

Welcome, Announcements, and Land Acknowledgement

As we come to worship in Jesus 'name we acknowledge with gratitude and respect the Lkwungen people – the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ – on whose traditional and unceded territory we gather. We commit ourselves to just and respectful relationships within our congregation and our neighborhood.

➤ *Don't be afraid (repeat)*

Call to worship

We come together to celebrate God's presence!

We greet you with love, Creator of the universe!

We come to worship and lift our hearts in thanksgiving

We are your people and the sheep of your pasture.

God is gracious and filled with love and mercy.

O come let us worship our God,

the One who renews and remakes us and sets our feet on new paths.

✠ Gathering Prayer and Prayer of Confession

Gracious and eternal God, we come together as a community of faith. We come to worship you, to love you and to draw close to your presence. We wait to hear your voice...

We thank you and praise you, that you have called us to be your people. God of creation, shaper of seas and stars, sculptor of rocks and people, we praise and bless you. Holy Spirit, breath of the universe, fill us with wonder – for the mystery of your compassion and the transforming power of your love. Create in us hearts that long to love and serve you in this place, in our homes, in our work, and in all we do.

Loving God, come and be present with us, and show us how to be the disciples you would have us to be... and so together we seek your forgiveness:

Jesus, look into our hearts and help us to see those things that you want to change, to heal, to strengthen, and to nourish. Forgive our inability to love ourselves and help us to remember that you made us in your image with your holy hands of love. Forgive our grudges, or those times when we have settled for bitterness. Forgive our fears when we have forgotten that you are faithful in all things. Send your Holy Spirit to remakes and renew us, so that we can serve you, love you and walk in your paths with trust and joy. Mold us and re-shape us according to your perfect will and endless grace.

Unclench our hands- that we may reach out to one another, and touch and be healed. Open our lips that we may drink in the delight and wonder of life. Open our eyes - that we may see

Christ in friend and stranger. Breathe your Spirit into us, and so touch our lives that we may ever praise you and delight in your presence. In the strong name of Jesus we pray this, Amen

Words of hope

Sing a new song unto the Lord! Sing his praise throughout the world. And do not be afraid, for God says to us: I have redeemed you; you are mine. I have set you as a seal on my heart. I have carved you on the palm of my hand. In Jesus Christ we have seen the love of God, and we know that we are forgiven people. Thanks be to God for such grace.

➤ *When morning gilds the skies*

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Prayer for Understanding

Lord of life we come to you, seeking the light of your face and the surprises of your grace. By the power of your Holy Spirit, open to us the treasures of your love and your wisdom. Encourage what you have begun in each of us through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen

Scripture

Isaiah 55: 1-9 [OT 685]

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. 2Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. 3Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. 4See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. 5See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. 6Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; 7let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. 8For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. 9For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Psalm 63: 1-8 responsive/displayed

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you;

my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

So, I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

So, I will bless you as long as I live;

I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

Luke 13:1-9 [NT 76]

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, *'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'*

Then he told this parable: *'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'*"

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Meditation: *The Calculus of Grace* (Luke 13:1-9)

Then, as now, there was no shortage of opinion as to what lay behind what had happened. The newspapers and the talk shows were abuzz over recent events, and what they had to say, reflected the general feelings of the public.

The first story ran under the headline, "Insurrection Thwarted in Temple Courts." It read, in part, ***"An alleged band of Galilean revolutionaries was killed by the Pilate's police yesterday in the temple courtyard. Undercover agents dispersed among the worshipers acted swiftly, drawing their swords at a pre-arranged signal. Fifty-six suspected terrorists were slain, and over one hundred arrested. Informed sources indicate that Pilate was acting on warnings of revolution from his closest advisers. Representatives of both Pilate and the High Priest declined to comment on the incident."***

The editorials and commentaries expanded on the story. Page three of the Jerusalem Times suggested that everyone in the city owed a great debt to Pilate's decisive action which again preserved the *pax romana*, the peace of the empire.

And on the radio, the open-line shows took a different slant. While a few dared to raise the troubling evidence that those who died had been unarmed, most callers thought the action was justified.

As one woman stated, "Look, they got what they deserved. These Galileans are always stirring up trouble. We'd all be a lot better off if they went back where they came from, and stayed there!"

An anonymous caller commented on how horrible it was for the blood of the slain Galileans to be mingled with the sacrifices, but hung up before their identity could be confirmed.

The sermons that Saturday were a little gentler - lamenting the loss of life, but taking from the incident a stern warning of the fate that awaited sinners.

Somehow, some way, those who died must have been up to no good, for surely the punishment of God falls only on those who deserve it.

Prayers were offered for the widows and orphans.

When a second disaster occurred shortly after, there was no gentleness or regret from either press or pulpit. Eighteen workers had died during the reconstruction of a pivotal part of the walls of Jerusalem, when the tower of Siloam had come crashing down on them. While the newspapers called for an investigation of the engineering firm and the whole process of tendering public contracts, popular opinion was much more strident.

Historically there had been a previous scandal when evidence was found that Pilate had seized temple treasury funds to build an aqueduct. It wasn't difficult to put two and two together to see what had happened this time.

People said, "Pilate stole the money for that project from the temple treasury, and anyone who worked on it was participating in a blasphemy against God. God made that tower fall, blessed be He. Anyone who cooperates with evil gets evil in return. Period. Bottom line. People get what they deserve."

"People get what they've got coming to them, and if something bad happens, at some level, somehow, somewhere, they were asking for it."

That's a pretty powerful attitude in the human heart, in their time and in ours. It's often called "attacking the victim", and it takes many forms.

A prostitute is beaten up in a seedy hotel, and some think that it's divine retribution, or at least 'getting what she deserved.'

A young woman is sexually assaulted, and some say "Well, it's not surprising. Look at what she was wearing!"

And when we are brought low, we almost invariably ask, "What have I done to deserve this?! Why is God punishing me like this?"

It is tempting to conclude that sin is the cause of all calamity. If God is a just God and if God is responsible for all that happens- then it would appear to us that we can safely answer the riddle of why bad things happen to good people.

However this logic is faulty. God doesn't cause all events. If God did, there would be no room for human freedom.

The rain falls on the just and the unjust. We all get wet.

This kind of thinking is as old as humanity, and it reflects very powerfully and painfully what we believe about God.

What we believe about people is always a reflection, ultimately, of what we believe about God. And it's never been uncommon to believe that if things go well it's because God loves you, and God must be on your side, and if things go poorly it must be because God is punishing you.

For a number of years I was a chaplain at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario. It was not uncommon for me to hear a parent whisper in tears, "I think God is punishing me."

Some parents and children go through more trials and suffering than any one person should have to go through in a life time, and like them, and anyone who suffers, we search our hearts for any bait that might bring disaster sniffing our way.

And Jesus says, "I tell you, no!" and the cross declared for all time, "No!" It isn't that simple, and life is not simply a matter of a God who keeps score and that people's lives reflect their scorecard.

Life is uncertain. Death is capricious. We can fasten our seat belts, change our pin #'s and passwords, and floss our teeth, but in the end, life is fragile and none of us are immune to suffering.

The rain falls on the just and the unjust. We all get wet.

Bad things just happen. War, having your country invaded, family disagreements, cancer, and so on. We all want answers.

It's most likely that the people raising questions about the Galileans slaughtered at worship were attempting to recruit Jesus as a potential leader of an uprising, a revolution.

It wouldn't be out of character for the times. A lot of people expected that the Messiah would be the one who would lead the revolution against the hated Romans and the puppet-king Herod, and it was understandable that people would raise these disasters with Jesus.

He was a Galilean like those who died and had their blood tossed in with the temple sacrifices. He was a religious man who surely must have been offended by the misuse of temple funds at the Siloam tower. But as Jesus so often did, he used their questions not to pass comment about someone else but as a door into the lives of those asking the questions .

I believe that what Jesus said to them was a statement of strategy as well as a statement of sanctity. "I tell you, no. But unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

Jesus had the insight to know that if these violent rebellions they desired came to pass, the nation would be crushed without mercy by the power of the Romans. Thirty-five years later the rebellion did come, and the Romans did react, and Jerusalem was flattened.

Yet the repentance Jesus called for was more than a turning away from zeal for insurrection. He was asking them, as he asks us, to repent - to turn away from something - to change our minds about something. That word repentance, *metanoia* in Greek – means a change of mind and heart.

And so it was in response to this, that Jesus told the parable about the fig tree. In the territory of Israel there was not a lot of arable land, not a lot of space for growing things, and so you had to make the best possible use of every square foot.

Wherever there was room you planted something. So even the vineyards had fruit trees dotted throughout them. They occupied a privileged position on the hills, had water and sun, and were tended with care by the vinedressers.

But the investment had to literally bear fruit. You had to keep score - if you fertilized and watered and pruned and got nothing as a result, then you had to get out the axe.

Besides the vineyard being a common theme of everyday life, there were also in Jesus' time a number of well known Middle Eastern stories about 'unfruitful trees.' They usually ended in getting out the axe. But Jesus turns it around and it's actually funny in its context.

The word Jesus uses in Luke is only used two times in the New Testament (here in Luke) which is mainly in Greek. The Greek word is *kopria*. It means dung, more than it means fertilizer. It's actually more, shall we say - earthy.

In Jesus' version the gardener intercedes for the tree, asking for mercy.

The vineyard of course, is a common Biblical metaphor for God's people, and the one who tends the vineyard of Israel, looking for fruitfulness, is God. The story Jesus tells is both a word of warning and a word of comfort. The people have not borne fruit. The *kopria* has hit the fan.

They have occupied a privileged position in God's love - they have been given the law and the prophets, and God is calling forth from them, the fruit of deeds of mercy and charity that will make Israel what it is called to be - a light to the nations. They need to repent of their fruitless forms of living and their fruitless desire for military solutions. They deserve the axe.

But the vinedresser says, "Give it another year, man. Let me try digging a little more. I'll use a different fertilizer - the very best *kopria* . let me see what I can make of this tree."

God's grace is still inviting and still patient.

Remember that the parable is to illustrate the statement, "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish". So what is the repentance called for?

What is he asking them to turn away from?

He's asking them to turn away from sin, of course, but **surely he's asking them to turn away from the very thing that has blocked God's grace in and through them, and has made them unfruitful.**

He's asking them to turn away from critically analyzing the pain of others and assessing blame and judgement. Repent of your calculus of rewards and punishments.

Our love will always be cold when we are caught in the grip of seeing life as a calculation of rewards and punishments. And our faith will always be fruitless if our whole preoccupation is to attribute some vengeance of God towards those who suffer while imagining some particular blessing on ourselves when things are going well. It was in the grip of that kind of thinking that passers-by looked upon the death of Jesus on the cross and said, "This is no Messiah - this man is accursed by God. Look what happened to him! "The love and grace of God calls us out of keeping score. It calls us from doing a cost benefit analysis of whether someone is worthy of our care, or numbering with relish our resentments and diffidently disdaining the deeds and the needs of others.

When bad things happen we generally want answers. And yet - with all the kopria in the news - in our world I still want to follow Jesus. Bad things are happening, but Jesus says to us, wait, give it another year and give it some really good manure - kopria. And yes - Jesus was being funny. He has turned a well known idiom of the time that demands a punishment into a response of grace. He equates God's mercy with manure.

And let me just add, that if someone tells you that God never gives you more than you can handle, remember this: That is kopria. God walks with us all the time. Jesus is always with us and yes - we all get wet.

May the mercy, justice and grace of God's good intentions work quickly down to our very roots, and on the roots of all of God's suffering people. Amen

➤ *Before the world began*

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Offering invitation

There are some who have much and some who have little. We are called to serve one another. In compassion, we are called to share what we have that others may grow in God's grace, discover new life, wholeness and joy. Let us worship God as we present our offerings.

➤ *Praise God from whom all blessings flow*

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† Offering Prayer

Loving and generous God, in glad thanksgiving for all of your goodness, we bring you our offerings and our service - to touch human lives and communities with the gentleness of your grace and the vitality of your goodness. Take and transform all we bring to you, that your love will may bring healing, wholeness and new life. In the strong name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

† Pastoral Prayers and The Lord's Prayer

Gracious God. We turn to you in our weakness, trusting in your power to renew and to walk along side of us. May your Spirit coax all our cares to unravel into your peace. Be visible in us in our daily lives – but also visible in who we are as a congregation. Empower us to be the face of love to one another as well as to those we avoid.

Jesus Christ, light of the world, we pray for your church in all places, where it is oppressed , set it free, where it is weak, renew and strengthen it. Where it is divided, heal it and unify it. May you spread your light upon our own paths that we may see new possibilities. We praise you for the signs of new life and hope that you set in and among us.

Tender and compassionate God, we pray for those who struggle with the cross in their lives. For those who face uncertainty and difficult decisions, grant them the steadfast faith and peace that only you can give. We pray for hearts that weep, hearts that mourn, for those who face odds that seem insurmountable.

Our world is broken Holy One. War rages on with unspeakable horrors and so we pray for peace in Ukraine, for safety of those running for their lives and your abiding presence with those who are hiding in fear. We pray for peace.

Jesus, you laid your hands gently upon young and old to bring healing, and so we pray for those who are ill, and weak... We pray for those who are dying – surround them with your peace and presence. And in the silence, we pray for ourselves and for those who are especially dear to us and need your touch today...

God of life and glory, open our eyes to see the radiance of your glory, and bring us at the last to your everlasting kingdom, where in light undimmed and unending, you are worshipped and adored. We offer these prayers – trusting in your great love, in Jesus Christ our redeemer and Lord, and together, we pray as he 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, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen***

➤ *I know not why such wondrous grace*

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Blessing

May the shadow of Christ fall on you. May the garment of Christ cover you. May the breath of Christ breathe in you. And may the Love of our God – Creator, Christ and Spirit – be with you to bless and keep you this day and always.

➤ *May the God of hope go with us every day*

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