

14 July 2024

Welcome / Announcements Worship Elder: Lorraine Whiting

Land Acknowledgement Responsive, lead by Worship Elder: Lorraine Whiting

*May righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more (Ps 72:7).*

**We acknowledge with gratitude the gift of this place and the original peoples. We gather on the traditional and unceded territory of the Lkwungen people – the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ. Today this land is home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island, including survivors and intergenerational family members who have been impacted by the legacy of the residential school system. We honour them too, as we stand committed to be partners in healing, reconciliation, and justice.**

As the wise ones of old carefully observed the heavens before immersing themselves in a journey across the land, let us examine where we are and all who share this watershed, *that the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known* (Eph 3:10).

➤ *Dance with the Spirit 156 (MV)*

Call to Worship

All who hunger and thirst for God; - Come!

**Taste and see that the Lord is good!**

We come from scattered lives to this sanctuary,

**To seek our unity in the Spirit**

To seek the grace of Jesus the Christ

**To seek the peace of our Creator,**

- father and mother of us all.

**God's people have gathered!**

Let us worship God.

➤ *Hymn #472 We are God's People*

Gathering Prayer

O God, you are the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end of all creation. You caused the formless void to burst into splendour, filling space and revealing your goodness. You are the author of black holes and you are the giver of all new life. We praise you for your son, our saviour, Jesus the Christ. He came to bring peace and to reconcile those who are estranged. Jesus - our risen Lord - come and bring your healing presence in this place. Come - and breathe your Holy Spirit upon us. Reveal yourself to us here, together as the body of Christ, as brothers and sisters of Jesus. We thank you and praise you. God of mercy and love, in humbleness of heart we confess our sins. We forget to love and serve you and wander from your ways. We can be careless of your world and put your creation in danger. But we trust in your forgiving love and so we worship and adore you. Holy and eternal One, receive our praises, hear our questioning, quiet our fears and renew us in the depths of your Holiness. And as Jesus taught his friends to pray - so we too pray, using the words displayed on the screen:

#### The Lord's Prayer

**...Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver, Source of all that is and that shall be, Father and Mother of us all, Loving God, in whom is heaven: The hallowing of your name echo through the universe! The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world! Your heavenly will be done by all created beings! Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth. With the bread we need for today, feed us. In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us. In times of temptation and test, strengthen us. From trials too great to endure, spare us. From the grip of all that is evil, free us. For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and for ever. Amen.**

#### Words of Hope

The prophet Isaiah spoke God's word saying: Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing. Do you not perceive it? I am the One who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and I will not remember your sins. We are a resurrection people! We carry with us the special promise of God that we are loved. Each day is new. The future is open. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven people. This is the good news! Thanks be to God!

#### Introduction to hymn # 64 by Rev. Cathy

➤ *Hymn #64 Be Still and Know*

Prayer for Understanding      In unison, lead by Lay Reader: Heather Anderson

**Oh Trinity of love and power, illumine the sacred page we pray. By the power of your Holy Spirit, open to us the treasures of your love, your wisdom and your grace. Encourage what you have begun in each of us through Jesus Christ we pray.**

Scripture                      Lay Reader: Anne Krauss

**Psalm 46 (Responsive)**

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

**Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,**  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;  
**though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.**

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

**God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.**

The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.

**The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.**

Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

**He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.**

“Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”

**The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.**

**Philippians 4:1-14 [ NT 202]**

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to

everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

**Matthew 22:1-14 [ NT 24 ]**

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. 'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." For many are called, but few are chosen.'

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

Message: One Helluva Gift

Rev. Cathy Victor

*(With thanks to Andrew Prior, Robert F. Capon, Frederick Buechner and Philip Yancey.)*

A little piece of hell.

What does that phrase make you think of? Gone to hell in a hand basket. Bloody 'ell. A living hell perhaps. I've never preached a sermon on hellfire and brimstone. Or on the weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. It's never too late I suppose. Some of you may already be thinking, -what the hell? This sermon is a rerun. Oh well.

That's a pretty brutal ending to today's gospel reading. Our world is facing so many instances of a living hell. I think of Ukraine being pummelled by the Russian army, the killing, the destruction, the inhumanity - and then there is the war between Israel and Hamas. I think of those poor souls being held hostage in Gaza, the Palestinians who live there and can't leave or find food or water or medical care. And the families in Israel just trying to live their lives but surrounded by Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran. The crimes against humanity seem to be endless everywhere. But I'm getting ahead of myself, so just hold on to those thoughts.

The gospel reading is certainly not some cozy bedtime story to make us feel good. Jesus told stories that provoked and disturbed sometimes. And this is one of them. In the Gospel of Luke there is another version of a great banquet but Jesus tells that story around the table - at a meal in the home of a Chief Pharisee. It has a touch of judgement in it, but it is mostly filled with grace.

The Matthew version we just heard read is told in a very different context. It is the week before Jesus is crucified, and the Priests and Pharisees are trying to have Jesus arrested and killed. This is a more severe version shall we say. Both of Jesus' stories; parables are referring to a wedding banquet and that is important to remember. Think of all the dinner parties, wedding receptions, banquets and feasts in the gospels. There is the Last Supper of course, the wedding in Cana (that's in John) there's the supper at Emmaus after Jesus' resurrection, and the BBQ'd fish on the beach. There's the banquet of celebration for the prodigal son's return. And you must

remember that the son isn't judged but he is welcomed with open arms and a feast. But the main lens to look at today's banquet story is through the lens of the Marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19. This is the great light that we are to see this story through. It's the big finale. It's the heavenly feast of joy and celebration.

And here's the invitation: (holding an invitation) You are lovingly and warmly invited by the Lord, the Holy One, the creator of the stars - the universe and all living things - to come to a banquet. Come to the party! It says. Will you accept? Decline? The invitation in Jesus' story is sent to every important person around, but they act with great disdain and ignore it. So in the story, the King sends out his servants to remind them - you are invited! Come to the banquet!

Meh, is the response. Just go away. Sorry, we're busy that day. (Toss the invite.) They even start killing the servants who brought the invitations. They reject the ones delivering the invitations as well as the gracious invitation itself, and the one sending the invitation. And so the king responds in kind, and sends his own troops to kill the killers. He is angry to be so shamefully rejected and to see his servants slaughtered. So the nobility, the upper crust who were invited, the TV stars, jet setters, the ones with the Dior gowns and the Mercedes Benzes parked out front, the so called winners, become the ones who lose. They are saying we don't care or want to go to your party. And they are the ones judging - it's not the King judging here.

The King has no limits to his grace though and sends out more servants telling them to invite everyone! I don't care if they are bad or good. I don't care if they are a mess, or if they haven't had a bath in weeks, or if they don't even know what an hors d'oeuvre is. Bring everyone you find. The street person, the person living in a tent, the CEO, the Dr., the lawyer, the thief, the nurse, the musician, the accountant, the farmer, the cook - even the clergy - bring them all! There is no need for anyone to get their act together. They have nothing to lose by saying yes. Those who say no? Well, they are in their own living hell by their own choice. But! The invitation still stands if they change their mind. It is by Jesus' grace that we are invited to the party, the heavenly feast of the Lamb. This isn't about judgement but rather about welcome.

It's been suggested by many who have written about this story, that the king offers fancy clothes to these new guests when they arrive. He knows they don't have the kind of duds for a party of this ilk. So he tells his servants to go to the wardrobe and wheel down the greatest party clothes he has to give to each one. Your choice! Pick what you love. Everyone is dressed to the nines. The party is going full tilt but then the King notices someone isn't wearing any party clothes - or 'gown', as it has been translated. They've been invited, but won't even accept the gift they have been offered of party clothes. How'd you get in here like that? What the hell? This is a party! The one who rejects the gift of the gown is living in their own little piece of hell, even though the party is in full swing.

We aren't invited because of anything we have done. Often we seem to think that God is keeping score, holding some clip board in one arm. We can be like the Pharisees reading off our lists of good deeds: the church offerings made! CHECK. The time given! CHECK. The food donated, CHECK the list can go on. But salvation is not by works and the heavenly banquet is not an option that is ours to have by even accepting the invitation. That party is already in progress. The King - the One giving the party - has paid for the party with his own death and resurrection. It is by Jesus' grace - not by any track record that you or I have that we are invited. And we are welcomed into the party with open arms and offered the garment of salvation.

In the book of Philippians Paul writes about God's grace. He lists off all of the things he has done trying to display his righteous track record as a servant of the Lord, but then he says that he considers that all rubbish (well in Greek it's actually along the line of compost, and I'm trying to be polite) compared to the grace of Jesus Christ. There is therefore now no condemnation. Nothing in this world - especially not any long ago cancelled sins - can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Robert Capon - a fine theologian says this: Hell is simply the nowhere that is the only thing left for those who will not accept their acceptance by grace. And another of my favourite theologians Fredrick Buechner wrote this: and I'm paraphrasing: "We all want to be rewarded for our merits and not given some free gift. We want to be able to hold that trophy up and say - Look what I accomplished! (and I would add we may think or want that too, - both as individuals or even as congregations) We are like bargain hunters at a second hand car lot trying to talk the salesman down in price. He whispers

in your ear - come around back. And so you go, and there's a brand new Porsche. He hands you the keys. And he looks you in the eye and says: It's free. The owner really likes you." Do you take it? Do you say thank you! Do you get suspicious? Or do you start asking about the insurance, the warranty or any added terms or fees. The world is full of people who can't believe a good thing when it is staring them in the face.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. Jesus stands at the door of your heart knocking. (Note picture of Jesus at the door- there is no door knob. YOU have to let him in. )He has gone to prepare a place for you. He will even wash your feet, and offer you party clothes. Faith and grace are the only things that count. And outside of the party there is nothing at all. And what about hell you ask? For those who refuse the invitation you might think that there isn't a snowball's chance in hell that they might get to go to the banquet.

Buechner says this: "If there is suffering life in Hell, there must also be hope in hell because where there is life, and where there is suffering, he (Jesus) is there too, because the suffering of the ones he loves is also His suffering. The Creed says - He descended to Hell. Psalm 139:8 says - If I make my bed in Sheol (place of death and darkness) you are there. It seems there is no depth to which he will not sink. Jesus is with us when we suffer, when we feel we are already in some living hell.

He is with those who are in the midst of some living hell seen in the wars and persecutions around us. But there is hope, and grace for all. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female (or Trinity or Knox or St. Andrew's) For you are all One in Christ! You are all invited to the party! To the great dinner of reconciliation. You are invited to participate in God's - in Jesus' unfolding and ever-changing work of resurrection hope and new life. And that my friends is one helluva gift.

➤ *Hymn #635 Brother, sister, let me serve you*

### Offering and Prayer

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 know God's grace, new life, and joy. Let us continue to worship God as we present our offerings.



➤ *Praise God from whom all blessings flow 306*

**Living God, in Jesus Christ you make all things new. You transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace. Receive these gifts that we humbly lay before you. Transform them into instruments of your healing, of your generous grace and abundance - but most of all - of your love. Through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.**

Pastoral Prayers

Let your Spirit loose now and us with it! Embolden us to go out with courage, and with grace to enter the dark places as well as the joyful ones. Breathe into us the restlessness and creativity to make something new - something designed by your hands. We thank you for the way you work your will in our lives, touching our families, our friends, and this your church - weaving us together with your love. Gather up our lingering fears and confusion. Meet our doubts with compassion and understanding. Open our eyes to your love and grace surrounding us, and open our ears to hear you calling us to new challenges. Open our imaginations to new possibilities. Help us to be patient with what is unsolved in our hearts. Come O Holy Spirit and coax our cares to unravel into peace, and renew us in the depths of your holiness. Within the radiation of your boundless love we place all these dear ones: We pray for your Church, and all those who lead in it. For your beautiful but bruised world - that we may learn more ways to care for it. For those who lead the nations of our world - especially those who have the influence to create war or peace. For those who live with the fallout from tragic and violent decisions of world leaders. we especially bring before you the people of Ukraine, of Palestine and of Israel. For those who are refugees , the oppressed, the powerless ones, the homeless, the hungry and all those who have lost hope. We pray for those who serve as caregivers, healers, teachers. For those who mourn and feel lost and alone. For those who are struggling with illness, pain, or fear. May our broken world, our broken lives and the lives of those we have prayed for be enfolded by your love and transformed by your grace. We place our lives in your holy hands, for you, O God, are our strength and our salvation. All this we ask in the name of Jesus, the risen Christ. Amen.

➤ *Hymn #477 Your Hand O God has Guided*

Blessing

In the darkness, may there be a blessing

In the shadows, may there be a welcome  
In the night, may you be encompassed by  
The audacious love that knows your name.  
For you are all God's people, one in Christ,  
called into God's marvellous light, and invited to the party!  
And now, may the compassing of the angels be upon you  
The blessing of God, the creator be upon you  
The peace of the Holy Spirit be upon you  
And the joy of our Lord Jesus Christ be upon you  
This day and always. Amen

➤ *Go now in peace, never be afraid*