite work of creation, but now all God could find was evil and wickedness, corruption and violence – and it broke God's heart. In the pain and grief of it all, God decided to wipe it out and start over – but not from scratch. There was this one man, Noah, who caught God's attention, so God decided to use him and his family, and work from there.

Noah didn't have a clue what he was doing, but he took notes and followed the instructions as they were handed down, and board by board, cubit by cubit, nail by nail, the ark was built. And then populated with animals and birds and creeping things, as well as food and fresh water supplies. No more had they gotten everyone on board and the hatch nailed closed than it started to rain. Hard and long and without stopping for days and weeks, maybe months depending on which part of the story you read, until they began to wonder if it would ever stop raining. The waters rose high enough and rolled angrily enough that it was utterly clear that any living creature that hadn't made it onto the boat was no longer living. The mountains and hills, the towns and cities, everything was under water – with the exception of this one boat packed to the gills with all manner of lumbering, squawking, mooing, barking and buzzing creatures. At which point, the text tells us that God remembered Noah, and set to work getting things dried out.

It took awhile, but finally everyone was released from the boat. The first thing Noah did on dry land was build an altar to God and begin to worship. When God smelled the fire and the offerings Noah had made, then and there God pledged never again: never again will I curse the ground because of humans, never again will I destroy every living creature as I have done. Never again. And it wasn't because God had visions and expectations that the people had finally learned their lessons and would never again make such a mess of things. Quite the opposite: it was very clear that evil still lurked in the human heart. Nevertheless, God pledged never again because that kind of violence and destruction is not who God is, not how God wants to relate to the people who were made in God's image. God would have to find another way to deal with the mess that people could make of the world because God was never again going to cause this kind of destruction.

Today's passage comes at the end of all of that, when God assembles Noah and his sons and lays out for them the first covenant in the Bible, and it's a totally one-sided covenant. God says, this is what I'm promising to you and your descendants, and to every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, every animal that came out of the ark with you. I establish my covenant with every last one of you that never again will I seek to destroy the earth by flood or in any other way. And as a sign of this covenant I'm placing my bow in the sky. Countless scholars make it very clear that the bow God is mounting in the sky is the warrior's bow. In this covenant, God is renouncing violence and hanging up the weapon of war, because it will never again be put to use. God pledges that whenever clouds cover the earth and the bow is visible in the sky, God will see it and remember the everlasting covenant that now stands between God and all people and every living creature of all flesh.

As I read this story, I don't think that God put the bow in the sky in order to make sure God remembers that first covenant. I don't for a minute believe that God is worried about getting triggered by this evil and corrupt human race, so that God needs something to help rein God in before another explosion is launched. I hear it as the remembering of grief. If the flood first happened because the violence and

sinfulness broke God's heart, this sign is set in place as a marker of God's turning point: God's choice of peace instead of war, of salvation over against destruction, of mercy instead of annihilation. God established an everlasting and universal covenant of peace with all humanity. There's no condition or prerequisite: this covenant does not depend on our good behavior, but only on God's generosity and willingness to forgive.

I think it's important to pause here and say what I'm often thinking but don't get around to saying. I don't read this story as journalism or a history lesson, but as a story that holds a mountain of truth – which is different from fact. It seems like no small amount of hyperbole to imagine one man, even with the help of his three sons, building a ship the size of a football field. And if you read the story carefully, in one place we're told that all of the animals came on two by two; in the next place we're told it was seven pairs of each. In one place we read of 40 days, but in another it names 150 days. This part of the book of Genesis is actually made up of two different strands of story that have been woven together into one. It's not that they couldn't have edited them apart and chosen one version over the other; it's that they chose not to, but instead to let them stand for the truths this story tells about God, about humanity, about the rest of creation and all of the living creatures on the earth and our relationships with each other. About the chaos that swirls around us, all too often stirred up by the willful disobedience of humanity. And about the God who is loving and faithful, trustworthy and gracious, peaceful and patient in the midst of all of the chaos.

It's painful to me to read a section near the end of Genesis 8, where the writer tells us that God said that the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth. I want to argue and protest that we're better than that, that there's good and potential for loving in every heart, that we're made in God's image after all. And I have to admit that I recognize the chaos in our times every bit as much as in the times of Noah. I recognize the corruption and violence, the meanness and self-absorption, the fear and apathy that drive far too many people. I'm struck by the ways in which this text repeatedly points to the presence and the inclusion of every living creature on the face of the earth, and I think about the extinction rate and list of endangered species and the ways in which we're pursuing our own interests at the expense of creation and creatures. And I end up silenced – for at least a moment. I still believe in the potential for good and love in every human being, but I also know we don't always live up to that potential. I know how utterly dependent we are on the mercy of God, and how eternally grateful I am for God's patience and presence, mercy and grace.

As tempted as I am to point fingers at other people and their terrible ways, it seems to me that in the season of Lent it is more faithful to begin by looking at my own heart, and the places where I can seek to draw closer to God. I was struck by the words of a UCC pastor, Jane Anne Ferguson, who wrote: "...It's telling that we want (children) to know that, even in the midst of the worst chaos, God will never forget them. But why relegate this message to the nursery...? Why not let the rainbow colors emanate from the nursery... into worship and committee meetings... into choir rehearsals and church potlucks?

"What an extraordinary promise for the body of Christ! Taken seriously and intentionally, it would profoundly change a faith community. Not into a utopia, but into a place where people were willing to let their hearts be remade in the image of God's heart; a place where people would let their hearts be broken open, with grief over their own hard-heartedness and the hard-heartedness of this world and its chaos. And when their hearts were broken open the people would be moved to partner with their Creator through patient, forgiving, loving and prophetic action for the renewal of all creation."
(*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2, pages 28, 30*)

God put the rainbow in the sky with a pledge to remember God's commitment to never again seek to destroy us or the world, to be with us in times of chaos and confusion, to seek out relationship with us, to accompany us in love and forgiveness, mercy and compassion, patience and peace. That's a covenant

for which I am deeply and eternally grateful. What if all of us together, and each of us on our own, also let the rainbow call to us to offer up our hearts so they can be remade in the image of God's heart?

PRAYER REQUESTS

Prayers for the people in Texas, the southern regions that have been in the ice, snow, cold temps....with no heat....water...food. Those recovering from the tornados in North Carolina and Arkansas.

Prayers for continued moisture in any form here in the northwest to help prevent a very dry and fire laden summer.

Continued prayers for our country and leaders. Prayers that the vaccine will continue to get out to the people.... and that people will not let their guards down with disregarding practices of masking and social distances.

Prayers for the school teachers and students as they return to in person schooling.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and Loving God, we marvel at the generous and unceasing ways you reach to us in love. You created us in your image, and even when we mar that image with violence and corruption, or dull it with apathy and disinterest, fatigue and fear, you continue to search us out and walk with us in love. Thank you for your willingness to forgive and heal, to cleanse and restore, to watch and wait until we are ready to turn back toward you and once again begin to walk the way of love. You know us, and you know the contents of our hearts, what holds us back and weighs us down; what keeps us from trusting you, serving you, following you in faith. Strengthen and bless, nourish and heal, forgive and transform; lead us along the path of love and service; remake our hearts in the image of your heart.

We pray, O God, for our community and for our country. For all those, here and miles away, who are struggling with the reality of winter – increased fuel bills, the difficulty of travel, an increased sense of isolation. We especially pray for the parts of our country that have been ravaged by severe winter storms, record breaking temperatures, layers of ice, devastating tornadoes. We pray for the people of Texas, and especially Bruce and his family; for the people of North Carolina and Arkansas; for all who are in search of shelter, safe drinking water, a warm bowl of food. We give thanks for the hands and minds working together to deliver the vaccine into millions of arms around this country, and ask that that effort not be delayed long by the winter storms. As we begin to feel a sense of relief at decreasing numbers of new cases, hospitalizations and deaths alongside increasing numbers of those vaccinated, let us not breathe too great a sigh of relief. Keep us vigilant and careful, considerate of others, and doing our part to slow the spread. We pray too for teachers and school staffs, for students and parents, for the struggle to get back to school, to stay safe and to learn. Bless them all, and show us the best way to protect and promote the education we value so dearly.

Walk with us, Holy God, through these days of turmoil and chaos; and help us to walk with you and with all of our neighbors in love. Lead us in the paths of peace and kindness; show us your vision of what our life together on this planet could look like; and guide us along the road that you would have us walk. Hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken. And hear us as we join together in the prayer Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

Psalm 25:10 reminds us, "All the paths of God are steadfast love and faithfulness for those who keep God's covenant and decrees." Our church's ministries are extensions of God's love and faithfulness, and they're made possible through your generous gifts of time, energy, and money. Whenever you contribute to the church or other organizations in Christ's name, when you give of yourselves by

volunteering at the food bank or buying a bag of groceries for them at Harvest Foods or Steins, when you offer a ride to a neighbor, call someone you know is lonely, or take time to be a kind to a stranger, you extend God's love and faithfulness into the community and the world. With love let us offer our gifts to God, confident that God will receive our lives and our gifts as a bounty and a blessing to you, our church, and the world. Amen.

SONG *"There's a Wideness in God's Mercy"*

There's a wideness in God's mercy Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in his justice Which is more than liberty.

For the love of God is broader Than the measure of our minds;
Ad the heart of the Eternal Is most wonderfully kind.

If our love were but more simple We should take God at his word,
And our lives would be all sunshine In the sweetness of our Lord.

BENEDICTION

And now go forth into the world in joy. Be of good courage. Hold fast to that which is good. Render to no one evil for evil. Support the weak, strengthen the fainthearted, help the afflicted, honor all people. Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. And the blessing of God Almighty, the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, rest and abide with us all this day and forevermore. Amen.