

St. Matthew's and Hardwood Lands Presbyterian Churches

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**January 23, 2022 ~ The Third Sunday after the Epiphany**

**Welcome**

- † Welcome! To the third Sunday after Epiphany!
- † And the celebration of the Baptism of our Lord!
- † It is so nice to have you join in this time of worship!

**Announcements:**

- † **Thank you** for being patient with our canceling in-person services once again! It was not an easy (or unanimous) decision, but it was made out of an “abundance of caution” since covid-19 cases continue to surge in our province over the past weeks. We are praying that we will be worshipping again in-person soon!
- † **Wednesdays** ~ St. Matthew's hosting of the Knitting and Crochet group has been postponed until at least January 26<sup>th</sup>! It usually runs from 10am-12noon in room 102 at 224 Highway 214. Come learn how to knit or crochet, help others, and share what you are working on. Come join in the fun! (We will have to check the pandemic restrictions as that time)
- † **January 18-25** ~ Week of Prayer for Christian Unity!
- † **January 26** ~ There will be a special meeting of the Presbytery of Halifax & Lunenburg is at 10:00am on ZOOM to deal with a suggested to the Preamble at the Ordination of Ministers, Diaconal Workers and Elders and other comments members wish to add to comments made re 2021 General Assembly referrals.
- † **January 30 ~ ANNUAL REPORTS** are due! More details in the days ahead!!
- † **Prayer list** – if you or someone you know would like to be included for extra prayers, please let Rev. Beth know!

- † We are also looking ahead and planning some things for 2022 – if there are any ideas for Bible Study, or a book study, or a type of group you would like to see our congregation host, please let us know!
- † Even though our in-person worship services have been canceled, our expenses continue. If you would like to make a donation to support the ministry done in and through our churches you can do so by the offering at worship services (when held), mailing a cheque, or sending an e-transfer:
  - † For the Hardwood Lands Church send to [hwtreasury@gmail.com](mailto:hwtreasury@gmail.com)
  - † For the St. Matthew's Church send to [stmatthews.elmsdale@gmail.com](mailto:stmatthews.elmsdale@gmail.com)
  - † Please include your name and mailing address in the e-transfer for receipt purposes!
  - † Thank you again for your support!

**Thank you** for joining in this time of worship!

**Let's take a moment to quiet our minds and focus on God!**  
*(you're invited to light a candle to remind you Christ is with you)*

**WE GATHER IN GOD'S PRESENCE**

**Call to Worship:** *[adapted from Psalm 19]*

Come let us worship the Lord.

For the law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.

The decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple,  
giving joy to the heart, and giving light to the eyes.

We are to desire them more than the finest gold.

By them we are warned.

In keeping them there is great reward.

May the words of our mouths and meditations of all our hearts,  
be pleasing to the Lord as we worship Him, our Rock  
and our Redeemer.

**Hymn:** “Open my eyes that I may see”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDceaG7kFQA>

Open my eyes, that I may see,  
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;  
Place in my hands the wonderful key  
That shall unclasp, and set me free.  
Silently now I wait for Thee,  
Ready, my God, Thy will to see;  
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!

Open my ears, that I may hear,  
Voices of truth Thou sendest clear;  
And while the wave-notes fall on my ear,  
Ev'rything false will disappear.  
Silently now I wait for Thee,  
Ready, my God, Thy will to see;  
Open my ears, illumine me, Spirit divine!

Open my mouth and let me bear  
Gladly the warm truth ev'rywhere;  
Open my heart and let me prepare  
Love with Thy children thus to share.  
Silently now I wait for Thee,  
Ready, my God, Thy will to see;  
Open my heart, illumine me, Spirit divine!

### **Prayer of Approach and Confession:**

Creating and Sustaining God, you created the earth and all that is in it. In the law and the prophets you give us your will, and in the person and teaching of Jesus your kingdom drew near to us. He came among us proclaiming the good news and calling us to follow you. You continue this ministry of love through the church and call all of us to participate in your work, by giving us gifts to use and roles to play in the great plan of your creation. We give glory to you, God, joining our hearts in praise of your Son, and giving thanks for your Holy Spirit who dwells with us and within us.

Jesus, you came to bring good news to the poor, release to prisoners, sight to the blind, liberation to the oppressed. You came to proclaim that the time had come when God would save the people. We hear this good news, but fail to live into its power preferring to stand back and let someone else care for your world and your people. We fail to bring hope and healing to the people and situations around us. We do not live as though our Saviour has come. We do not proclaim the good news. Forgive us God, and strengthen us in the knowledge that in Christ we are set free, our sight is restored and we can live confidently and generously knowing that our Saviour has come.  
Amen.

### **Assurance of Forgiveness**

Jesus Christ came as the Living Word of God, anointed by the Holy Spirit to proclaim good news. No matter the circumstances: poor in body or spirit, captive to any number of things or situations, blind to joy, hope and peace, oppressed or constrained. Jesus came to bring good news. So today, receive this good news into your own life. Be set free, open your eyes and your heart to see God at work, and know that in Jesus Christ you are forgiven. And give thanks to God!

## **GOD SPEAKS TO US**

### **Time for the Young and the Young at Heart**

- † Item(s): Bible(s)
- † What version of the Bible do you own? Do you have different versions? If you do, which one is your favourite, and why? *(If you don't own one, please let me know – I will get you one!)*
- † Did you know there are many different versions of the Bible?
- † Some are direct translations from the original Hebrew and Greek languages, word-for-word. Some are translated into more contemporary English so they are easier to read and understand. Some are paraphrases = they have similar meaning or thoughts, but are not word for word.

- † One website says that there are about 50 main English versions (not to mention ones in other languages).
- † Add to those, there are ones that are study Bibles (with extra notes and historical information); there are life application ones (give ideas how to apply passages to your own life); and there are ones that focus on a certain topic or group of people (women's, men's, youth, teens, children; bikers/motorcyclists, firefighters, hockey players, etc... the list could go on)
- † Why so many, you may ask? Different translation techniques; the English language itself has changed over the year; different ways to explain things; etc.
- † Yet they are all still basically the same = we still learn about God from them
- † The version we like and use the most might change as we get older as well... or as we mature in our faith. We need to find the right one for us at this time in our life.
- † God's Word is important for us at any age; no matter where we are, or what we are doing, or what we are going through; it is the one thing that never changes
- † As we read the Bible we learn more about God; and how we can follow the example of Jesus, with the help of the Holy Spirit
- † Let us pray... Dear God, we thank you for giving us Your Book – the Bible. Thank you for all the different ones that speak your Word in different ways. Thank you for people who are translating it into different languages – may all the people of the world one day be able to read your Word in their own language. Let us not take being able to ready your Word for granted. Help us to make time every day to read Your Scriptures and reflect on what you teach us through it. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**Hymn:** "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npWJZwgmKMo>

Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path  
 Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

When I feel afraid, think I've lost my way,  
 still you're there right beside me,  
 and nothing will I fear as long as you are near.  
 Please be near me to the end.

Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path  
 Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

I will not forget, your love for me, and yet  
 my heart forever is wandering,  
 Jesus, be my guide, and hold me to your side,  
 And I will love you to the end. (to the end)

Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path  
 Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.  
*(repeat)*  
 You're the light unto my path.

**Prayer for Understanding:**

Holy Spirit, our great Teacher, as we read and reflect on your Word, we acknowledge that your Word has the power to revive our souls, make us wise, and enlighten our eyes. Create in us a desire to hear your Word. And by it, equip us for every good work. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

**Scripture Readings:** Nehemiah 8:1-10  
 Psalm 19 (responsively)  
 Luke 4:14-21

**Sermon:** God's Word

I was very happy to see that the lectionary listed a reading from the Book of Nehemiah for this Sunday! During my Revelation Wellness Instructor Training last spring, we did an in-depth study of this book. It's interesting that this is the only time a passage shows up in the lectionary from Nehemiah in the three-year cycle. *(Yes, I know the names can be challenging, but don't get stuck on them).*

In order to fully understand what is happening and why in this passage, we need to take a look at a bit of history to set the scene and bring us up to this moment in their time – what brought these people to this point...

The Israelite people were attacked and taken into captivity in Babylonia. They were scattered throughout the empire and spent 70 years as servants. King Artaxerxes became king of Persia from c. 464 to c. 425 BCE, after the fall of Babylon to the Persians.

By then, the Israelites had been allowed to return to Jerusalem – some did, and some didn't. Partly because they had made lives for themselves in this new land. And partly because Jerusalem was in shambles – the wall around the city was destroyed; its gates burned; and the temple was in ruins. The temple was the first to be rebuilt - The Book of Ezra, which is close to this one in the Bible and in time, documents the rebuilding of the temple. And we might think that not having a wall around the city wouldn't be that big of a deal... we don't have them. However, back then a city not having a wall around it was a major problem. A city wall was a symbol of strength, peace, prosperity. A city without walls was subject to invaders; loss of people, crops, animals, and commerce. It was an unstable environment physically and psychologically. The gates regulated the coming and going of life and resources; they were the center of public life. The wall and gates established a secure time, place and life. Without them there was great uncertainty and risk, shame and disgrace.

News of the few (the remnant) who survived the exile, of those who returned to Jerusalem, the rebuilding of the temple, and the wall still being in shambles were some of the news items that one of Nehemiah's brothers brought to him. The news touched Nehemiah so much that he sat down and wept – he mourned, fasted, and prayed before God for days [Neh.1:4].

You see, Nehemiah was a Jew, he was God fearing, he knew God's promises to His people, and he was a man of prayer. He had also become the "cup bearer" to King Artaxerxes. It was a high position, a close servant to the king in his royal court. It was his duty to serve the king all drinks, after tasting it to make sure it wasn't poison! It was a position that

was highly esteemed, of great influence, with a salary that gave a high and comfortable life. Still, he had concern for the other Jews and for Jerusalem. He knew those in Jerusalem were hanging on, surviving spiritually and physically, yet not truly thriving. He knew they were tired and broken... unable to repair or rebuild. (*much like us in this pandemic*) So God places it on his heart to go and rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. Nehemiah lets God's Words sink in... for about four months.

As Nehemiah goes about his usual routine, the king notices he is sad, and when he asks Nehemiah explains (after praying), and the King gives him permission to go back to Jerusalem. When Nehemiah asks for "letters" that will help him travel through other areas, and provide timber for the rebuild, he notes "because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests." [Neh. 2:8b] In fact, the king does even more by sending military officials and cavalry with Nehemiah to Jerusalem.

When Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem, he goes out and surveys the damage; then goes to the local officials with his plan. It seemed like an impossible task; the people are not sure it can be done. Still, everyone gets involved – from nobles to servants, men and women, of all ages. Each worked on the section nearest their house. Nehemiah assured them God was with them and would help them: "The God of heaven will give us success." [Neh. 2:20] (*Some people think rebuilding the church is possible even now. Are we willing to work on our section? Do we truly believe God will help us and give us success?*)

Now this doesn't mean that it was easy – the work was hard and there was lots of opposition. Four or five times throughout the rebuild, there was a group that would do all that they could to distract and disrupt the work. At different times they use questioning, doubting, mocking, ridicule, name calling, insults, slander, anger, bullying, distraction, scheming, lies, accusations, fear, and even a letter (it's a long list)... to try and make the people think that they can't do it or can't do it right. The enemy even works within the ranks of those working – they end up oppressing fellow Israelites – which Nehemiah confronts them about. (*What opposition do we come up against when we try to do things to build/rebuild God's kingdom here?*)

Each time Nehemiah would respond by helping the people to refocus on God through prayer, and reminding them that the enemy will try to attack as they do God's work. He reminds them: "Don't be afraid of them. Remember whom we serve." At one point Nehemiah posts people with weapons to guard those who are rebuilding... some even work with a sword in one hand and a tool in the other!

Rebuilding means facing fear head on; but prayerful and faithful people of God will not run! God's people need to remember that God delivers! God is mighty! And pray!! Nehemiah prayed "Now strengthen my hands" [Neh. 6:9]. Prayer is our greatest weapon; it aligns us with what God is calling us to do; it sends fear running back into the darkness. God's people must be people of prayer! When we are, and we allow God to work in and through us, God makes the impossible possible! (*Do we really believe this?*)

When they began rebuilding the city wall and gates, it seemed impossible. However, it took only 52 days! The length of the walls is 4,018 meters (2.4966 miles), their average height is 12 meters (39.37 feet) and the average thickness is 2.5 meters (8.2 feet). The wall was done complete, finished!

Then the first thing the people did, when they gathered on the first day of the week, was to ask Ezra the priest and scribe to bring the Book of the Law (the first five books of the Bible as we know it), and read it to them. Men, women, and all who could understand were gathered. Remember – they have been in captivity for 70 years; generations have passed; the Book of the Law has not been opened or read to the whole community for 70 years! Ezra praises the Lord, and all the people lift their hands and respond, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bow and worship the Lord with their faces to the ground. The Book of the Law is read, made clear, given meaning so that everyone could understand what was being read. From early dawn until 12noon, they listened (at least four hours). Listening, they realised how far they had strayed from God's Word. Realised how much they had sinned – and they were convicted of their sins. A sense of loss and shame overwhelmed them and they broke into tears. God's Word touched their hearts so much, that they wept!

*(How often when we read God's Word, Scripture, the Bible, do we let it sink in deep enough to touch our hearts... our souls?)*

Nehemiah knew this was how they felt, but he told them not to grieve, but celebrate! Rejoice that God had brought them back, had helped them work together to rebuild – God is with you, you're still His children. Celebrate with others – share with those who have nothing prepared... bring them back to celebrating God too. "This day is sacred to the Lord." "The joy of the Lord is your strength." Celebrate so all can follow God and His Word again!

They recognised their sin, repented, and asked God to renew them. This is the cycle that Revelation Wellness teaches about – the on-going cycle that we need to be aware of, and repeat on a regular basis in our lives... as individuals and as congregations. Just as Nehemiah, one person, couldn't rebuild the wall and gates of Jerusalem, we cannot rebuild our lives and our church lives on our own... we need each other AND we need God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – to help us understand God's Word and what He wants us to do to build/rebuild His Kingdom. We need to read Scripture, let it sink in so we can understand it, and know what God is bringing to our hearts through it.

This is what has been done and needs to be done in every generation. That is what was happening that day that Luke writes about in 4:14-21. The people had gathered on the Sabbath (first day of the week), to listen to Scripture read, to hear it explained, and to ask God for understanding of it.

Jesus stands and reads part of the Book of the Law, from Isaiah 61:1-2a:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

After He had read it, He sat down, and said that "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Diana Butler Bass: "Jesus essentially told his friends, 'Look around. See the Spirit of God at work, right here. Right now. God is *with us*'." Jesus

was sent into this world to do all of the things listed. As His followers, this is what we should be doing... Re-read the above verse; as if God was speaking it to you; let the words sink in; let them touch you deeply... *(take the time)*

Some churches allow a minute or two of silence after the Scripture reading, for people to let it sink in.

The Revelation Wellness has a journal page with sections to "Write the Word" – the verse of the day or key words or phrases; "Soak in the Word" – sit, inhale, meditate on the passage 2-3 minutes; then "Wring it Out" – how can I apply this passage today; *(there are other sections but those are for another time)*. I've been using this page for quite some time now and what a difference it makes in my daily reading of Scripture.

How often do we let God speak to us through His Word? Or let His Word convict us or challenge us? How often do we let His Word touch our hearts so that we will step out and do what He wants us to do?

What is God asking us to do together? Especially when He brings us back together when this pandemic settles again.

This can be a time, like Nehemiah had, to pray, listen, and plan. Maybe this is when we develop a plan. And figure out how we can start – nearest to our homes – to rebuild; to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour!

## **WE RESPOND TO GOD'S WORD**

### **Prayer of the People and the Lord's Prayer**

Eternal God - we thank you for the Word you give to us for our guidance - For the Word that shows us how to live in a way that is pleasing to you and which sets free your liberating and healing power in our midst. We thank you for all who proclaim that Word faithfully and help us to understand what is your Will. Most of all Lord, we thank you for the living Word - the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us - full of grace

and truth. We thank you for sending Christ Jesus into this world not only to be our Saviour, but to save all people.

God of community, we come together in prayer for your people and for the unfolding of your kingdom. We thank you for the grace and freedom we have found while living life faithfully. We give thanks for the diversity of our congregation and the church as a whole. We give you thanks for the rich gifts of arts and culture, of home life and community celebration which bring meaning and encouragement to our lives. Help us contribute our gifts to the traditions and imagination that sustain the best of our common life from one generation to the next.

God of mercy and forgiveness, You call us to live together in peace and unity. In this Week of Prayer for Christian unity, we pray that your Spirit will create understanding and co-operation among all who bear Christ's name. Help us share our gifts with each other so that churches within our community may flourish and our common mission will find new energy after months of challenge. Lead us to reach out to those of other faiths and no faith so that, together, we may be a blessing in the world you love.

God of healing and hope, we pray for our neighbourhoods and our nation. Where people are divided and bitterness turns into resentment, show us how to work for reconciliation. Inspire our leaders at every level of community life to work together for the care of the most vulnerable and to restore the goodness of our common life as we recover from the effects of these months of pandemic. Make us generous citizens and careful stewards of the land you entrust to us together.

God of justice and mercy, we pray for the world you love, the world Christ died to redeem, so deeply divided by religious and political animosities, by ancient bitterness and current conflict. Encourage world leaders to work for peace and understanding, especially in places torn by violence, and areas still struggling with the effects of the pandemic, by poverty, hunger and the effects of natural disasters. May the hope Jesus embodies encourage us all to work for positive change.

God of courage and comfort, we remember those of our congregation and community in need of your special attention

today.... *(take time to name people and local concerns that God brings to your mind and heart).*

Use us as agents of your healing and hope, workers of your building and rebuilding. Make us all aware that it is your Word that has the power to revive our souls, make us wise, and enlighten our eyes. Create in us a desire to hear your word, and by it, equip us for every good work as we pray they prayer, Jesus taught us to pray together...

Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for Thine is the kingdom the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

**Offering:**

The gifts we offer in Jesus' name are all needed, each of them and all of them. Together, the body of Christ accomplishes many things through the gifts we share. Let us give praise and thanks to God for all He gives us to share with others...

**Doxology:**

"Praise God from Whom all blessings flow;  
Praise Him all creatures here below.  
Praise Him above ye heavenly host.  
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost."

**Offering Prayer:**

Creator God, you made each of us in our uniqueness, and together, all of us to bear your image in the world. Accept our gifts, unique as they are, and bless them for the sake of your Son, Jesus. May they bear his grace and mercy into the world you love so your purposes will be fulfilled. We pray through Him and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**Hymn:** "Every Promise of Your Word" (by Keith and Kristyn Getty)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DpSIIiWkEM>

From the breaking of the dawn to the setting of the sun,  
I will stand on ev'ry promise of Your Word.  
Words of power, strong to save, that will never pass away,  
I will stand on ev'ry promise of Your Word.  
For Your covenant is sure,  
And on this I am secure—  
I can stand on ev'ry promise of Your Word.

When I stumble and I sin, condemnation pressing in,  
I will stand on ev'ry promise of Your Word.  
You are faithful to forgive that in freedom I might live,  
So I stand on ev'ry promise of Your Word.  
Guilt to innocence restored,  
You remember sins no more—  
So I'll stand on ev'ry promise of Your Word.

When I'm faced with anguished choice,  
I will listen for Your voice,  
And I'll stand on ev'ry promise of Your Word.  
Through this dark and troubled land  
You will guide me with Your hand  
As I stand on ev'ry promise of Your Word.  
And You've promised to complete  
Ev'ry work begun in me—  
So I'll stand on ev'ry promise of Your Word.

Hope that lifts me from despair, love that casts out ev'ry fear,  
As I stand on ev'ry promise of Your Word.  
Not forsaken, not alone, for the Comforter has come,  
And I stand on ev'ry promise of Your Word.  
Grace sufficient, grace for me,  
Grace for all who will believe—  
We will stand on ev'ry promise of Your Word.

**Benediction:**

Jesus Christ came as the Living Word of God,  
anointed by the Holy Spirit to proclaim good news.  
And so this is also our task.  
For the Lord continues this ministry through us.

Go out into the world as the body of Christ to do justice,  
treat others fairly, and transform the world in love.  
God has done this work before you,  
Jesus Christ is with you to empower you,  
and the Holy Spirit goes ahead, paving your way...Amen.

**Hardwood Lands:** Choral Amen

**Elmsdale: Parting Song:** "Go now in peace"

Go now in peace, never be afraid  
God will go with you each hour of every day,  
Go now in faith, steadfast, strong and true,  
Know He will guide you in all you do.  
Go now in love and show you believe  
Reach other to others so all the world can see.  
God will be there watching from above  
Go now in peace, in faith, and in love.