

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL  
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

August 22, 2021

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

PRELUDE “*All Things Bright and Beautiful*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

God has given us this beautiful earth and all that grows and runs upon it.

**Thanks be to God.**

God has given us breath to love and spirit to sing.

**Thanks be to God.**

God has gathered us into a community of care and worship.

**Let us worship God with love, thanksgiving and praise.** (Maren C. Tirabassi, *Touch Holiness*)

HYMN No. 560 “*For the Beauty of the Earth*”

For the beauty of the earth, For the glory of the skies,

For the love which from our birth Over and around us lies:

Lord of all, to Thee we raise This our hymn of grateful praise.

For the wonder of each hour Of the day and of the night,

Hill and vale and tree and flower, Sun and moon and stars of light: ...

For the joy of human love, Brother, sister, parent, child;

Friends on earth and friends above; For all gentle thoughts and mild:

For Thy Church that evermore Lifteth holy hands above,

Offering up on every shore Her pure sacrifice of love: ...

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

**Almighty God, we have come to this place to find you; yet, you have been beside us all the time.**

**Our prayer, then, does not so much ask for you to be here as it asks you to make our own hearts**

**more aware of you. Creator, make an intentional and worshipful focusing of our minds a more**

**constant discipline in our lives. Timeless as the sunshine, it is so easy to take your love for**

**granted. Fill this moment with awe, loving God of our hope, and let us progress from a reverent**

**hour into continual veneration, from a moment of devotion into a life of prayer. Amen.**

(Sheryl Stewart, *Beyond the Amen*)

SCRIPTURE READING Psalm 84

How lovely is your dwelling place,

O LORD of hosts!

My soul longs, indeed it faints

for the courts of the LORD;

my heart and my flesh sing for joy

to the living God.

Even the sparrow finds a home,

and the swallow a nest for herself,

where she may lay her young,

at your altars, O LORD of hosts,  
my King and my God.  
Happy are those who live in your house,  
ever singing your praise.

Happy are those whose strength is in you,  
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.  
As they go through the valley of Baca  
they make it a place of springs;  
the early rain also covers it with pools.  
They go from strength to strength;  
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer;  
give ear, O God of Jacob!  
Behold our shield, O God;  
look on the face of your anointed.

For a day in your courts is better  
than a thousand elsewhere.  
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
than live in the tents of wickedness.  
For the LORD God is a sun and shield;  
he bestows favor and honor.  
No good thing does the LORD withhold  
from those who walk uprightly.  
O LORD of hosts,  
happy is everyone who trusts in you.

#### SERMON

There are numerous ways I've always sort of identified with Dorothy in her travels around Oz, searching for a way home. No, I've never been in a tornado or had a dog named Toto, and I've certainly never asked how to get to Kansas; but I have been swept into a strange land or two, encountered a plethora of colorful characters and searched high and low for something my heart would recognize as home. I guess I could have been a good girl and believed my mother when she told me it was our small town in northeastern Vermont, where I had the distinction of being the 5<sup>th</sup> generation born in the same town. But I heard another call and followed other dreams, and while that town claims a spot in my heart no other place ever will, I don't think I would call it home. I've lived and worked in communities stretched from Maine to Minnesota, New Hampshire and Vermont, and now here in Idaho, and for the most part I've always had a nice place to live. True, there was one summer when I was technically homeless and unemployed, but only because I chose to take two months off between jobs and houses, so we could explore the west coast and spend time with family from Los Angeles to the San Juan Islands. And then there were the years Ben and I got caught in a difficult transition, and he lived in an RV, while I rented a pathetic second floor apartment with a bathroom the size of a phone booth, and periodically went spelunking in our storage unit to see what treasures I could find. But at the heart of it all, it's only fair to say that despite all the time and energy that has gone into our houses, I've been very aware that a house is not automatically the same thing as home.

How do you understand the notion of home? The television show *Cheers* told us that it was the place where everybody knows our names. Robert Frost wrote that home is where, when you go there, they have to take you in. I think home is a place of shelter and safety, welcome and embrace; and while

having our physical needs met is a fundamental prerequisite, in the long run, for me “home” is much more about relationships than structure. Home is the place where laughter and love rule, where needs are respected and hurts are healed, where vulnerability is met with tenderness and weariness is offered rest, fears are shushed and dreams are encouraged.

The Psalm I read a few minutes ago has always been one of my favorites, precisely because of the way it invites the pilgrim home – to God’s house. True, the writer is looking toward the temple, and is overwhelmed by its beauty and majesty. It was built with the very best materials which had been assembled from around the world; no expense was spared, and the very best of everything imaginable was brought together to build a place worthy of Israel’s God. As much as this Psalm is about a building and gathering for worship there, it’s about more than that; it’s about living with God and in God, and all of that can never be contained in a building. While this psalm begins by pointing to the temple, it moves on to describe a sense of journey and pilgrimage, referring to the highways that lead to Zion and passing through the valley of Baca (which no one is sure about, but it was probably a dry and dusty place they had to go through to get to Zion). God is present throughout the journey as the pilgrim moves from strength to strength, leaning on and trusting in God. Whether we’re dancing through the mountaintop victories of our lives or slogging our way through the valleys of despair and struggle, God accompanies us, shelters us, comforts and confronts us, loves and embraces us. Something in this Psalm speaks deeply to the longing of my heart to come on in and be at home, pull up a chair and sit a spell, tell me about your day and your dreams, your hungers and your hurts; together, we’ll drink deep of the refreshing waters, rest in the cooling shade and get ready for the road that lies ahead.

I’m keenly aware of the ways in which I hear this psalm differently this summer than I did a couple of years ago. I’ve long defended how important it is to gather together for worship, and most of the time, we’ve done that in a building; but when COVID sent us to our homes and public health mandated that we stay apart in order to keep each other safe, our priorities were required to change. As I listened to you over the course of the months that we were apart, I didn’t hear that you were homesick for our building. Perhaps some of you were, and I’d understand it if that was the case. But what I heard was that you were heartsick for each other. It wasn’t about the building, but about relationships and community; and everything in me shares that priority. Once again, I’m drawn back to my initial sentiment that, while buildings and houses matter, they aren’t what make a home; that precious gift is much more firmly rooted in relationships, and that’s every bit as true with God as it is with family, friends and churches. We are invited to make our home in God, but that will never be about the building where we meet; instead, it’s all about the relationship we share.

I want to go back to a piece of this psalm that I skipped over a minute ago, and that’s where it says that even the sparrow finds a home and the swallow a nest for herself where she may raise her young. I like that, and I can see it. I picture my dad’s hay barn and the birds that built nests up in its rafters. I picture the ruins I’ve visited in Europe where partial walls and roofs have survived, almost never any doors and windows; of course the birds fly in there to set up their nursery. I also remember the years that Ben made a mission of keeping the birds off the sailboat mast as it was hanging from the rafter of its storage place, so we didn’t have to spend the whole summer waiting for them to raise their young and kick them out of the nest. What I haven’t ever done is ponder what it means that the psalmist wrote about sparrows and swallows rather than eagles or owls, hummingbirds or herons.

Once I considered that question, I turned to a book that Debbie Blue wrote entitled, *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to Birds of the Bible*. According to Debbie, sparrows and swallows are exceptionally unpopular birds, especially house sparrows. I expect some of you are serious birders, so I’ll be curious to see if you agree with this. She writes about the pure and utter disregard people have had for them since ancient times, maybe because of their promiscuous and unseemly sexual behavior as well as their tendency to multiply rapidly, maybe because they are considered “bland, dingy and dull

with songs that are monotonous and grating” (or so field guides have described them) (page 129), maybe for their aggressive personalities and tendency to compete with rarer, more beautiful birds for nesting spaces – and usually winning. Debbie has a neighbor who has trapped and killed house sparrows because of their inclination to kill blue birds, the same a neighbor who has a pretty short fuse when Debbie tries to point out the merits of sparrows or protect their place on their farm. And yet, it is precisely these birds that the psalmist tells us are welcomed into God’s temple to find a home, build a nest, and raise a family. And in case you’ve forgotten, Jesus took up the song too when he asked, are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten by God. So fear not. You are of more value than these sparrows. To which Debbie adds, “This seems like fairly minimal assurance, really. We can only hope we won’t be poisoned or eaten.” (page 132)

I guess if we think of ourselves as despised house sparrows, all of that is good news: we’ll always have a place to call home, someone we can count on to take us in when we show up in the middle of the night, in need of a bath. But I suspect it’s safe to assume that most of us don’t think of ourselves as house sparrows, which means the challenge for us will be making our peace with the rest of the residents of God’s home. The great and glorious birds will likely be there, but so will the house sparrows. Because that’s the kind of home God runs.

The psalmist writes of a deep yearning to find a home in the sheltering love of God, and while that search began at the temple, finest structure ever built, and with the best of all possible materials, and all to the glory of God; it seems clear to me that God didn’t settle down and set up shop in that temple. Instead, God is out and about, accompanying pilgrims across the soaring peaks of majestic accomplishments, as well as slogging through the trenches of despair and tragedy, ready to welcome and embrace each and every heart that is looking for a home. God is with those desperate families evacuating fires and then facing into the word that there’s no house to go back to; with the Olympians who have returned home and now replay visions of victory and glimpses of achievement; with the families crouched under tarps in the wreckage that is Haiti, and both in and out of the airport in Kabul, looking for the distraught, clearing a path to safety, catching the babies dropped over walls in the desperate hope one of them will live to see a better day. God waits with those who brace for Hurricane Henri and searches for the missing from Tropical Storm Grace.

The walls of God’s home stretch far and wide, and are eager to welcome us in. All of us, house sparrows and blue birds alike. Unlike Dorothy, we don’t have to travel a yellow brick road, fight munchkins and flying monkeys, take out bad witches or click our heels three times. God’s sheltering love and welcoming embrace are within reach and available to all. Perhaps, together we can find a way to do our part in putting out the welcome mat by which all God’s people know they can home to love. Amen.

HYMN No. 344 *“He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands”*

He’s got the whole world in His hands, He’s got the whole world in His hands,  
He’s got the whole world in His hands, He’s got the whole world in His hands.

He’s got the wind and the rain in His hands...

He’s got the little tiny baby in His hands...

He’s got you and me, brother, in His hands, He’s got you and me, sister, in His hands,  
He’s got you and me, brother, in His hands, He’s got the whole world in His hands.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Christi’s cousin, Carolyn Weil, in the ICU on a ventilator with Covid, some improvement in pneumonia in one lung

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, you have blessed us with a world full to overflowing with wonder and beauty, kindness and grace. Keep our eyes and hearts open that we might see and cherish the work of your hands and the signs of your presence. The bounty of August gardens and the refreshing gift of rain, the miracle of bird flight and signs of new life emerging after a fire, a baby's first steps and kernels of wisdom from one who has lived long and seen much, skilled surgeons who work as aids to meet the need of a Covid ward and nurses who go door to door to deliver vaccine, pilots who dump water from the sky to douse fires and maneuver planes to shuttle workers out of Afghanistan, cooks set up to serve thousands of meals a day in Haiti and an eleven year old who works hard to save bees, a twelve year old collecting shoes for Ghana, the science that unlocks the secrets of a virus and developers who deliver the internet to remote villages and explore the farthest reaches of space. In each of these gifts and so many more, O God, we celebrate the presence of your touch, the compassion of your heart, the intricacies of your creation, the possibilities that surpass our assumptions. Help us to find delight in your generosity, appreciate the kindness of others, and do what we can to extend the blessing.

Holy God, it is also true that we live in a world of hurt and need, and even there, we would ask – perhaps hesitantly, but yes, we invite you to help keep our eyes and hearts open to the hurt as well as the beauty. When we are tempted to draw the shades and turn out the lights, help us to see the people sleeping in their cars, hiding the bruises of a fall or a fight, counting their coins and embarrassed when they don't have enough. When apathy calls to us that there's nothing we can do or asks who are they to us, help us to see your face in the child crying for shelter, the girl reaching for an education, the veteran sitting alone in the park. Move within us and among us; stir us to compassion and generosity, imagination and kindness, that we learn to share what we have and do what we can, even if all we have is a tired smile and an unopened bottle of water. Help us to believe that in your presence, no gift is too small, no kindness insignificant; multiply and bless what we have to share and lead us together into your world of blessing and joy, mercy and peace.

Hear our prayers, O God, spoken, unspoken and offered to you now in the silence of our hearts. (*silence*) And hear us as we offer the prayer that Jesus taught his friends when they asked him how they should pray: Our Father...

## PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

## OFFERING

You may have seen an email I sent this past week, sharing with you information about the ways in which the United Church of Christ is responding to last week's earthquake in Haiti. Working with Church World Service and other partners in the country, their initial assessment said that water and first aid are part of their immediate need. Water tanks were corrupted by the quake, and medical care is very hard to come by (which is not helped by the kidnapping of two doctors recently). As other priorities become clear, we will continue to develop both an emergency and a long-term plan of assistance. The denomination has set a goal of raising \$100,000 to help with this effort; 100% of which will be used in this effort. If you would like to join in this effort, you can give through our church; just clearly designate it as being for Haiti relief. And whether you give to the needs in Haiti or to support the ministry of our congregation or in any other way, know that your gifts are blessed by God and deeply appreciated by all.

## DOXOLOGY

## PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

**God, you who have everything, we bring our offering and come into your presence. How amazing! This is your generosity to us – we can share with you in the giving and receiving of gifts. May these be blessed for their uses and may we be blessed by the joy of not-holding on. Amen.**

(Maren C. Tirabassi, *Touch Holiness*)

HYMN No. 68 “*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.

There is welcome for the sinner And more graces for the good;  
There is mercy with the Savior; There is healing in His Blood.

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

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

BENEDICTION

May God bless you and keep you, and may God bless you and give you away to others.

May God’s face shine on you, and your face reflect an irresistible good news.

May God lift up everything that is fallen in you, and give you more pieces of peace than you alone can hold. Amen.

(Maren C. Tirabassi, *Touch Holiness*)