

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

March 21, 2021

Fifth Sunday in Lent

PRELUDE “*When Morning Gilds the Skies*”

GREETINGS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends! And welcome to worship. It’s good to gather together in the presence of God, in the confidence that God’s Spirit continues to knit us together as one body, one community of faith, one part of the Body of Christ. Thank you for joining us in this time of worship and prayer.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Each day is a gift from God,

each moment is that opportunity to reach out in service to all creation.

Each day is a reminder of the new covenant:

not written on stone tablets easily broken, but inscribed on our hearts filled with joy and hope.

Each day we draw closer to God:

who has forgotten more than we will ever learn; who has forgiven us more than we will ever acknowledge.

(Thom M. Shuman, *Where the Broken Gather*)

SONG “*Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee*”

Joyful joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love;

Hearts unfold like flowers before thee, Opening to the sun above.

Melt the clouds of sin and sadness, Drive the dark of doubt away;

Giver of immortal gladness, Fill us with the light of day.

Thou are giving and forgiving, Ever blessing, ever blest,

Well-spring of the joy of living, Ocean depth of happy rest!

Thou our Father, Christ our brother, All who live in love are thine;

Teach us how to love each other, Lift us to the joy divine.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (in unison)

Covenant-making God, you use every possible means to reach us, breathing your Spirit in us, calling us by name, showing us symbols of your promise, offering us a new way of life. We confess that our hearts are hardened. We choose certainty over faith, anxiety over courage, independence over compassion. We turn our eyes from our neighbors in need, and from stories of despair, and from pleas for peace, and from anything that might bring tears to our eyes, for we prefer our own comfort. We get caught up in our own needs and desires, and forget you have made us to be your people, together. Engrave your word on our hard hearts again, O God. Then break them open for what breaks yours, that your word might sink in and become a part of us, so we might truly live as if you are our God and we are your people. We pray in the name of the One whose love breaks all bounds, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Rev. Terri Peterson, posted on *LiturgyLink*)

ASSURANCE OF GRACE

Our God is a persistently gracious God, at work among us and within us, writing on our hearts, reaching to us in covenantal faithfulness, walking with us in life and in love. My friends, believe the good news of the Gospel: in Jesus Christ, we are a beloved and forgiven people. Thanks be to God.

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

SERMON

Pie in the sky? Or a promise to stake your life on? You tell me. How does this text sound to you? I love it. It’s one of my favorites. One of those Old Testament prophetic promises that gives me hope and makes me feel all tucked away, safe and warm, protected from anything harsh or threatening. One of those passages that, if you try to tell me the Old Testament God is mean and vengeful while the New Testament God is forgiving and merciful, I’ll point to and say, nu hunh, here’s a loving, gracious text, straight out of God’s mouth and sitting in the heart of the Old Testament. I really do love this text, but the sad part is that I can’t honestly say I recognize it all that much from the world I live in. Now, put it back in context and talk about the rest of the book of Jeremiah, and I recognize that a plenty. Don’t like it much, but it looks and feels painfully familiar.

Jeremiah is a hard book, named for one of God's prophets. Prophets were usually tapped by God to challenge and correct the people, but Jeremiah's assignment was especially hard. The people had gotten way off course, God was angry and it was time to turn and repent or else. In this case, the “or else” was that the enemy's army was gathering just on the other side of the hill. The people needed to clean up their act fast and turn from their sinful ways, or else Babylon would storm the gates, burn the cities and carry the people away as hostages. It was hard and uncomfortable but Jeremiah was faithful to the work that God asked him to do and was warning the people with all the urgency and fury he could muster. Then God stopped him in his tracks, corrected his message and said, you need to cut out the “or else” part of your talk. It's too late for second – or tenth – chances. Time's up. I've had enough of their wicked ways; they've had all the time they're going to get to turn things around. Babylon is coming, and there's nothing these folks can do to stop that. And that was exactly what happened: Babylon arrived on the scene, destroyed everything within reach, carried the people away from their homes and dropped them in foreign territory where they existed as hostages for a couple of generations. God's people were miserable, both because of the horrible conditions of their lives and because they felt so cut off from God, home and everything that God had promised them – the land, protection and blessing, favored status as God's beloved people. It was all dried up and gone. For virtually all of the book of Jeremiah, the entire message was doom and gloom, and once the people were plopped down in enemy territory they had nothing left but time to rehearse their regrets, lick their wounds and beat up on themselves for their failures and shortcomings.

For most of the book. Just over half way through the 52 chapters, the angry judgment and dire consequences are interrupted by two chapters that are often referred to as the Book of Comfort: exquisite words of rescue and release, restoration and return graciously extended to a people steeped in loss and grief, whose hearts and spirits have been broken. God's heart has been touched by the suffering of the people; they may feel completely cut off from God, but God promises them that God has every intention of continuing in relationship with them: I will be your God, and you will be my people. Just when they have given up all hope, the people receive a lavish promise, unexpected good news. God will bring newness out of destruction, hope where there is no hope, life out of death, a way where there

is no way. No longer will the law be engraved in stone and displayed on court house lawns for all to see but none to follow. The days are surely coming when the law will be tattooed on people's hearts and displayed in their lives. No longer will they know about God, all the right words, all the right theology; the days are coming when all will know God and walk with God in intimate relationship. God will wash away the people's sin once and for all and remember them no more, flush them down the drain and wipe away every trace of evidence.

So what do you think? Pie in the sky wishful thinking? A promise to stake your life on? Or one spoken so long ago, that it's more likely to disintegrate in a puff of wind than ever be brought to reality? How many hearts do you see living, breathing and beating in complete sync with God and God's ways, in love with all God's creation. God promised that the days are surely coming when we will all know God, and live and walk in intimate relationship with God. Do you hear that, smile peacefully and say Amen? Or do you ask, when? When, O God, are those days surely coming? If I have a say, I'd vote for sooner rather than later. Please.

In recent months, one of the pieces I've begun to turn to as part of my preparation for preaching is a podcast called Sermon Brainwave, where four faculty members from Luther Seminary in St. Paul talk together about the readings for Sunday. This week, I was captivated by the conversation on this text, in which a couple of them matter of factly observed that this promise has never been fulfilled. Never happened. But another, Joy Jay Moore, spoke up and stepped in with some eloquent words about this text and what we just might have learned about it this past year. Clearly, we don't live in a time when everyone is so completely in sync with God that there's nothing left to teach us, but maybe we've learned some things about how to wait for promises to be fulfilled, and how it happens in small and steady steps, an accumulation of millions of people doing their part and playing a role rather than as a one and done moment of transformation. She invited us to ask how our living points to that day yet to come when everyone will know God: what are we doing to help make God's covenant visible in large and small ways?

That really is a choice we have to make day after day. We can sit back and wait for God to deliver on the promises made. Maybe even check our watches, tap our toes, pace the room while we wait, trying not to be too agitated and impatient. Or we can chip in and do our part to open the door and pave the way, to tune our hearts and our lives to God's love, and to what God has already written on our hearts. Like the community in British Columbia that has responded to COVID by pairing up 47 young people and 53 senior citizens; seniors who were feeling isolated by pandemic precautions as well as cut off from their grandchildren, and high school students who were finding it harder than usual to meet their schools' requirements for volunteer hours. I read about 99-year-old Myrtle who was paired with 17-year-old Jaelyn, one a retired nurse, the other interested in becoming a nurse; one who had traveled extensively, even living for 10 years in India and working in a refugee camp in Thailand, the other just beginning to think about travel and the world outside their small town. There's a 94-year old man who's writing his memoir for the 16-year old who finds his stories fascinating, and a woman in her mid-70's learning Microsoft Excel from a 17-year old. All of them are making friends, feeling connected and valuable, and a lot more engaged with the people around them.

There's a 26-year-old man in Oakland, California who posted a note on social media volunteering to accompany any Asian American when they are walking somewhere, as a way to help them feel more safe and comfortable from the growing threat of assault or attack. Within a week of making his offer, he had more than 300 volunteers offering to join him, and the organization Compassion in Oakland was born.

I think of a small community I know where several churches and other organizations are working together to explore offering shelter to asylum seekers, as a way to offer them safety from the violence at home while their petition for asylum is being processed. One of those churches is also discussing converting an unused room in their building into a place of shelter for a homeless person in a time of transition. All of these examples, and so many more remind me of the very small church I served years ago. When one of their members was sick, in and out of the hospital, away from home for a bone marrow transplant, back and forth for appointments, they moved into gear – providing food, offering rides, caring for the cat, mowing the lawn. When I commented on their generous kindness, they said, we're just doing what we're supposed to do. No need to talk about it or make a big deal of it. Just doing what we're supposed to do, which is a lot like living with the love of God written on our hearts and woven into our lives. Just doing what comes naturally.

That's the dream that God shares in this text: a covenant in which God won't have to chase after us, line up new teachers and make us stay after school for tutoring, but a covenant that all of us will know, will honor, will display in our lives and our loves. I can just hear God say, I am so weary of being angry with you, of being hurt and rejected by you. The days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant with you, I will write my ways on your hearts, I will fill your hearts with my love, I will give myself to you and for you. And we will walk together to share that love, to transform this world, to care for all creation, and build up the beloved community. My friends, let us wait with hope for the dawning of God's long promised day, and while we wait, let us walk together and live together in love. Amen.

SONG *“Da Pacem Cordium”*
Give peace to every heart

Cathy Barker, Alice Ling, Dick Weaver

PRAYER REQUESTS

Continued prayers for Penny and Jim, both of whom have COVID and both of whom are improving.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and awesome God, we hear your hopes and hungers for our life together in this world, and we say thanks. Thank you for believing in the potential in every one of your children, and show us what we can do to encourage beauty and kindness, wholeness and health. Thank you for holding fast to your dream of peace on earth, and lead us along the paths that will carry us closer to the dawning of that great day. Thank you for the miracles of creation, the strength found in weakness, the power born in tenderness, the joy known in service. Open our eyes to see your image in each face we meet; open our ears to hear the cries of this wounded, weary world; open our hearts to give and receive of your great love. A love that transforms, blesses, renews and heals.

Loving God, you are the source of all healing and hope, and so we lift up before you all those who battle COVID, cancer, the realities of age, diseases of the body and mind, soul and spirit. We pray for those who have been broken by the harshness of their lives, wounded by racism and cast away by unexamined assumptions; for the hungry and homeless, those digging out from tornadoes, grieving another round of senseless violence, struggling to balance home and work, school and play. We pray for your healing and holding, courage and patience, wisdom and forgiveness, compassion and peace.

We give you thanks for the beauty that blesses our lives, and for the promise of spring that points us toward renewal and hope, new life and fresh beginnings. For the remaining days of winter fun and the gift of a snow pack that will fill rivers and streams into the weeks and months ahead. For moments of laughter and joy, discovery and growth, for companions and friends, and all the ways that you nurture and sustain us. Hold us close, fill us with joy and draw us close to you and to one another.

And hear us as we pray together the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

What an abundance of gifts we have to offer: musical talent, the melody of laughter, the use of our hands in cooking and repairs, 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 gratefully received by all who come in contact them. Thank you for the ways you share what you have, give of who you are and extend God's love to others. Thank you for the gifts that build up the church and our ministry to God's world.

SONG *"Sent Forth by God's Blessing"*

Sent forth by God's blessing, our true faith confessing, the people of God from this worship take leave.
The service is ended, O now be extended the fruits of our worship in all who believe.
The seed of the teaching, receptive hearts reaching, shall blossom in action for God and for all.
God's grace did invite us, and love shall unite us to work for God's realm and to answer the call.

With praise and thanksgiving to God ever living, the tasks of our everyday life we will face.
Our faith ever sharing, in love ever caring, embracing God's children of each tribe and race.
With your grace you feed us, with your light now lead us, unite us as one in this life that we share.
Then may all the living with praise and thanksgiving give honor to Christ and that name which we bear.

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.