

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL  
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

October 24, 2021      Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

PRELUDE    *“Praise to the Lord, the Almighty”*

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

Sing aloud with gladness:

**God is gathering the people!**

From the farthest parts of the earth we come:

**All who struggle; all who labor with new life!**

Those who are weeping, God will console;

**Those who get lost find a clear path home.**

Let us worship the God who gathers us!

(Rev. Bonnie Tarwater, UCC Worship Ways)

HYMN    *“Gather Us In”*

Here in this place, the new light is shining, shadows of doubt are vanished away.

See in this space our fears and our dreamings, brought here to you in the light of this day.

Gather us in, the lost and forsaken; gather us in, our spirits inflame.

Call to us now, and we shall awaken; we shall arise at the sound of our name.

We are the young – our lives are a mystery; we are the old, who yearn for your face.

We have been sung throughout all of history, called to be light to the whole human race.

Gather us in – the rich and the haughty; gather us in – the proud and the strong;

give us a heart so meek and so lowly, give us the courage to enter the song.

Here we receive new life in the waters, here we receive the bread of new birth;

here you shall call your sons and your daughters, call us anew to be salt for the earth.

Give us to drink the wine of compassion, give us to eat the bread that is you;

nourish us well, and teach us to fashion lives that are holy and hearts that are true.

Not just in buildings small and confining, not is some heaven light years away,

here in this place the new light is shining; now is God present, and now is the day.

Gather us in and hold us forever; gather us in and make us your own;

gather us in, all peoples together, fire of love in our flesh and our bone.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION    (in unison)

**Ever-calling God, we give thanks that you have gathered us into your church and graced us with your faithful presence. We ponder our history, ancient and still developing, and marvel at the many expressions of your church. Grant us the vision to be a part of this new moment in your Church that will bring ever more joy and justice to the world. Continue to gather us, the diverse lot of us, into Jesus’ vision and dream that your faithful people may be one in you. Amen.**

(Rev. Bonnie Tarwater, UCC Worship Ways)

SCRIPTURE READING

Mark 10:46-52

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he

began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

#### Jeremiah 31:7-9

For thus says the LORD:

Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,

and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;

proclaim, give praise, and say,

“Save, O LORD, your people,  
the remnant of Israel.”

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,

and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,

among them the blind and the lame,

those with child and those in labor, together;

a great company, they shall return here.

With weeping they shall come,

and with consolations I will lead them back,

I will let them walk by brooks of water,

in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;

for I have become a father to Israel,

and Ephraim is my firstborn.

#### SERMON

For me, the book of Jeremiah will forever be connected to Bonnie Kittel, a beloved seminary professor with whom I was privileged to study the Old Testament. She was one of two professors who taught the survey course of the entire Old Testament over the course of two semesters; later, for one semester, a small group of us met with her once a week to dig deep into the book of the prophet Jeremiah. Typical of me, I don't remember many of the details (it was the late 70's after all). What I do remember is the fire of Jeremiah's words, the intensity of his ministry and prophecy, and the predictable and dependable way that Bonnie had of always making a connection between the ancient words of Jeremiah and the current moment in which we were living and learning. Every class, she'd open with a lecture on some section of the book, and then pose a question or make an observation and we'd be off, talking about Jeremiah's world and our world as if they were one. So what if the details and specifics lived on spheres the other would never be fully able to comprehend? The reality of human sinfulness and stubbornness, and an insistence on doing things in our own way and on our own terms is more than a little constant – as is God's call for covenant faithfulness and repentant and dependent living.

The book of Jeremiah is harsh and strong, often angry and full of threats. God was worn out and fed up by the people's rebellion and selfishness, and sent Jeremiah to warn them to clean up their act or else. Finally God said, forget the “or else”: it's too late for them, I'm done waiting, judgment and doom are headed their way. Which meant the Babylonian army was also headed their way; it was only a matter of time until they were carried off into captivity and the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. The people sat in their exile and longed for home. Generations came and generations went, and still they wept and dreamed and tried desperately to hold on to the possibility that they would one day be able to go home again. Home to the land that God had given their ancestors. Home to the promises of God. Home to

their special status as the chosen people of God. Home to what they knew and where they found comfort and where their believed their hope took root.

In the midst of all the doom and gloom of the book of Jeremiah, there's a small section that's often called "the book of consolation". Chapters 30 and 31 sit as an oasis in the midst of all the pain and misery and speak a word of promise and of hope, of a new heart and a new covenant, of restoration and return. And that's precisely where today's text lives. After years and generations, heartaches and trauma, the people are going home. From the north and from the farthest corners of the earth, the people are on their way home. And not just to live as individuals and families, but that together they can re-form the blessed and beloved people of God, to reconstitute the people of Israel. That's heavenly music, but one look at the list of who's walking the highway, and we realize that yet again, God isn't doing this the way we would, if left to our own devices. Trace Haythorn describes it with these words: "This is not a eugenics experiment, drawing together only the strong to ensure that the fittest and most capable will rebuild the nation. No, this group is defined by people with disabilities and pregnant women. This is a community of the vulnerable, the marginalized, and the physically weak. Unlike the warriors whose battles have defined reality for the Israelites, they are a people who are not just promised the consolation of God but deeply need such consolation." (*Feasting on the Word, Year B*, additional essays) Haythorn goes on to point to the end of the passage, where God claims the role of Father of the people, gifting them with all the rights and privileges of the firstborn, and then goes on to say: "For God to bestow such a birthright on Israel among the family of nations sounds profoundly powerful; however, it parallels the vulnerable kind of power illustrated in God's gathering of the blind, lame and pregnant. Israel is not strong through might; it is strong through its need of God and for community. The ties of mutuality that bind the people together, not its military or its wealth, are the source of its strength."

I'm drawn to this list of returnees for a couple of reasons. As God speaks in this text, opening the highway for the people to return home, the first in line are precisely the people most often left out or overlooked, pushed into in the background to hobble and scrape their way along on their own. People who can easily be isolated by trauma or dismissed because of their disability. Left to my own devices, I suspect I would have read this passage and considered the blind and the lame symbolically or metaphorically as weak or vulnerable. But before I got too far in my study, I listened to the weekly podcast on today's passages and heard Rolf Jacobson, a man who recently told me that he lives in a wheelchair, observe that in the Gospels, disabilities are something that need to be fixed, as in today's gospel healing of blind Bartimaeus; in contrast, in Jeremiah the blind and the lame are gathered as they are, drawn together into community and blessed with companionship and the consolation of God.

And then, just to make sure I got the point, I read yesterday's Daily Devotional from the United Church of Christ. In that piece, Mary Luti wrote about leading a church retreat and talking about heaven. She said that heaven isn't floating on clouds forever, but a transformed creation where we'll live a fully human life together. And a fully human life means an embodied life. When she said that in God's new creation every body will be healed and made whole, the woman in the wheelchair spoke up. She said, "I've been using this chair for 27 years. It took 20 for me to stop believing I needed fixing. Don't tell me I'm not whole. I won't be walking into heaven; I plan to roll." Mary wrote, "Over the years she'd stomached a lot of glib churchy talk about wholeness and healing. The message was clear: her body is substandard, but—good news—she'll be getting a new improved version in paradise! It (made her mad). Talk like that dishonored her body and delivered only shame. She reminded us that Jesus' resurrected body bore the wounds of spear and nails. It still does, and forever will. "Christ's body is a disabled body," she said. "You're saying he's not whole?" ("This is My Body" October 23, 2021)

I'm not sure that Jeremiah – or God – were trying to make all that point in this text, but maybe. There's powerful affirmation and inclusion here; there's community and welcome, there's restoration and

wholeness precisely in the bodies and lives of the blind and the lame, the weak and the marginalized, those with children and in labor. And in those last two categories, there's also new life and the promise of generations yet to come. They will lead the way home. They will usher in the new day of God's restoration. And precisely because their bodies don't allow them to be fiercely independent and self-sufficient the way the rest of us honestly prefer to be, they can show us how to help each other, work together and maybe even lean on God for wisdom and strength.

Having said all of that, and very sincerely not wanting to do anything to minimize or whitewash the reality for those who are physically disabled, I do think there's also a message here for those who may from time to time know what it is to feel emotionally disabled, to be traumatized or battered, worn out or worn down. We value strength and power, and we like ourselves best when we're well put together and have all our ducks in a row; but we can't always manage that. And I don't know about you, but I'll tell you that for me, these days are ones when it's hard to keep the spit and polish in tip top shape. Covid has taken a toll in ways I'm not sure any of us can fully articulate to ourselves or each other. I don't think we've even begun to comprehend the grief we're experiencing in the face of more than 736,000 Covid deaths, or the effect this pandemic is having on our medical and educational systems. Add to that political divisions, extreme weather, racial tensions, climate change, and so on and so forth – the list is endless.

The exceptionally good news of this text from Jeremiah is the invitation to come home – as we are. We don't need to pretend or posture, wave a banner or lead the charge. We don't need to have a thoroughly researched plan or well documented set of credentials. We don't even need to know the way home. We just need to travel together, leaning on each other, building community and cooperation as we go, looking to God for wisdom and strength, courage and direction.

Then as now, God is inviting the people, including us, to come with shouts and songs of joy, and yes, with tears. From the farthest parts of the earth, God says come, led by the blind and the lame, those with children and those in labor. Leave isolation behind and move into community. Bring your beauty as well as your brokenness, your weakness as well as your wisdom, your strength as well as your sorrow, your need as well as your knowledge. Come. Together, with God and with each other, we'll create the new home that God has envisioned from the dawn of creation, the beginning of time. Amen.

HYMN No. 285 *“In Christ There Is No East or West”*

In Christ there is no East or West, In Christ no South or North;  
But one great fellowship of love Throughout the whole wide earth.

In Him shall true hearts everywhere Their high communion find;  
Christ's service is the golden cord Close binding humankind.

Join hands then, all ye of the faith, Whate'er your race may be;  
Who serves my Father as a child Is surely kin to me.

In Christ, now meet both East and West, In Christ meet South and North.  
All Christly souls are one in Him Throughout the whole wide earth.

#### PRAYER REQUESTS

For Dorothy and John Thielman, positive with Covid: Dorothy has some symptoms, not interested in eating because of lack of taste, achy; John frustrated by the confinement of quarantine  
For those dealing with the power and the poison of alcoholism  
For missionaries held captive in Haiti

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, who, in Jesus, touched the earth, admiring its beauty and blessing its people, we honor you for the gift of life and all the gifts that life brings us: food, shelter, company, the experiences that make us think, the people that bring out the best in us.

Hear our prayers for the places in this world where beauty has turned to ugliness, food has been replaced by famine, friendship has been forgotten and fear, hostility and hopelessness have the upper hand. *(pause)* God in your mercy, **bring healing, bring peace.**

Hear our prayers for people who cannot pray because of pain, loss or worry; and for those who will not love themselves and so cannot love their neighbor. *(pause)* God, in your mercy, **bring healing, bring peace.**

Hear our prayers for ourselves – our private yearnings, our secret hopes and any doubt, jealousy or anger to which we hold too tightly. *(pause)* God, in your mercy, **bring healing, bring peace.**

And hear us as we, in our native language, say the words Jesus first prayed in his:

*(Iona Abbey Worship Book, The Iona Community)*

## PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

### OFFERING

We have a long-standing tradition of once a year inviting donations to support the work of Church World Service through their gifts of blankets and other resources to help people in need. In the first six months of this year, January through June, they gave away 23,610 blankets – blankets people can use for warmth, to carry belongings, to function as a tent, and I forget how many other ways they can be used. One of the stories I read about their work this past year has been taking place in Everett, Washington. There's a Presbyterian Church there that welcomes 150 community members into their sanctuary every week to eat. Most of the people are homeless, and many of them have been abused or are dealing with addiction issues or just can't make ends meet. Through the church's partnership with Church World Service they are also able to give hygiene kits, and blankets that help add warmth in the cold winter months. Those tangible gifts also communicate the love and care of a community of people. Church World Service also gives resources like school kits, emergency clean up buckets and hygiene kits – all of them vital ways to ease the burden people are struggling under, and valuable ways to communicate care and compassion. I invite you to prayerfully consider participating in this ministry. You can mail a gift to the church or drop it in the mail slot, marking it clearly for Blanket Sunday.

### PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

**Gracious God, we ask your blessing upon the tangible expressions of our joy and care. Renew in us a sense of our abundance in all times and a never-failing compassion for all who need hope, for we pray in the Spirit of Jesus Christ who is the source of hope and joy, of our gifts and our open hands. Amen.**  
*(Maren C. Tirabassi, Touch Holiness)*

### HYMN No. 354 “*Leaning on the Everlasting Arms*”

What a fellowship, what a joy divine, Leaning on the everlasting arms;  
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine, Leaning on the everlasting arms.  
Leaning, leaning, Safe and secure from all alarms;  
Leaning, leaning, Leaning on the everlasting arms.

O how sweet to walk in this pilgrim way, Leaning on the everlasting arms;  
O how bright the path grows from day to day, Leaning on the everlasting arms...

What have I to dread, what have I to fear, Leaning on the everlasting arms?  
I have blessed peace with my Lord so near, Leaning on the everlasting arms...

**BENEDICTION**

The grace of God, deeper than our imagination;  
the strength of Christ, stronger than our need;  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit, richer than our togetherness;  
guide and sustain us today and in all our tomorrows. Amen.

# Blanket the world with **love**

