

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.*

➤ *O let the power fall on me*

Call to Worship

O God, our Shepherd,  
**gather us together and lead us like a flock.**

O God, our Gardener,  
**plant us like a vineyard so that we produce good fruit.**

O God, our Merciful Judge,  
**we call upon your name in prayer and praise.**

We bow before you, O God,  
**and offer our worship with glad and humble hearts.**

Gathering Prayer / The Lord's Prayer / Words of Hope

God of majesty and mystery, we gather today in the presence of that great cloud of witnesses who have worshiped you in song and service. Our praise joins theirs as we fix our eyes on Jesus and wait for your Spirit to guide us. We praise you for your great love and mercy, revealed in Jesus, at work in us through the Spirit. Holy One, we offer you all glory and honour in our worship, seeking to renew our faith and commitment to serve you in this broken world.

Attentive God, you care for us like a gardener tending a beautiful vineyard – blessing us with what we need to be fruitful. Yet we confess we fail to live up to your hopes for us. Instead of love and kindness, we produce anger and resentment. Instead of generosity, we produce greed and jealousy. Forgive us, O God. In your mercy, renew in us the fruit of the Spirit as we are bold to pray... ***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***

Hear the good news! Although we have not always been faithful to God, God remains faithful to us. In Jesus Christ, God offers forgiveness. Through the gift of the Spirit, God renews us to live faithfully. Thanks be to God!

➤ *Shall we gather at the river*

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† Prayer for Understanding

**God of all time and place, fill our hearts and minds with stories of your faithful people through the ages. Guide and enlighten us by your Holy Word as we journey in your way. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen**

Scripture    **Isaiah 5: 1-7**            **[OT 634]**

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: *My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.* And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

**Luke 12: 49-56**            **[NT 75]**

*I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.*

He also said to the crowds, *When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?*

**Hebrews 11: 29 - 12: 2**            **[NT 226]**

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace. And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets – who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented – of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

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

### Message

The readings for this week are provocative to say the least – harsh even. Where is the peace we have so often heard Jesus speak of? Where is the comfort and reassurance we long for? Instead, we have God seeing bloodshed and hearing cries – Jesus telling us that division rather than peace on earth is to be expected – and the author of Hebrews recounting the gruesome deaths of great heroes of the faith who fail to receive what was promised.

These are texts that invite us — *compel* us — to move beyond soft, saccharine faith, and wrestle with the hard, high costs of discipleship. Descriptive rather than prescriptive, they declare in honest, unflinching terms what will happen if we dare to take our faith seriously. What will happen in our families, our communities, our churches, and our world if we allow the fire of God’s word to burn through us. Bottom line? If *tender Jesus, meek and mild* is what we prefer, then this week’s lectionary is not for us. If feel-good religion is the comfort zone we refuse to leave, then we’re missing out, because the *shalom* of God is about so much more than good feelings. In our life of faith we should be provoked, disturbed, surprised, and challenged.

There is just so much to draw from in these readings that instead of delving deeply into one text, I am going to highlight a few phrases that challenge me and reflect on them.

***... he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!***

Isaiah 5 begins with what looks like some light-hearted romantic ballad. A kind of troubadour opens this chapter by saying, “Listen up! I’m going to sing you a ballad about my beloved one – a song about the vineyard of our love!” It looks like a love song but quickly changes into a lament.

The singer worked hard to create the right conditions for his love-vineyard, for what is later called *a garden of delight*. He did everything right. He planted expensive vines, vines of cabernet, zinfandel, merlot, and chardonnay grapes. So far as he knew, everything was on track. Grapes grew and looked like the genuine article. Vines seemed to flourish. Finally, the harvest came, but the only grapes he could find were sour, stinky, and worthless.

*“What else could I have done,”* the man cries out in despair. *“What more could I have provided? There’s nothing for the entire project but to start over.”* So, in a kind of fury fueled by heartbreak the vintner declares the destruction of all he had labored so hard to build.

God is that broken-hearted vintner, and the vineyard is Israel.

Isaiah said that the good, juicy grapes God wanted were justice and righteousness. Instead, what God discovered was the exact opposite. Instead of justice God found bloodshed – instead of righteousness, cries of the oppressed.

Israel had a *form* of justice, but it was justice for the few – the wealthy, the lucky winners of society. Meanwhile, most of what the upper crust had was ill-gotten gain built upon the shed blood of the poor. Some of the people looked very righteous, very pious – they went to the Temple, observed the Sabbath, prayed now and again. Yet their ears were deaf to the cries of distress which God’s ears picked out very easily. Instead of being the locus of justice, the Temple became a shelter for the elite whose walls were used to keep them from hearing the cries of the needy.

Throughout the Old Testament it is clear that justice was mostly a way to *prevent* crimes from happening, and one of the biggest crimes that needed to be avoided was a trampling upon the widow, the orphan, and the alien – women who had lost their husbands, children who had lost their parents, and *the stranger who is within your gates*.

These groups represented the underdogs of society – the marginalized who could so easily be exploited. Justice in the Old Testament was more about caring for the needy than punishing the wicked. Biblical judges were not people who doled out verdicts from a bench but were champions of justice who went out and *pursued* the righteous things of God.

But the day finally came in Israel when there were no such champions. The Jubilee year was ignored. Farmers greedily picked up every last speck of grain from their fields, leaving nothing behind for the poor to glean. People who fell into debt did not see their debts cancelled or their mortgaged property eventually returned, as God’s law demanded. Precisely what God did not want to see in Israel happened anyway: there developed a permanent underclass of widows, orphans, and foreign immigrants. The people who allowed all of that to happen are the ones who break God’s heart.

This is a passage about justice in ancient Israel – about the *lack* of justice – a deficit which caused God great pain. And divine heartbreak is a devastating thing. Isaiah 5 is a little like God singing the Blues. If you are familiar with the jazz genre of the Blues, then you know that most such songs are about unrequited love or love gone bad.

Billie Holiday was a great Blues singer who crooned lyrics like: “*Without your love I’m like a song without words, a nest without birds, a plane without wings, a violin without strings, without your love.*” And “*Lady sings the blues, she’s got ‘em bad, she feels so sad.*” That’s the Blues. And in this text God is singing the Blues!

Are we continuing to break God’s heart with our lack of justice? Sometimes I’m sure I hear God still singin’ the Blues.

***Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!***

When Jesus speaks of division rather than peace in Luke’s Gospel, he’s being descriptive, not prescriptive. It’s not Jesus’s desire or purpose to set fathers against sons or mothers against daughters. It’s certainly not his will that we stir up conflict for conflict’s sake or use his words to justify violence or war.

Jesus’ words are a necessary reminder that the peace he offers is not the fake peace of denial, dishonesty, and harmful accommodation. His is a holistic, truth-telling, disinfecting peace. The kind of deep, life-changing peace that doesn’t hesitate to break in order to mend and cut in order to heal. Jesus will name realities we don’t want named. He will upset hierarchies we’d rather keep intact. He will expose the lies we tell ourselves out of cowardice, laziness, or obstinacy. And he will disrupt all dynamics in our relationships that keep us from wholeness and holiness. This is not because Jesus wants us to suffer. It’s because he knows that real peace is worth fighting for.

Consider the fact that Jesus forced choices from just about everyone he met during his years of incarnate ministry. No one met him without feeling compelled to change. He consistently brought people to the point of crisis, tension, movement, or transformation. He consistently led people to decisions their families and communities didn’t understand.

When was the last time my faith “divided” me? When was the last time you allowed Jesus to bring you to a point of saving crisis? When was the last time our faith life encouraged holy division – holy change – in someone heart? Are we most interested in the comfort or the salvation Jesus offers?

***...though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised,***

Hebrews chapter eleven highlights the remarkable lives and achievements of those who lived “by faith” in the Hebrew Bible. And indeed, the achievements of these faith-filled men and women are awe-inspiring. During their lifetimes, they *administered justice, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, won strength out of weakness, and received their dead by resurrection.* How much more impressive can you get?

But there is a dark underside of triumph and victory. Many of God’s faithful were tortured, flogged, mocked, and stoned to death. Many went about *destitute, persecuted, and*

*tormented*. Many spent their lives wandering in deserts and mountains, in caves and holes in the ground. And all of them — *all of them* — died without receiving what was promised to them. What does this mean?

Well, I'm not sure exactly. Perhaps it means that God's timing doesn't always align with ours. Or that crises of absurdity, meaninglessness, pain, and horror are part and parcel of human existence, regardless of whether we profess faith in a benevolent God or not. Maybe it means that we need to be clear and honest about the faith we profess. Yes, there is joy in the Christian life. Yes, there is beauty. Yes, there is the promise of love, wholeness, healing, and grace. But the life of faith is also arduous — challenging — risky. And the life of faith *does not ever* guarantee us health, wealth, prosperity, or safety. To suggest otherwise is to lie — to make a mockery of the Gospel.

***...since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,***

With this beautiful image the writer encourages us to persevere in the race of faith precisely because we are not alone. Jesus has pioneered the way of faith for us, and countless men and women have gone ahead through the millennia, shaping the path for us to follow. Their stories — stories of triumph and sorrow, gain and loss, trust and doubt, achievement and disappointment — offer us both comfort and accountability.

It can be easy to forget about this cloud in my daily life. Living in a culture that worships individualism, we can be quick to assume that we are alone — unseen and unfettered in our spiritual life. But we are not — we are surrounded! Surrounded by witnesses whose testimonies both console and challenge — by witnesses whose stories touch and deepen our own. Christian faith is not about me and my personal Jesus, doing our own private thing together. Ours is a profoundly communal faith, one that spans place, culture, race, ethnicity, and time.

When I completed my studies at Vancouver School of Theology one step in the process was to participate in a kind of exit interview. I did this with my friend and colleague, Chris Parsons. We had been asked to come to the meeting with a scripture text that was significant for us. Chris and I took this seriously but also needed to put our own spin of it. We settled on the cloud of witnesses from Hebrews because of how friends, family and the relationships we formed in seminary encouraged us in our faith — our awareness that those with whom we surround ourselves were then and would always into the future influence our journey of faith. So we bottled a bit of that cloud to take into the exit interview — a tangible representation that we were part of something much bigger than ourselves — that looking to and following Jesus was best undertaken with the loving support of a community of faith — a cloud of witnesses.

It is this cloud of witnesses that encourages me as we wrestle with the challenging texts we have encountered in scripture this morning.

➤ ***May the mind of Christ my Saviour***

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### † Offering Invitation

Thankful for the good gifts God gives us in Christ and in creation, let us present to God the fruit of our labour for God's work in the church and the world.

➤ *Praise God from whom all blessings flow* 306

### † Offering Prayer

**Faithful God, bless the gifts we offer today. Use them to plant seeds of faith, hope and love in the world, so that your goodness will grow among your people, and your name be honoured. Amen**

### † Pastoral Prayers

God in whom we live and move and have our being: as we gather in your presence today, we give thanks for your faithfulness to your people across many generations and in so many situations. Thank you for the faithfulness we meet in the world around us – in friendships that endure – in communities that pitch in when someone is in trouble – in workers who go that extra mile – in countries who offer safety or sustenance when disaster strikes and strangers are in desperate need.

Compassionate God, we are aware of many challenges in our own lives, in the lives of those we care about, and in the world around us. Show us how our care and concern can respond to the prayers of those we love. In faithful silence, we lay before you the concerns on our hearts – those who have been in the headlines lately, whose situations concern us deeply, whose lives cry out to you for help...

We pray for those who are suffering behinds the scenes – those who are ill or waiting on treatment – those who are bereaved – those struggling to make ends meet or find the right job – those who are lonely – those who are moving this summer and will need new friends...

We pray for those looking forward to a new beginning – those starting at a new school or in a new College or University program – those beginning new work or new activities – those settling into a new home and neighbourhood – those welcoming new members into the family through birth, adoption or marriage...

We pray for our congregation. Gather us into new and renewed friendships. Show us how to reach out with your love and generosity. Equip us to meet every challenge with faithfulness and commitment. Faithful God, hear our prayers and renew our faithfulness in Jesus' name. **Amen**

➤ *Colourful Creator, God of mystery* 317

### Blessing

Go in peace – love and care for one another in the name of Christ Jesus. May the Lord of Fire bless and keep you – may the Lord of Energy shine upon you and be gracious to you – may the Lord of Love lift you up – offering an abundant and rewarding life.

➤ *May the God of hope go with us every day* 726