

Welcome and Land Acknowledgement

As we gather in the name of Jesus we remember and acknowledge with gratitude the Lkwungen people – the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ – on whose traditional and unceded territory we gather. As we remember let us also recommit to reconciling relationships.

➤ *Rise up, rise up*

130 MV (repeat)

Lenten Liturgy

We are not the first to make the journey to Jerusalem; many have gone before us and many will come after us. From near and far, God's people gathered to celebrate God's goodness on the holy mountain.

We are pilgrims on a journey. We are travelers on the road.

Jesus often went to Jerusalem as a child to celebrate Passover.

Now he has set his face toward Jerusalem again, knowing this time will be different.

We are pilgrims on a journey. We are travelers on the road.

Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem is somber. He has no illusions about what is to come. Still, he goes ahead, doing God's will.

We are pilgrims on a journey. We are travelers on the road.

Let us pray... **God of light, we want to follow in Jesus' footsteps, but we have our fears and doubts. We would rather avoid the pain and darkness on our journey. Give us courage and perseverance when the journey is difficult and the grace to help others on the road. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen**

PWS&D Sharing **Empowering Women in Guatemala**

In many indigenous communities in Guatemala, women face domestic violence, poverty and discrimination. Consequently, it's difficult for women to feel safe to voice their concerns, both in their households and local civil society.

PWS&D, through workshops led by local indigenous partners, empowers women to improve self-esteem, learn about their rights and encourage political participation. Women learn the importance of health, nutrition and hygiene, in turn improving their home and family lives.

For Marta Crisóstomo, a 30-year-old mother of a young son, these workshops meant she was able to change the health of her entire family. *"I learned how important it is to clean my kitchen, wash my dishes and practice good handwashing to avoid illness,"* she shared. Marta used the skills she learned to empower herself and her family.

Respond to Christ's call to serve and equip vulnerable communities by empowering women with skills and knowledge to advocate for themselves and their families. www.werespond.ca / (416) 441-1111

† Prayer for Understanding

O God, our strength, lift us up on wings as a mother eagle supporting her young. When we are weary, restore us to your purpose and fill us with your hope. Open your word this morning to our yearning hearts. We pray in Christ's name. Amen

Scripture **Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16**

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you and will make you exceedingly numerous."

Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you."

God said to Abraham, "As for Sarah your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

Mark 8: 31-38

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message

Our images of God can inspire interesting questions such as: *What is the nature of God's relationship with the world? Is God aloof and unchanging? Is God domineering, acting unilaterally and robbing creation of agency? Or is God's relationship relational and loving, promoting utmost freedom and creativity in the created world? Does God love everyone or only a select group – a chosen few?*

We serve a covenant-making God. On the first Sunday of Lent, we heard the story of how God made a covenant with Noah, his family, and all the creatures of the earth. With the sign of the rainbow, God promised never again to destroy the creation with a flood. That covenant is often understood to have universal application. There are no stipulations. God regretted the flood and announced that such an action would never again occur. Now, several generations later, God chooses to make another covenant with the couple from Haran – Abram and Sarai.

While God initiates the covenants – with Noah and all creation last week – with Abraham and Sarah this week, the covenants involve an ongoing call and response in which God calls – humans respond – and humankind's response shapes God's future calls. There is a divine-human mutuality in which God acts graciously toward humankind – and God also changes in relationship to humankind. Grace expands rather than contracts our freedom and creativity.

The relationship between God, Abraham and Sarah gives birth to an everlasting covenant with humankind! God forges a covenant with Abraham and Sarah – and us. Most contracts have time limits but God's covenant is everlasting and invites us to share in God's eternity in an ever-changing world.

For Abraham and Sarah, the covenant is about biological or family immortality. Our lives live on either in our children's lives or as part of a larger life story in this life or the next. In the reading from Genesis, Abraham is promised biological immortality. Childless Abraham and Sarah are told that they will become the parents of a great nation. They will live on biologically in their children and children's children. Their faithfulness will also live on in the impact of their decisions on the future.

Remember, in this passage we are still working with extended lifespans. It says in an earlier chapter that Abram's father, Terah, lived until he was 205. This is intended to communicate the legendary standing of the ancestors, not unlike *The Ancient of Days* title from Daniel that expresses awe of God. Set in the context of his 175 years, Abraham is a little over halfway through his lifespan – nonetheless he is recognised as being of a fair age when God makes this everlasting covenant with him. The story of Abraham and Sarah, who unexpectedly became older parents to Isaac, suggests the importance of being open to the promises of God at every age and stage of life. You never know – something serendipitous may happen!

How old is old? When is it time for a new beginning? Seniors have a powerful voice – just look at the impact of the *Raging Grannies*. Maybe seniors are the present and the future of the church after all. And what is a senior anyway? I know there are official definitions – legal ones that enable you to collect pension or ride the ferry free of charge. There are also the concepts we have in our minds – a senior is retired or lives in a retirement home – a senior is someone my mom’s age or grandpa’s age – a senior is way older than me! This past week I asked a group facilitator to define what she meant by seniors. She said anyone over 55! Yikes!

In middle or old age God promises to make Abraham *exceedingly numerous* and with this comes a change of name. Until this point he has been Abram, but now he will be known by a name that expresses God’s covenant: *Abraham*. A name change also happens in the gospels when Andrew introduces his brother to Jesus. Jesus says, “*You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas (which is translated Peter)*”. The Greek meaning of Peter is stone – or rock. Peter is often considered the cornerstone of the church.

El Shaddai – God Almighty (used in the first verse of our Genesis passage today) – is one of the names for God in the Old Testament communicating God’s power, and this is its first use in scripture which points to the significance of this exchange.

Naming is so vital to our identity! All we need to do is consider anyone in circumstances where they are choosing to change their name and we come to understand the power of our names. I once taught with someone who had changed her name from Carol (which means *song of joy*) to Carla (which means *free, strong or independent woman*). Both names are lovely and have powerful meanings, but one expressed this woman’s self-identity better and so she chose Carla.

Steve’s name, short for Stephen, means *victorious, one with a crown*. My name is *derived from the word 'laurel', a plant used to make crowns for winners during in Ancient Rome. It means victory*. I love that our names mean almost the same thing!

Do you know about the meaning of your name or the names of important people in your life? Do you know the story of where your name came from? Do people agree about how your name is used, pronounced, or shortened? Do people remember to use the name that you like for yourself? Are there names people agree not to call you?

Names today are chosen for many reasons. In the Bible names communicated a message or aspiration. Abraham’s name, meaning: *ancestor of a multitude of nations*, was a daily reminder of God’s promise – God’s covenant.

The covenant is with Sarah as well as Abraham. It is important that she also receives a covenant and a new name – now she is *a princess* in her own right. God’s covenant with us is egalitarian, not patriarchal – expansive not parochial. Sarah is the mother of nations – fallible like her

husband, but open to God's promises and creativity moving through her life. There is great richness in this scripture, lived out in the promise that God makes a way where we see no way – hope when all seems hopeless. Covenant is about birth and growth. When we respond positively to God's covenantal love, new possibilities emerge.

The word *covenant* appears 396 times in the Bible (so I'm told!) and usually refers to promises given and received between God and individuals, who may also represent others. The initiative lies with God – God makes the first move. God's grace is unconditional and crucially, unwarranted. The covenant with Abraham is the second time God makes a covenant in the Bible – the first is with Noah – and there are others, notably with Moses and David. The last is the new covenant ushered in by Jesus. *We love because God first loved us.*

Covenant ultimately is not about me or my people, but about what we do today to support the well-being of future generations – *to love as God has loved us*. Hopefully we can remember not to read scripture in a way that separates us – God's people – from the covenant that God makes with them – with us. Israel stumbles a lot – and God remains faithful. We stumble a lot – and God remains faithful. That is a good thing to consider as we continue this Lenten journey focused on God's covenant promises. God is faithful – even as we stumble – God remains faithful.

➤ *To Abraham and Sarah*

478

† Prayer (built on themes from Psalm 19)¹

Creator God, your glory fills the heavens and all that you have made bears your mark. We pray for this creation: we ask forgiveness for the ways in which we have disfigured it; we pray for those who cannot enjoy the warm sun or the cool night, those who are imprisoned or alone... those who are ill or infirm... those who mourn...

Use all of us, our hearts, our hands, to bring your wondrous power into their lives. Let us glorify you, O God – let your hymn resound in our lives.

(Silence)

Gracious God, your perfect law protects and revives us and your way enlightens and enlivens us. We pray for all the peoples of this world: people hungry for order and safety, warmth and shelter... women and men who lay down their lives to keep their neighbours safe... and those who lead our nations, cities, and towns...

Help us unearth this treasure of justice and equality and bring it to all the world. Let us glorify you, O God – let your hymn resound in our lives.

(Silence)

¹ Reformed Worship 90, page 25ff.

Loving God, who brings the true sweetness, the true riches of life to those who serve you, who gathers, protects and preserves us: we pray for one another and for your holy church...

Keep us blameless and innocent. Cleanse our faults, increase our faith, inspire our work and witness in your name. Let us glorify you, O God – let your hymn resound in our lives.

(Silence)

Hear these and all our prayers, great God –

and let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, our strength and our hope.

We pray together in Jesus' name... *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, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen*

➤ *We are God's people*

472

† Offering and Prayer

Jesus challenged his followers to deny themselves in order to follow him. Our offerings express to God our willingness to give not just a little something, but to commit resources we could have used in other ways for God's purposes instead. We are blessed to be able to give.

Jesus, you challenge your followers to give to God as you did, without counting the cost. Receive our gifts and bless them so that they may continue your ministry of healing in this hurting world. Bless us with your courage so our lives speak to others of our love for you and for them. Amen

Blessing

As we continue our journey in the river of life, may we feel the winds of God bringing life through each one of us so that we might be a blessing to everyone we meet. And may the grace of the Living Christ, the love of God, and the nurturing community of the Holy Spirit embrace us all. Amen

➤ *Go now in peace*

622