

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 closer to the events in Jerusalem every day.

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

When your people were slaves, you led the faithful through the waters and set them free. But we struggle with the freedom you give us.

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

Always you reach out to us. Yet so often we have ignored your open arms and fled from your grace and freedom—and our responsibility.

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

Let us pray... **Loving God, you have loved us beyond all measure, but we continue to look for life outside of your embrace. On this journey, remind us that true freedom comes in obedience to you and following where you lead. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen**

PWS&D Sharing    **Women Farmers Ensure Food Security**

In the village of Mwenitanga in Malawi, Twambilire inspected the soil that lay beneath the layers of flimsy husks on her plot of land.

Twambilire had witnessed the effects of climate change on her farm in the frequency and severity of both droughts and rain—events that make it difficult for her to grow enough food to eat and sell at the market.

One day, Twambilire decided to sign up for a PWS&D-supported program teaching conservation agriculture. At the workshop, she learned to farm in a way that encourages crop rotation, organic fertilizers and minimal soil disturbance.

Twambilire proudly shares that since mulching her plot and implementing what she had learned, her once-degraded soil is now fertile and healthy. She has also become a lead farmer with the PWS&D project, teaching other farmers in her community about conservation agriculture.

Faithfully respond with PWS&D as we help farmers adapt to climate change so that they can increase their yields and improve nutrition for their families. [www.werespond.ca](http://www.werespond.ca) / (416) 441-1111

➤ *We come to ask your forgiveness*

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† Prayer for Understanding

**Holy God, the pages of scripture hold many things. You have inspired poetry, song and story. You have called many people to faithfulness through these words. Open to us the meaning so that we may find your will for us in what we read today. Amen**

**Laura:** I love the prophet Jeremiah. He was a little bit nuts, but he cared so very deeply for his own people, and for the God who loved them.

**Steve:** Jeremiah fumed and fussed – smashed pots in front of people – walked around naked sometimes – got thrown into jail. He was willing to try anything to get people to pay attention to God’s call to faithfulness.

**Laura:** It didn’t work all that well. The Hebrew people were taken as prisoners to Babylon. And Jeremiah went with them.

**Steve:** The Hebrew people were treated well in Babylon. In many ways, life was better there than it had been back in Israel. There was good food. Nice clothes. Good entertainment.

**Laura:** But Jeremiah could sense it. There was a rotten core inside of all that. And the more thoughtful Hebrew people were wondering, *“How can we sing the Lord’s song in this strange land?”*

**Steve:** Does that sound familiar? We’ve been enjoying the good life in this country. Most of us have seen our standard of living go up in our lifetime. Most of us are doing just fine.

**Laura:** But there are thoughtful Jeremiah’s among us too, who are asking, *“Can we sing God’s song”* in this midst of our affluent lifestyle? Do we need a whole new way of being faithful? What is God calling to our attention?

**Steve:** So this is our passage. It is Jeremiah struggling to speak God’s words to people who are living very comfortably in a place that is not their home...

**(SLIGHT PAUSE)**

Scripture     **Jeremiah 31: 31-34**

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

## John 12: 20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

Jesus answered them, *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."*

Then a voice came from heaven, *"I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."*

The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, *"An angel has spoken to him."*

Jesus answered, *"This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."*

He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

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

➤ *Now the green blade rises*

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### Message

God makes a new covenant with the people because they are – we are – forgetting yet again how to live in loving relationship with one another – forgetting God's promises. God remembers – recalls the history of the people better than they remember it themselves. God considers the promise of the rainbow – a promise to take care of the earth and all living things – a promise to be with the people always. God remembers the promise of the stars – a promise made to Abraham and Sarah long ago – a promise that they would begin a huge family – as many as all the stars in the sky. God remembers this promise that the family could become people of God and that each one would be known by name. God brings to mind the promise of stone tablets – a promise to give the people loving ways to live in freedom. God remembers the promise of the snake – a promise that God would always be with the people – in new times, in lonely times, in scary times.

God remembers these promises because God makes and keeps them. But God is concerned about the forgetfulness and sin of the people and God decides that it is time to give the people a new

promise – a new covenant. God knows people need divine love and help so God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah – promises they will come to know God so well that they will never forget again. God promises to put on their hearts that which helps them to know how God wants each person to be in relationship with others. God will write divine words on their hearts.

*A disciple in the Jewish tradition asks his rabbi, 'Why does the Torah tell us to "place these words upon your hearts"? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words **in** our hearts?'*

*The rabbi answers, 'It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay, until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in.'*

Our hearts need to break so that the promises God has placed there can fall in and take root. God's new covenant is rooted in the overriding reality of forgiveness – forgiveness overcomes sin. The covenant is a promise in the future that God is creating in which the people's sin will be remembered no more – a future promise that begins when it is heard and believed.

God's way is full of promise yet we, like the exiles of old, sometimes doubt the capacity of God to work something new against all the circumstances we see around us. Can there be any newness that will overcome the evil of today? Have we lost the very possibility of promise – of hope?

The heart breaks open like newly tilled soil – the promises of God fall in and take root – bringing to mind the passage from John's Gospel about *a grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies so that it can bear much fruit.*

The people who approach Phillip to ask for an appointment seem to know that Jesus is the one they should talk to. Maybe they are wondering if there is anything that will overcome the troubles of their day. Perhaps they are looking for the possibility of promise that Jesus represents.

What they hear is a lesson in discipleship: *If you want to follow Jesus, understand that you must be – like him – a seed that falls into the ground and dies in order to blossom. You cannot hoard your life – making personal survival your goal. You must have a higher allegiance – one born out of belief in and commitment to Jesus – to God. Jesus is the one who finds by losing – who brings a great harvest by dying.*

Jesus talks of death as if it were a necessary loss. He turns to images of nature where death and life are always cycling back and forth. The seed dies in the ground and comes up again with new life, giving a great abundance back to the earth. We watch the trees as green leaves lose their life giving power of photosynthesis – turn brown, yellow and red – plunging into colorful death. What might these natural examples have to do with human life – with your life and mine?

The truth is that parts of us are dying all the time. You probably lost half a million or more cells since I started talking! We all lose about 100,000 cells per second. Fortunately, just as many cells are being reproduced in a healthy body. Healthy bodies have this constant cycle of dying cells and rebirth of new ones. Some scientists say that we are regenerated every seven years. Apparently, cells that don't die off in the normal cycle are a real problem. These cells are related to diseases like cancer and become problematic because they get in the way and block healthy development of the body.

Perhaps this is true in the spiritual and emotional life as well. Our failure to let go and let some things die is a primary spiritual disease – new life can't come without some death. The failure to forgive leads to death of relationship while anger and bitterness ravage the spirit like a cancer. Holding on to regrets strangles hope before it can lift us to new life – trying to control events and other people leads to frustration, excessive stress, and exhaustion. Forgiveness and letting go are spiritual exercises in the art of dying so that new life may abound.

Our mind is always full of thoughts – memories – worries about the future – the din of things to accomplish – the whirl of schedules – the buzz of distractions from all aspects of our life constantly flooding our consciousness. I was reminded this week that we, each of us, likely have some main issue that is constantly in the forefront of our mind – that concern or worry or hope or joy that keeps drawing our attention. It is right there all the time – blotting out so many other things – dominating our conversation – skewing our perspective. Letting some of that die away and allowing ourselves to be fully present in the moment is a way to be both faithful and mindful.

Mindfulness gets us out of our heads and into our lives in the present moment – instead of being governed by that one issue. Our thoughts and emotions rise and fall – come and go – just like our breathing. One thought dies and another brings new life. As we learn to let go and be in the present moment, seeds fall to the ground and die, allowing the birth of something new.

At the center is this saying about the seed – the paradox of keeping your life and losing it – of losing your life as the only way to really live it. This is the great truth that Jesus' disciples and so many of us often fail to grasp. It's not just about Jesus' death and resurrection. It's about being willing to follow Jesus **into** death and resurrection. What's true for him is true for each of us. We can't move by standing still. We can't grow by remaining the same. We can't reach our destiny by refusing to participate in the moments that are meant to define us. We can't be great by playing it safe.

If the people listened and absorbed what Jesus said – if they truly "saw" him – they realized what their path would be as his followers. They heard a grain of wheat hitting the ground and saw a rich harvest coming from that grain. They felt their hearts break open and experienced the promises of God falling in to take root. They witnessed a cross being lifted to the sky and a vision of people drawn to that cross – walking in the light of Christ.

We are always dying – with each breath that enters and leaves our body – with each second and the hundreds of thousands of cells that are dying off to make room for more – with each love and loss and hope. May we continually die so new life may abound in us and through us. May we fall into dirt, as Jesus says – go where grain is supposed to go. May we follow the spiral within the seed that takes us deeper into the dark but also – finally, fruitfully – out of it. **Amen**

➤ *Spirit of God, descend upon my heart (vs 1, 2, 4)* **382**

† Prayer (based on themes from Psalm 119: 9-16)<sup>1</sup> **Not in ppt – reader does bold**

How can those who are young keep their way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands.

**I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. Praise be to you, Lord; teach me your decrees.**

With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth. I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways.

**I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.**

We who are young, we who are old, we who are rich, we who are poor, we who gather from every way and walk of life, seeking you with our whole hearts, trying to guard our lives according to your Word, we come to you in prayer...

...asking that you would bless those whom we love – family, friends, neighbours – and those in need who may be strangers to us.

...asking that you would bless those who serve us in places of business or in medical contexts – those who remove our garbage, deliver our mail, and keep our streets safe.

...asking that you would bless those in our community and the world who are disliked and abused, exploited or oppressed, persecuted, imprisoned or forced to flee to safety.

**We who seek you with our whole heart offer our prayers, in the name of Christ, our Saviour, whose life was laid down that all our lives might rise. 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***

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<sup>1</sup> Reformed Worship 90, page 25ff.

† Offering and Prayer

Jesus reminds us that a seed surrenders its life to the ground in order to bear much fruit. What we surrender to God in our offering will also bear much fruit in the world, for the sake of Christ, our Lord. As springtime begins, sow the seeds of God's love as you offer your gifts to God.

**God of growth and new life, with our gifts we offer you our thanks and praise for the promise of spring and the promise of resurrection in Christ Jesus. Bless our gifts and through them, accomplish more than we can ask or imagine, as they bear fruit in the world you love, through Christ, our Lord. Amen**

Blessing

Go now, to serve Christ and follow him. Let your old life fall like a grain of wheat into the earth so that you may bear much fruit as you allow God to reshape your heart. And may the grace of the Living Christ, the love of God, and the nurturing community of the Holy Spirit embrace us all. Amen