

28 July 2024 – Proclaiming the Year of Jubilee

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners... [Isaiah 61:1-2 & Luke 4:18-19]

Welcome / Announcements **Ursula**

Land Acknowledgement

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 (Psalm 146 – selected verses)

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!

I will praise the Lord as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,

whose hope is in the Lord their God,

who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith forever;

who executes justice for the oppressed;

who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!

We will praise the Lord as long as we live;

We will sing praises to God all our life long.

□ Lord, whose love

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Gathering Prayer / Words of Hope

Gracious and generous God, we gather with grateful hearts, amazed by the abundance in your creation – abundance to share in food, in friendship and in faithfulness. We gather with hopeful hearts, seeking another taste of your love for us. Your love is both mysterious and miraculous, with the power to transform times that overwhelm us and lives that hunger for hope. By the power of your Spirit, move among us in our worship.

Holy One, Jesus calls us to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, but we have not remembered the persecuted and people in prison. Religious persecution today stretches throughout the world, from China to the Sudan to Indonesia to Nigeria to Russia to Saudi Arabia to North Korea and beyond. Criminal justice systems in the western world are in crisis partly because so many people crowd the system.

Eternal God, we confess that we have tried to hide from you because we have done wrong. We have lived for ourselves and apart from you. We have turned from our neighbours and refused to bear the burdens of others. We have ignored the pain of the world and passed by the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed. In your great mercy, forgive our sins and free us from selfishness, that we may choose your will and follow Jesus...

□ Take, O take me as I am – summon out what I shall be – set your seal upon my heart and live in me.

Hear the good news! Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ – and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us – Christ lives in power for us – Christ prays for us. Thanks be to God – we are forgiven!

Prayer for Understanding (responsive) **Doug**

Liberator Christ, you came into a holy place and read the sacred word about sight for the blind and freedom for prisoners.

Come to this place now. Read these words to us until our own eyes are opened, our faith unlocked, and we can see the world as it is – as it could be.

Until the yearnings of ordinary people are taken seriously; until your kingdom is celebrated everywhere, and your church is good news to all. Amen.

Scripture **Isaiah 49:1-10** **[OT 679]**

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, "*You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.*"

But I said, "*I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.*"

And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength – he says, *“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”*

Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, *“Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”*

Thus says the Lord: In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; saying to the prisoners, *“Come out,”* to those who are in darkness, *“Show yourselves.”* They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be their pasture; they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them.

Acts 16:16-40 [NT 136]

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, *“These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”* She kept doing this for many days.

But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, *“I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.”* And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities.

When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, *“These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.”* The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the

prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, *"Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."*

The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, *"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"*

They answered, *"Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."* They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, *"Let those men go."*

And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, *"The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace."*

But Paul replied, *"They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves."*

The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. After leaving the prison they went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.

Listen to what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

Message *Remembering those persecuted for their faith and those in prison*

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners... [Isaiah 61:1-2 & Luke 4:18-19]

Our task today is to reflect on the fulfillment of God's call to proclaim freedom for the prisoners. The passages from Isaiah 49 and Acts 16 are intended to help us in that reflection but if you are at all like me this is a challenging topic. God calls us to be remembering people. As we remember what God has done – what God is doing – what God will do – we share in God's work of remembering those who are forgotten, including people in prison.

It may or may not surprise you know that I have never been in prison. I have never felt that I was part of the persecuted church, or a person persecuted for my faith. How do I remember that about which I feel ignorant and far removed? Who, in a country of religious freedom such as our own, can imagine more than general criticism for their faith? Who, in a country of rights and responsibilities and rule of law, would expect mistreatment, discrimination or abuse for their beliefs or spiritual practice? Not only that, but who among us wants all those imprisoned across our land set free? We look at those who commit crimes – those accused and found guilty and incarcerated – and we give thanks that our freedom is safeguarded. We wonder about proclaiming release to the captives because we're relieved that they are off the streets – out of sight, out of mind. So how do we participate in the call to *proclaim freedom for the prisoners?*

First, we need to recognize this as a call to each one of us and not just an affirmation of what Jesus has done for us. When people read the opening verses of Isaiah 49, they tend to speculate about "the servant of the Lord". There is no consensus among scholars as to any historical person to whom Isaiah might be referring. Many regard the servant as Israel and Christians often see these verses as suggesting Jesus. Most agree that the best idea is to focus on the imagery and force of the poetry. God has designed some human agent to be about the work of healing and emancipation in the world: *Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born,... And said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."*

As disciples of Jesus we seek to follow him and live Christ-like lives. This means participation in God's divine purpose for the world – in these verses it seems clear that God's purpose includes liberating activity within creation. The servant is God's means for God's intention. Later in the passage at verse eight, God calls the servant "a covenant" – a promise – a powerful agent and partner in the practice of loyal solidarity that makes a new future possible. Jesus comes to us as that promise and calls us to share in the work as servants of the gospel. As such we are empowered with Christ to say to the prisoners, ***"Come out,"*** to those who are in darkness, ***"Show yourselves."***

The verb “come out” is an exodus verb, asking the Babylonian exiles to leave the domination of their captivity – to regain their sense of purpose, hope and possibility. We are now the ones who must say “**come out**” – proclaim freedom for the prisoners, enlivening those separated from God with new courage and hope.

The next thing we must do is learn about and appreciate the persecution of people of faith historically and currently – we need to see our connection to this suffering. Many Christians have experienced persecution from both non-Christians and from other Christians during the history of Christianity. Persecution may refer to unwarranted arrest, imprisonment, beating, torture, or execution. It also may refer to the confiscation or destruction of property, or incitement to hate.

Persecution of Christians began long before the established church and continues today in many parts of the world. From the Roman Empire to Islam, from China and Japan to the scientific community and Hinduism it is not difficult to document persecution of the church throughout history. In 1943 Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested, imprisoned and eventually hanged by the Gestapo. He denounced Hitler and took a theological stand against the politics of his time. Bonhoeffer wrote letters and poems while in prison, this is an excerpt from a letter to a friend dated July 21st, 1944...*it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to believe... This is what I mean by worldliness – taking life in one’s stride, with all its duties and problems, its successes and failures, its experiences and helplessness. It is in such a life that we throw ourselves utterly into the arms of God and participate in his sufferings in the world and watch with Christ in Gethsemane. That is faith... and that is what makes... a Christian.*¹

Unfortunately, Christians have also been perpetrators of persecution. While Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and killed for his faith, other Christians, swept up in Nazi propaganda, participated in the persecution and eventual slaughter of millions of Jews. You can also think further back to the time of the Crusades – military expeditions undertaken by European Christians to the Holy Land in the Middle Ages. Muslims, Jews and any outside the Latin Church were targeted. Remembering those persecuted for their faith means also acknowledging that Christians have – and are – both oppressor and oppressed.

I remember the imprisonment of Christians in the Bhil region of India – the killings of over 130 evangelical pastors and countless other civilians in Columbia about 20 years ago – Christians murdered in Somalia – detained by police in Vietnam during a prayer vigil. I remember the Muslim family mowed down by a Canadian man in a pick-up truck – someone motivated by white nationalist beliefs and Islamophobia.

And lest we imagine that these things don’t happen in our own community... I remember the Ukrainian Church that was targeted in recent years. I remember the

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letter and Papers from Prison*, SCM Press, 1953 (p.124-25).

defacing of the local Jewish Cemetery not so long ago and the fear in that community especially at the start of the war in Gaza.

Earlier this month, hateful messages were posted on the front door of the Multifaith Center at the University of Victoria threatening the Muslim students, staff and faculty who hold weekly prayers there. The Multifaith team was invited to show solidarity and support by attending prayers the following week and to demonstrate our collective commitment to a respectful and inclusive environment for everyone. Standing against the persecution of one group is standing against the persecution of all.

Only a few days ago, security has again been enhanced at Multifaith because excrement was found in the building – smeared and intentional – a message of disrespect – an implicit threat. Persecution based on faith – for simply being a person of faith – can and is happening in our community today.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer proclaimed freedom within his prison and beyond – the sovereignty of faith. We too are encouraged to seek an end to religious persecution in its many forms both locally and globally. We may not experience such persecution personally, but it shapes our world and informs our faith.

Finally, we need to open our minds to the true meaning of freedom and to the call of Christ to empathy and compassion. We may not cry out for the physical release of all held in captivity in ours or any country despite the disproportionate number of Black, Indigenous and people of colour in our prisons. We know that some people are imprisoned appropriately for their crimes. We can, however, reach out to those in prison, seeking to proclaim the freedom of salvation.

A clear example of this comes for me in the movie “Dead Man Walking”. It is not an easy film to watch since the scenes of violence are persistently presented as a backdrop to the ministry of Sister Helen Prejean, but it is a film which does not trivialize the horror of murder, the complexity of criminal justice, or the overpowering healing of Christ’s redeeming love. “Dead Man Walking” is the autobiography of a Roman Catholic nun in Louisiana who brings the love of God to a man on death row, as well as to the families whose children he murdered.

Sister Prejean’s ability to restore the criminal’s life comes from her own surrender to God and her conviction that God’s love is for every human being – for all of creation. Surrender and conviction empower her to love even those who are difficult – seemingly impossible – to love. This is the beginning of ministry. We are often asked to love a person despite their sin and accept them as a person valuable both to God and to us.

Sister Helen says to the criminal, *“I want the last face you see in this world to be the face of love, so you look at me when they do this thing. I’ll be the face of love for you.”* That is truly proclaiming release to the captive. The murderer, Matt Poncet finds freedom when he accepts and admits the truth about his responsibility for his crimes – in this moment he knows God’s grace and is liberated.

You may think that sort of thing only happens in the movies, but I have known people who were once members of this congregation who were engaged in prison ministry for many years. They went regularly to William Head to lead the ALPHA program, to answer questions about faith and life, and to reach out with the gospel. They prayed for conversion to belief, being set free.

When asked why they proclaim the good news at the prison, the response was: *"Each of us can be imprisoned when we are not free in the Lord, and we are released as we commit to Christ. They are entitled to the message we bring. We don't judge them. We go out there to give them Christ's love – that's all we can do."*

God calls us to be a remembering people. Remember that some people are persecuted for their faith and think about how to support them. Remember that Christians are sometimes the perpetrators of persecution and be vigilant to call that out. Remember that some people are wrongly imprisoned. Remember to be the face of love even for those who trespass against us and the laws of our land. Remember that we share in divine work – God's hopeful redemption of the world. **Amen**

▫ *Amazing grace my chains are gone*

Offering and Prayer

Jesus teaches that the gift of a simple cup of water is a gift worthy of his disciples. Friends, whatever we give to God this day can bless the world in Jesus' name. So, give with confidence that your gift matters.

▫ *Praise God from whom all blessings flow*

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God of abundant love, we offer our gifts to you willingly, knowing you desire fullness of life for all your children. May these offerings from our hands be gifts that fulfill that desire. Bless us we pray and bless these gifts in your service. Surprise us with your power, working in us and through us, to accomplish worthy things in the name of Jesus, the Christ. Amen

Pastoral Prayers / The Lord's Prayer (a scripture and response prayer for two voices)

Luke 21:12-14 But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance...

Give us the strength, O Lord, to endure persecution for your name. Help us and all believers to stand firm in our faith.

Hebrews 11:36-38 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.

Thank you for the faithful witness of those who have gone before us and have given their lives to share your hope with a dying world. May we learn from their example.

Mark 8:38 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.

Give us courage, O Lord that we may speak forth light in this dark world. Forgive our weakness and our fear; transform our wavering into a certain proclamation of your salvation and justice.

In speaking of the body of Christ, Paul reminds us that *“if one part suffers, every part suffers with it”* (1 Cor. 12:26). And elsewhere we are instructed, *“Remember those in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering”* (Heb. 13:3).

[When invited, you may wish to name, aloud or silently, places where religious persecution is taking place as well as prisoners you know of or know personally.]

Forgive us when we forget.

Matthew 5:10-12 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

For all those who suffer for their faith – who face persecution, torment, imprisonment, separation from their families, violence, and hatred – we cry to you, O Lord. Have mercy on them.

Romans 12:14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

We pray for those who persecute. Open their eyes and heal their lives; turn them toward peace.

Revelation 21:3-4 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, *“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”*

Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly; bring your healing to this earth.

Romans 8: 35-38 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, *“For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”* No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let us pray together with confidence... *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*

□ *Arise, your light is come*

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Blessing

Go in peace, with Christ as your friend and companion.

May the God who feeds the hungry fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that you may abound in hope as God the Spirit brings you growth – God the Son tends you with wisdom – and God the Source assures you that you will never walk alone. Amen

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

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