

St. Matthew's and Hardwood Lands Presbyterian Churches

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February 13, 2022 ~ The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Welcome

† Welcome! To the fifth Sunday after Epiphany!

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. I can hardly wait to be worshipping together in-person next Sunday!
- † **Wednesdays** ~ St. Matthew's hosts the Knitting and Crochet group each Wednesday morning 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! Proof of vaccination is required, along with the wearing of masks, hand sanitizing, and physical distancing.
- † **Annual Reports** are NOW due!
 - † Reports for the St. Matthew's Church can be given to or emailed to Cindy Shea at cindyjshea@hotmail.com
 - † Reports for the Hardwood Lands Church can be given to or emailed to Rev. Beth at elmsdale.hardwoodlands@gmail.com
- † **February 15** ~ the Presbytery of Halifax and Lunenburg will meet at 10:00am on zoom.
- † **February 16** ~ The congregation of St. James' will hold its annual meeting at 7:00pm in their church building.
- † **February 20th** ~ we will have in-person Sunday worship services again!! 9:30am in the St. Matthew's Church; and 11:00am in the Hardwood Lands Church. Pandemic

requirements: wearing of masks, hand sanitizing, and social distancing. Congregational singing is permitted with masks on. No proof of vaccination is required. All welcome!

- † **February 24** ~ the Session of the St. Matthew's Church will meet in the church at 10:00am.
- † **February 24** ~ the Hardwood Lands Session will meet at 7:30pm in the church.
- † **February 27** ~ both of our worship services will include the serving of Communion.
- † **Annual Meetings** ~ will be planned for mid to late March!
- † **Prayer list** – if you or someone you know would like to be included for extra prayers, please let Rev. Beth 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
 - † For the St. Matthew's Church send to 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:

Blessed, happy are those who follow God's ways.

God's laws are just and merciful.

Those who follow God's ways are nourished in faith.

In all that they do, they grow.

Come, let us open our hearts to God's compassionate love.

Let us celebrate God's mercy and justice.

Hymn: "Come, now is the time to worship"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doOVqKQo3lo>

Come, now is the time to worship.
Come, now is the time to give your heart.
Come, just as you are, to worship.
Come, just as you are, before your God.
Come.

One day every tongue will confess You are God.
One day every knee will bow.
Still the greatest treasure remains for those
Who gladly choose You now.

[repeat all above; then repeat first 4 lines again]

Come, just as you are. *[3 times]*
Come

Prayer of Approach and Confession:

God of majesty and mystery,
You are Creator, Christ and Spirit
You are the God who awes us and astonishes us.
You are the God who manifests glory in weakness.
You are the God who comforts and raises up what has been left
low.
You are the God who redeems all things and provides all
blessings.
You are the God who gives a vision.
You are the God who speaks good news of life, of liberty, and of
newness.
And so, we worship you this day and always
in beauty and in holiness
for you are the only giver and ruler of life.

Gracious God,
you test the mind and search the heart:
you know our thoughts and the secrets of our hearts.

We confess
the smallness of our love,
the narrowness of our concern,
and the denial of your truth.
Through our hands have slipped
opportunities missed,
people not cared for,
moments and days not celebrated.
Some of our sins are plain for us to see;
and to others we are blind;
some we cannot face and others we cannot forget.
We are sorry for our failings and ask for reassurance and
forgiveness.
Turn our hearts to you once more,
Open us to your love and forgiveness,
so that we may receive your grace and mercy
and share it with others.
We pray through your Son Jesus,
and by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen

Assurance of Pardon

Hear and believe the good news: anyone who is in Christ is a
new creation. The old world is gone, and the new world has
come. Know that you are forgiven and have the courage to
forgive one another. Amen

GOD SPEAKS TO US

Time for the Young and the Young at Heart

- † For something different this week... I want you to listen to
the following song, read the words, and really take time to
think about the message
- † What do you think about the message?

Song: Blessings *by Laura Story*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICnct8THNag>

We pray for blessings
We pray for peace
Comfort for family, protection while we sleep.
We pray for healing, for prosperity.
We pray for Your mighty hand to ease our suffering.
All the while, You hear each spoken need,
Yet love is way too much to give us lesser things.

Chorus:

'Cause what if your blessings come through raindrops
What if Your healing comes through tears
What if a thousand sleepless nights are
 what it takes to know You're near
What if trials of this life are Your mercies in disguise?

We pray for wisdom,
Your voice to hear.
We cry in anger when we cannot feel You near.
We doubt your goodness, we doubt your love
As if every promise from Your Word is not enough
All the while, You hear each desperate plea
And long that we'd have faith to believe

Chorus

When friends betray us
When darkness seems to win
We know that pain reminds this heart
That this is not, this is not our home
It's not our home.

Chorus

What if my greatest disappointments
Or the aching of this life
Is the revealing of a greater thirst this world can't satisfy
What if trials of this life
The rain, the storms, the hardest nights
Are your mercies in disguise.

Prayer for Understanding

God, you are the source of wisdom and understanding for us.
In the midst of all that distracts us, help us listen in stillness.
In the midst of competing voices, may we hear your Word for
our lives and our times. By your Spirit, help us discern Jesus'
call to follow him. Amen.

Scripture Readings: Jeremiah 17:5-10
 Psalm 1
 Luke 6:17-26

Sermon: Blessings and Curses

When I began to read the lectionary readings for today, the images of the trees and bushes from the Jeremiah passage and Psalm 1 caught my mind. Perhaps it was because it was right after the ice storm last weekend and all the trees around our house were coated in layers of ice. Some of them were bowed over to the ground with the weight of the ice. Some that I saw on news coverage from around the province, were uprooted and toppled over on the ground from the weight. When we went outside you could hear them cracking, and making odd noises as their ice-covered branches rubbed together. I know, the trees in our readings for today were not ice covered – they were planted by streams of water. But some were faced with other challenges, in parched places of the desert and in salt land. While others were planted by water where they could send their roots by the streams and thrive. Those well rooted did not fear or worry about heat or years of drought, they always bore fruit.

The Jeremiah passage and Psalm 1 both build on the image of trees, and how people are like trees... not an image we think of very often, is it?

Although like the trees, we need to be well rooted to withstand the storms, the things that weigh us down in life. We may not endure actual ice, wind, heat, or drought, but we do come up against things that weigh us down, that make us feel empty, useless, uprooted, toppled, in the heat of the fight, or blown away by what's happening around us. From the

pandemic to protests, from viruses to violence, from hate to trying to heal other health problems. From attacks about what we believe to debates about rights and freedom. There is so much trying to break our spirits and strip us of our faith in God.

We sometimes think that no one else or no generation is going through or has gone through stuff like this! However, similar things have happened back in the Bible times. There were generations of people who dealt with illnesses, violence, hate, fighting, and so on. Something or someone is always testing or tempting our faith... And sometimes it is God who tempts us to see if we will stay true to our faith in Him.

I can remember Dr. Timothy Ashely – he was my Old Testament professor at the Acadia Divinity College. He often told classes that the Old Testament could be summed up with the phrase “Blessings and Curses”. People were blessed if they followed and held true to God’s word and ways; or they were cursed if they didn’t. Of course, God always gives warnings and explains them along the way... for people not to turn away from Him; and He welcomes anyone who turns back to Him. Yet still there were people who turned away from God.

As I’ve been reading my Bible through again (I read about one chapter a day, and I’m up to the book of Judges), and as I read the passages for today – I’ve come to realise once more, that Dr. Ashely is right.

Blessings and curses... the idea seems simple enough, doesn’t it? Yet throughout the Old Testament we read about generations that don’t seem to have figured it out. For example, the Book of Judges speaks about the generation after those who lived through the time when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and into the promise land, and God did amazing things for them. But the generation that followed had not experienced God in the same intimate way, had not see or heard God in the pillar of smoke or fire, they had not experienced God fighting with and for them.

There have been many generations from them to those who experienced Jesus in the flesh. How amazing it must have been to be around Jesus to hear Him teach, and see Him heal people!

There have been generations from the time of Jesus until our ancestors, who settled in this “new world” and brought their faith with them, and experienced God helping them in this new land.

There are now a few generations who have not experienced God in tangible ways, who don’t know about God, or don’t know how important faith in God is. We see it in the news media, on social media... everyone is out for their own selves, own rights; they want control, want to put themselves in God’s place. Some even claim to be following God – I’ve seen Scripture passages painted on signs in the background of news footage! (and yes, I’ve looked up the passages and still wonder why they were chosen for that situation).

Who is right? – Who is wrong?

Who is blessed? – Who is cursed?

How do we cope with all the debates, accusations, anger, hate, and control issues?

Well, Jeremiah and King David (author of Psalm 1) tell us that we need to be like a tree in the midst of a storm or in a season of drought, we need to be rooted in God (the river of life). We need to choose how we want to live – receiving blessings or curses.

It is not easy to stand firm in the faith in challenging times. So let’s take a minute to see what God tells us in these passages...

Those who are cursed – trust in humans; depend on flesh for strength; allow their hearts to turn away from the Lord. They are the ones who dwell in parched places, in salt lands. They are the wicked who are like chaff the wind blows away or gets burned in the fire. They will not stand in judgement, nor in the assembly of the righteous. Jesus warns those who are rich for they’ve already received their reward; the well fed, for they will go hungry; those who laugh for they will mourn and weep; those spoke well of for that’s how false prophets were treated.

In contrast, those who are blessed – trust in the Lord; their confidence is in Him. They are like a tree planted by water that does not fear in heat or worry in time of drought; but always is green and produces fruit in season. They are the ones who do not walk in the way of the wicked or stand in the way of

sinner or sit in the seats of mockers. They delight in the law of the Lord, and meditate on it day and night. They prosper in whatever they do. Jesus says blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; the hungry because they will be satisfied; those who weep for they will laugh; those who are hated, excluded, insulted, or rejected because of Him because great is their reward in heaven... this is how the prophets were treated.

Quite the lists, aren't they? At every stage of history down to today, every generation, every person – God asks each of us – 'Where do you fit in? Are you among the blessed or the warned/cursed?' Which list do you find yourself?

Most of us are not poor, hungry, weeping, or hated by others... so does that mean we are those receiving the warnings... most likely! Hmm... this is uncomfortable!

We want to be among the blessed... not among those cursed. But remember – whenever the curses are mentioned there are warnings given! And remember these are warnings – not condemnations. If we are not careful, the warning will come true.

At any moment in our lives we could become poor, hungry, hated, and have reasons to weep and mourn. At any moment we can be the tree that is parched, weighed down, uprooted or broken.

When Ann M. Svennungsen wrote about how even those financially secure need to be aware, she noted, "Our money, like every single area of our lives, is subject to the will and direction of God." She tells us that our culture says, "You are just one purchase away from true happiness." Contrast that message with Jesus' reassurance of blessing even for the poorest and most powerless among us.

Jeremiah tells us that the Lord searches each of our hearts and examines our minds. The Lord rewards according to conduct, according to what your deeds deserve.

King David in Psalm 1 tells us that the Lord watches over the way of the righteous.

If we heed God's warnings, turn back to follow Him - as shown us by Jesus, with the power of the Holy Spirit - when

we've gone astray, we will live the way God wants us to, and we will be blessed.

This does not mean that it will always be easy to live God's way or to stand firm in the faith (a tree's life is not always easy). However, Jeremiah and King David tell us a few ways to do this: we have to trust God, have confidence in Him; we are to turn our hearts to Him. When we do, we will not fear or worry; instead, we will delight in the law of the Lord, and meditate on it day and night. We will also live opposite to how many in our society expects us to. As one writer put it: Jesus ushered "an era of reversal... turning things on their head, a new order of things" that begins with His own ministry.

Jesus teaches that while God blesses us all and God's grace is poured upon us all, rich and poor alike, we need to pray for understanding of how to share what we have been given. We are to look for and give thanks for the blessings God gives us. For once we hear His Good News, can see His blessings around us (even in the struggles), we are also called to respond, and to follow in the way of blessing, not woe. How we respond, how we live, what we do, matters. The choice is yours!

Are you firmly rooted in faith in God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Are you like a tree by water that stretches its roots out for life sustaining water – God's river of life?

Do you want to live following the way that leads to blessings? Or The way that leads to curses?

WE RESPOND TO GOD'S WORD

Prayer of the People and the Lord's Prayer

You, O God, watch over the world and care for each soul and situation. Hear us as we bring you our prayers for creation and for all people. Help us to pray with our hearts as well as our lips and to serve you with our strength as we can. Visit each person and situation we name with your steadfast love:

Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God". We remember those who do not have enough to eat, adequate shelter, sufficient support or authentic love and affection. Keep us from being preoccupied with money

and worldly things and from trying to increase them at the expense of justice.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth." We give thanks for those in our lives who are kind and gentle; who are gracious in spirit, calm in demeanor and comforting: they make our communities stronger and greater reflections of your kingdom. Help us not to be ruthless with one another but to be patient and careful with one another.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." We give thanks for those in the world who bring peace and work hard to serve in difficult and dangerous situations. Make us peacemakers in our families, in our country, and in the world. Soften the hearts of those who believe that it is essential to fill the world with weapons and who imagine that peace comes through threats and intimidation.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." We pray for those who have suffered a loss in their life; those who mourn the death of a loved one, a loving relationship or lost dreams. Help us to seek healing in our own lives and to bring healing to the lives of others.

Receive all our prayers, and equip us to do your will as together we pray the words Jesus taught us:

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:

Our faith does not rely on human wisdom, but on the power of God working in us and among us. So we dedicate our offering, trusting that each gift has a power beyond itself, the power God gives. Trust in the miracle of God at work in the world through the gifts we bring.

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:

Source of every blessing,
you have planted us beside living waters
and nourished our souls with your ways of life.
In gratitude and thanks
for the fruit we have born in due season,
we return our gifts to you.
Bless them with your manifold grace,
and multiply them in your mercy,
that they may go forth to heal a world trapped in loneliness and isolation.
In the name of the one who leads us into life, we pray.
Amen.

Hymn: "Standing on the promises"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56e3XFRtmY8>

Standing on the promises of Christ my King,
Thro' eternal ages let His praises ring;
Glory in the highest I will shout and sing,
Standing on the promises of God.

Chorus: Standing, standing,
Standing on the promises of God my Saviour;
Standing, standing,
I'm standing on the promises of God.

Standing on the promises that cannot fail,
When the howling storms of doubts and fear assail,
By the living Word of God I shall prevail,
Standing on the promises of God.

Chorus

Standing on the promises I now can see
Perfect, present cleansing in the blood for me;
Standing in the liberty where Christ makes free;

Standing on the promises of God.

Chorus

Standing on the promises of Christ the Lord,
Bound to Him eternally by love's strong cord,
Overcoming daily with the Spirit's sword,
Standing on the promises of God.

Chorus

Standing on the promises I cannot fall,
List'ning ev'ry moment to the Spirit's call,
Resting in my Saviour, as my all in all,
Standing on the promises of God.

Chorus

Benediction: (Jer 17)

Go from this place as those who are blessed,
And live in God's love.

Go from this place as trees planted beside living waters.
And drink of Christ's mercy.

Go from this place to bear the fruit of righteousness.
And share the Spirit's strength with everyone you meet,
This day and every day. 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 out to others so all the world can see.
God will be there watching from above
Go now in peace, in faith, and in love.