

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

March 7, 2021

Third Sunday in Lent

PRELUDE “*My Faith Looks Up to Thee*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends. And welcome to worship. It’s very good to be gathered here together with you. We come to sing our praise to God and hear God’s Word for us and for our lives, with the hope that we will respond in faith and service. We will also gather around Christ’s table, where we will be welcomed and healed, fed and sent out. If you haven’t brought something with you to represent the bread and cup of Christ’s feast, I invite you to get it now. And if you want to follow along and join in the prayers and singing, I invite you to print out the PDF that came with this video, or read it on your phone while you watch the video on your computer.

Let’s begin our worship with another song that I recorded with my friends Cathy and Dick. It’s a song out of South Africa, and the first and last times through we are singing Xhosa. The middle verse is in English, and it translates the text as “Amen, We praise your name, O God.”

SONG “*Masithi*”

Cathy Barker, Alice Ling, Dick Weaver

I don’t often read the Psalms that are assigned as part of the weekly set of readings, but today’s I want to share. It’s Psalm 19, which CS Lewis called “the greatest poem in the Psalter, and one of the greatest lyrics in the world.” I hear it as a glorious call to praise and call to prayer, and share it using Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of it, from *The Message*:

CALL TO WORSHIP Psalm 19

The Message

God’s glory is on tour in the skies,
God-craft on exhibit across the horizon.
Madame Day holds classes every morning,
Professor Night lectures each evening.

Their words aren’t heard,
their voices aren’t recorded,
But their silence fills the earth:
unspoken truth is spoken everywhere.

God makes a huge dome
for the sun—a superdome!
The morning sun’s a new husband
leaping from his honeymoon bed,
The daybreaking sun an athlete
racing to the tape.

That’s how God’s Word vaults across the skies
from sunrise to sunset,
Melting ice, scorching deserts,
warming hearts to faith.

The revelation of GOD is whole
and pulls our lives together.
The signposts of GOD are clear
and point out the right road.
The life-maps of GOD are right,
showing the way to joy.
The directions of GOD are plain
and easy on the eyes.
GOD's reputation is twenty-four-carat gold,
with a lifetime guarantee.
The decisions of GOD are accurate
down to the nth degree.

God's Word is better than a diamond,
better than a diamond set between emeralds.
You'll like it better than strawberries in spring,
better than red, ripe strawberries.

There's more: God's Word warns us of danger
and directs us to hidden treasure.
Otherwise how will we find our way?
Or know when we play the fool?
Clean the slate, God, so we can start the day fresh!
Keep me from stupid sins,
from thinking I can take over your work;
Then I can start this day sun-washed,
scrubbed clean of the grime of sin.
These are the words in my mouth;
these are what I chew on and pray.
Accept them when I place them
on the morning altar,
O God, my Altar-Rock,
God, Priest-of-My-Altar.

SCRIPTURE READING John 2:13-22

Geoff OMeara

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it Siddallup." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

SERMON

I've had almost a year to work on it, so you would think I'd have it figured out by now. When we're out and about in our neighborhood and we bump into people who ask if our church is still closed, you

would think I would have an answer ready, so I don't walk away sputtering that I didn't handle that well. Again. What do you tell people? Maybe that's not the question they ask, or maybe that's what you say – that the church is closed and you're just waiting for it to open again. How do we talk about this time? And what are we experiencing? I know I fuss with uncertainty every Sunday, even more than I do when I try to answer our neighbors' questions. Do I talk with you about how we've come together to worship, and say that I believe the Spirit knits us together as one in the Body? Do you feel like we're together? Or worshipping even? What's church like for you these days? And how would you define the very notion of the word "church"?

When people ask me if the church is still closed, I tend to say we're worshipping on-line. Since I don't think they hear what I'm really trying to say, I wish I could remember to begin with, the church has never been closed, we're worshipping on-line, and meeting for Zoom Fellowship and praying for each other and supporting the food bank, and, oh yeah, talking about when we'll go back to the building. All of which highlights the question of what role the building plays in what it means to be or do or go to church. And which is it? Is the church a building? An hour of the week? A community of people? A lifestyle?

I don't mean to make an annoying word game out of what has become a disorienting, frustrating, lonely, maddeningly long time. Watching a video or reading a script simply is not the same thing as going to a building, hearing music, smelling coffee, catching up and bantering with friends, passing plates and literally breaking pieces of bread off the same loaf. I know at least one of you has really enjoyed worshipping by video from home, and perhaps others have begun to create and enjoy some new routines, but for many, it's simply not normal, not our tradition, and not what we crave – and isn't likely to be. In the midst of all of that, I wonder what we've learned this year, or come to appreciate. How and where have we felt the presence of God? Have we experienced church in new ways or places? Discovered new forms of prayer? Is it possible that, even in the midst of our grief and longing, God has been among us, inviting us to reimagine, develop, evolve and grow? A hidden invitation to ask the most basic, ground-level questions about what we're doing and why.

In ways that are more off putting than invitational, I think those are the kinds of questions Jesus is posing in this morning's gospel reading. The Jesus we like to think of as meek and mild makes a "whip of cords" and drives sacrificial animals scrambling to hidden perches and out of reach corners, overturns tables, pours coins all over the floor and tells the money changers to stop making his Father's house a marketplace. Sure, maybe they would say they were just trying to help the faithful meet their religious obligations, but Jesus wasn't buying it. One look around and it was abundantly clear that signs of exploitation and abuse were everywhere, with the poor and disadvantaged standing outside, forced to go deeper and deeper in debt if they had any hope of approaching God. Jesus stormed into the middle of that and brought the marketplace to a screeching halt. When his stunned audience asks for a sign to authorize his violent rampage, he doesn't bat an eye. Jesus dares them: destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up. And then, as is typical in the Gospel of John, it becomes clear they're talking past each other and on two totally different levels. Jesus' listeners fire back and challenge his rhetoric: this temple has been under renovations for 46 years and you think you can raise it up in three days? But later, after his death and resurrection, his disciples looked back and the pieces finally clicked into place. He wasn't talking about the building at all, but about his life and body. He was the sign of God's authority, the articulation of God's love, the visible expression of God's presence in their midst.

They were seriously mistaken if they thought it all came down to the building. Yes, they believed the temple was a sacred space, the dwelling place of God on earth. But here was Jesus telling them that God had left the building, if God was ever there in the first place. God was not contained in a building or located in one place. As God had chosen to accompany the people of Israel through their 40 years of

wilderness wanderings, so God was continuing to journey with them. If they were serious now about approaching God, they could begin by looking at Jesus, because he was God's temple, the living, breathing, flesh and bones expression of the life and love, will and way of God. God was more present and visible in him and his life, his witness and wisdom, healing and holding, passion and power than anywhere else, before or since. He was the incarnation of God, the living, breathing expression of God's presence here on earth. And God would and will continue to be present and visible in any and all who follow in Jesus' way, and continue to live out the will and ways, the love and life of God.

A big part of what is so striking in this text, and I think unsettling for us, is Jesus' passion, the fire in his belly, his eyes and his voice. As his disciples watched him working that whip of cords and voicing his outrage about the shenanigans taking place in the temple, they heard words from Psalm 69 echoing in their heads: Zeal for your house will consume me. I don't know about you, but I don't often think about zeal when I think about the ways we approach worship, God or God's house. And honestly, I'm not all that keen on adding more zeal to my diet if it means swinging a whip of cords and chasing people off. That's just not my style. And yet... there is something compelling in this text that calls to me. I don't think I'm likely to become a fire-breathing prophet, and so far I haven't heard that I'm being called to be one, but I do think there are times when God would be pleased if I got more involved, put more skin in the game, spoke up more clearly, rose up out of my chair before my complacency kicked in again. Maybe that's why Debie Thomas' words speak to me, when she wrote: "Where, I'm asking myself during this Lenten season, has my power to act, to deepen relationship, or to love fiercely, atrophied? Where has my faith become so rote, so abstract, so disembodied, that I no longer find it natural or easy to rejoice with those who rejoice, or mourn with those who mourn? Where am I refusing to ask the hard questions -- the questions that will pull me into uncharted and risky territory for the sake of the church, Christ's body?"

"Whenever the pandemic winds down, our communities open up, and we find ourselves free to return to "business as usual" on Sunday mornings, I hope we won't. I hope we'll remember Jesus, who upended the temple when it forgot how to be the Father's house. I hope we'll burn with the passion that animated the whip-wielding, coin-scattering Christ. I hope we'll settle for nothing less than churches that are, truly, houses for prayer, welcome, freedom, and hope for all nations." ("Not In God's House", *Journey with Jesus*, posted 28 February 2021)

May it be so. Amen.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Katie asked for prayers for Jonathan Phillips, a parent of 6 children in Silverton. He suffered a massive heart attack and stroke recently and has been in critical condition at Kootenai Medical. He is unconscious and she didn't know what the prognosis is; he, his wife AnnaLee and their children need our prayers.

Geri Bair's son Jerry Alan is dealing with heart problems. Another open heart surgery is possible.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Maker and Lover of all, in the mystery of your kindness, you have bound us to each other, and called us to serve the earth and its people. So hear us, as in this time of worship, we pray for our church, that it may be a center of faith, hospitality and imagination, modeling the future rather than lamenting the past. *(pause)* God in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Grateful for the life in our bodies, we pray for those whose lives are diminished by ill health, depression, grief or rejection, especially for Jonathan Philips and for Jerry Alan, asking for the healing, the affirming, the listening which will encourage and restore them. *(pause)* God in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Conscious of the peace in our lives, we pray for those who have no peace because of war or the fear of war, or the threat of violence, or the grip of hunger, or the loss of hope. May the voice of the victims be heard and the work of the peacemakers be blessed. *(pause)* God in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Surrounded by the rugged and tender beauty of our community, we pray for the earth, especially where it is damaged by human carelessness and threatened by human greed; and ask that we may learn to care for the earth as you do. *(pause)* God in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

And because we are here to meet with Jesus, we join our words to those he taught us, saying: Our Father... *(Iona Abbey Worship Book)*

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

Our God has richly blessed us: with life and with love, with the company of friends and the fellowship of a church community, with the warmth of our homes and food to set on our tables, with the gift of warm days and signs of spring beginning ever so cautiously to reappear, with the roll out of the vaccine and the decrease of COVID numbers, with hope and joy, mercy and love, with resources with which we can ease others' pain and soften the shadows of despair, support our church and put food on the shelves of the food pantry, reach out with kindness and extend to others the grace that has been poured out upon us. Thank you for the ways in which you pass your blessings along to others, for the times to bother to lend a helping hand, and for the opportunities you create to share the love of God. Thank you.

SACRAMENT OF COMMUNION

Song

Come to the table of grace. Come to the table of grace.

This is Christ's table, not just yours or mine. Come to the table of grace.

Come to the table of peace...

Come to the table of love...

Come to the table of joy...

Invitation

This is the table, not of the Church, but of Christ. It is to be made ready for those who love him and who want to love him more. So come, you who have much faith and you who have little, you who have been here often and you who have not been for a long time, you who have tried to follow and you who have failed. Come, not because I invite you. It is Christ. It is his will that those who want him should meet him here.

Communion Prayer

Gratitude, praise, hearts lifted high, voices full and joyful – these you deserve.

For when we were nothing, you made us something. When we had no name and no faith and no future, you called us your children. When we lost our way or turned away, you did not abandon us. When we came back to you, your arms opened wide in welcome.

And look, you prepare a table for us offering not just bread, not just a cup, but your very self so that we may be filled, forgiven, healed, blessed and made new again. You are worth all our pain and all our praise.

So now, in gratitude, we join our voices to those of the Church on earth and in heaven:

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!

Holy God, as we come to share the richness of your table, we cannot forget the rawness of the earth.

We cannot take bread and forget those who are hungry. Your world is one world and we are stewards of its nourishment.

God, put our prosperity at the service of the poor.

We cannot take the cup and forget those who are thirsty. The ground and its rootless, the earth and its weary people cry out for justice.

God, put our fullness at the service of the empty.

We cannot hear your words of peace and forget the world at war or, if not at war, then preparing for it.

Show us quickly, God, how to turn weapons into welcome signs and the lust for power into a desire for peace.

We cannot celebrate the feast of your family and forget our divisions. We are one in spirit, but not in fact. History and hurt still dismember us.

God, heal your Church in every brokenness.

For us you were born, for us you healed, preached, taught and showed the way to heaven; for us you were crucified, and for us, after death, you rose again.

Lord Jesus Christ, present with us now, for all that you have done and all that you have promised, what have we to offer?

Our hands are empty, our hearts are sometimes full of wrong things. We are not fit to gather up the crumbs from under your table.

But with you is mercy and the power to change us.

So as we do in this place what you did in an upstairs room, send down your Holy Spirit on us and on these gifts of bread and cup, that they may become for us your body, healing, forgiving and making us whole; and that we may become, for you, your body, loving and caring in the world until your realm comes. **Amen.**

Sharing the Bread and Cup

Among friends, gathered around a table, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it and said, "This is my body, it is broken for you."

And later, he took the cup of wine and said, "This is the new relationship with God, made possible because of my death. Take this – all of you – to remember me."

Look, here is our God coming to us in bread and cup. These are the gifts of God for the people of God.

Let us at many tables receive the gift of God, the Bread of Heaven.

We come to Christ in the Bread we share.

Let us in many places receive the gift of God, the Cup of Blessing.

We come to Christ in the Cup we share.

Prayer of Thanksgiving (in unison)

Lord, 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.

(A Wee Worship Book, Fourth Incarnation, Wild Goose Worship Group)

SONG *“Lord, Dismiss Us with Thy Blessing”*

Lord, dismiss us with thy blessing, Fill our hearts with joy and peace;
Let us each thy love possessing, Triumph in redeeming grace.
O refresh us, O refresh us, traveling through this wilderness.

Thanks we give and adoration For thy gospel’s joyful sound;
May the fruits of thy salvation In our hearts and lives abound.
Ever faithful, ever faithful To the truth may we be found.

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.