

Welcome, Announcements, and Land Acknowledgement Dennis Sutherland (worship elder)

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 recommit ourselves to just and respectful relationships within our congregation and our neighbourhood.

➤ *Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary (repeat)*

Call to Worship – Lenten Liturgy

In Lent, we hear Jesus' call to mend our ways:

repentance is necessary no matter who we are.

So we come to listen and respond to Jesus' word of life,

for the Holy One will abundantly pardon.

In returning to the Lord, we trust that mercy will be ours

and our lips will again praise the God of life.

† Gathering Prayer and Words of Hope

God, our Creator and Sustainer, in you we live and move and have our being. In your depths we find meaning; in your heights we find light and joy. You are the source of peace and hope for all who turn to you. You alone have been our help and our guide; you give us strength and courage when we face challenges. In you we find rest and welcome along the way. We praise you, O God, for your steadfast love. Draw near to us once more in this time of worship. Reveal your purposes for us and prepare us for the days ahead so that our lives may witness to your mercy and grace as we follow Jesus.

God of grace and mercy, we confess that our thoughts are so often not your thoughts – our ways are rarely your ways. Our tempers are short, and we fail to act with kindness. Our confidence is weak, and we treat others without respect.

Our faith falters and we lose track of you. Forgive the many ways we fail you, and inspire us to follow you more faithfully. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Hear the good news! In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. We can make a fresh start today!
Thanks be to God for this gracious blessing.

➤ *Bless the Lord (seated – repeat)*

PWS&D Sharing **Alice Embraces New Techniques**

In Malawi, Alice has struggled with food insecurity for many years. Due to frequent dry spells and unpredictable rains caused by climate change, her family was harvesting little. She knew something had to change.

Alice attended a community gathering organized by PWS&D's partner Churches Action in Relief in Development, where she was introduced to a project focusing on innovative and sustainable farming techniques.

"They explained the importance of conserving the environment amidst effects of climate change, which have negatively impacted agriculture production, including our area," Alice recalls. She hoped that participating would change her situation by reducing soil erosion and minimizing water needs, two crucial problems they were facing.

Alice embraced conservation agriculture practices, transitioning away from the less productive methods she had been using. The shift yielded remarkable results, as she doubled her harvest on the same plot of land.

We can respond to Christ's call to help farmers learn to improve crops and conserve resources – providing food for today and an income for the future. Thanks be to God.

➤ **As the deer** *(additional verses displayed)* **27**

✠Prayer for Understanding **Fiona Gow**

Loving God remind us of your presence here this morning. Be present to us in our need, in our weakness, in our fear, in our love. Be present to us as we receive your Holy Word. In the name of Jesus, 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. Why 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. Incline 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. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, 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.

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let 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.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For 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.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13 [NT 172]

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.

So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested

beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

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 around 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.**

Message

My friend Kim and I met during our first week at the University of Alberta in residence and in time became quite close. We shared an apartment in Edmonton during our third and fourth years of university. We worked together as noon hour and afterschool supervisors where we produced plays with elementary aged children. We hosted unusual theme parties like our infamous "Oddly Shod" spring bash in 1981. And we remain dear friends today.

I think many of you know that I introduced Kim to my brother Mike. They have been married for over forty years, so Kim and I share family bonds as well. We have been there for one another through many experiences. Kim was able to attend this week's Knox Café with her daughters – supporting Steve and PWS&D. I am always grateful for the time we are able to be together – sometimes for happy occasions of celebration and sometimes ordinary, simple pleasures like a walk in the park, and sometimes to comfort and care for one another in grief.

Early in 2013 one of Kim's two sisters, Anne, was teaching in her classroom in Texas when her students noticed she was talking funny and that her face looked "weird" – she didn't

believe them at first but eventually school staff insisted on an ambulance, and she went to hospital. She had had a stroke. Tests were done and family contacted – there was a significant blockage in her heart due to an undetected bacterial infection. She was scheduled for surgery. Her son, deployed in Afghanistan, got compassionate leave to come home. Kim spoke with Anne that Saturday – they joked and were confident everything would be okay. Anne had a second massive stroke on Sunday, the 10th of February 2013 and she died.

Anne worked hard and was a wonderful teacher. She had a strong marriage, a daughter, a son, parents and sisters – she was well loved by all. Anne had a mature Christian faith – was active in her church as well as in her community. In the previous summer she came to Victoria for a month to help care for her mother who had been injured in a car accident. Anne was, in all the ways we tend to measure it, a good person – 55 years old – and suddenly just gone – dead. “It’s just not right,” Kim said.

It’s just not right when people suffer – or die so young – or leave us missing them – or experience tragedy that they don’t deserve. It’s just not right.

We all know that good things happen, and bad things happen. We all know that some people are good and some – well some people aren’t so good. And we struggle to make sense of how these things are connected – we wonder if they are connected. Do bad things happen to someone because of their own failings? That can’t be right – can it?

We read the story from Luke’s gospel in isolation, but it doesn’t occur that way. We are entering an ongoing conversation – joining midstream. Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, teaching his disciples and the crowds as he goes. In chapter twelve he has told several strongly worded parables about money and foolishness and always being prepared. He concludes by suggesting that those listening are not just missing the point of his stories but missing the boat altogether: “You may be able to read the signs to predict the weather,” he says, “but you are utterly clueless about reading the signs of the times.”

That is when the recent slaughter of some Galileans comes up. Some of the listeners want to show that they do know what is happening – that sinners, the worst sinners, are being punished. That is what they are suggesting and that is what Jesus refutes.

Are the bad things that happen to us our fault? Do we deserve them? Are they, in fact, at least the consequence of, if not punishment for, our sinful deeds? “What did I do to deserve that?”

Jesus speaks of the accidental nature of tragedy and injustice. Religious commitment – spiritual maturity – ethnicity – these things had nothing to do with the fall of the tower

in Siloam and Pilate's violence. It was a matter of poor construction and political violence committed against people in the wrong place at the wrong time. Faithfulness to God does not immunize us from life's pain – or insure that we get the most desirable spouse – the top position at work – or our favourite spot in the parking lot. The sun shines and the rains fall on the just and the unjust. Our behaviors may put us at risk, but they are not all-determining. We cannot boast of the relationship between our success and our righteousness nor can we blame the victim for her or his illness. Stuff happens! God is involved in all events – seeking wholeness in all events – but God does not control the outcome of all things.

Jesus does not defend God. Jesus refuses to act as if God was supposed to pull the strings – ensuring that only good happens to the good and only bad happens to the bad. Jesus refuses to act as if this is a failure on God's part. Jesus is not defending God's goodness in the face of evil – instead he is challenging the hypocrisy of the claim being made by his listeners – the claim we frequently make. Jesus undermines the ideology underneath the question – he says the world doesn't work like that.

"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. Do you suppose a causal relationship between morality and tragedy?"

"Do you think they were worse sinners than all the others? No. No worse than you. You have more in common with those victims than you may think."

These people didn't suffer under Pilate's terror or an engineering disaster because they were bad people. Kim's sister, Anne wasn't bad either – no more sinful than any of us. The people who suffer and die are just like everyone else. What happened to them could happen to anyone even when it doesn't seem right at all.

Despite what we learn when we read the book of Job, people insist on variations of the theme that *good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people*.

We seem to believe this in spite of the facts. No matter how many good people suffer, we still believe this. No matter how many bad people prosper, we still believe this. Why? Because we really, really, really want the world to work like that. In a world where that is true, we believe we have a say in the matter of suffering. In that world – if people are good – if we are good enough – suffering can be avoided.

If we lived in that kind of world, it would be easy to tell the good guys from the bad guys – as easy as it is in old time westerns – but the presence of Jesus among us makes it clear that the world doesn't work like that. We are not puppets on manipulated strings – some

suffering for their sin while others prosper for their righteousness. No, we are all in the same boat. We all need grace and forgiveness – we are all both good and not so good – we all need to repent.

There is a memorable scene from the film Unforgiven where a young gunslinger is literally shaking in his boots in shock and remorse after his first experience of having shot a man dead. In a weak attempt to justify himself, the young man says, “Well, I reckon he had it coming.” To this the grizzled old gunslinger replies, “We all got it coming, kid.”

Finger pointing and figuring out how to rate evil or sinfulness in others misses the point. Suffering is not logical. Tragedy is not a punishment for sin. We are all vulnerable.

We tend to pay more attention to the sins of others than we do to our own. Sometimes we zero in on another person’s problems precisely in an effort to prevent ourselves from having to look in the mirror. But there is still time – we can still repent.

Jesus calls us to repentance and as we do so we are tempted to go right back to our old patterns – tempted to turn 360 degrees instead of only 180 – tempted to view repentance as a kind of reset to factory defaults.

If you just repent, some argue, then God forgives you, you’re on God’s good side again, and everything will work out for you – you can avoid suffering and death. But we already know that the world doesn’t work this way.

Jesus invites us to repent of that whole paradigm – that whole way of thinking. We are asked to stop deluding ourselves and repent of the idea that we can avoid suffering and death if we are good enough. We can’t.

What we can do is change – wake up – repent – turn around. We can give up on ways of thinking that are hurtful to ourselves and others. We can remember that no one lives forever – not even kind, caring, faithful people whom we love, so we need to give thanks for the rare and precious moments we have. We can resist looking for the sin in others and seek to root out the sin in ourselves. We can let the Holy Spirit turn our lives around and cultivate in us fruit that both shows and shares the glory of God. **Amen**

➤ *O God, you are my God alone*

PCUSA

✠ Offering and Prayer

God has given us life and breath – and created a world of beauty and order. In Christ we know God’s generous mercy. Our gifts are tokens of gratitude for all that we have received in Christ and in creation. May our gifts speak for our thankful hearts this day.

Loving God, accept these, our gifts, we pray. Bless them and use them to inspire peace in places of unrest – love in places of resentment – joy in places of fear – and hope in places of loss. In the name of Jesus, the Christ, our friend and Saviour. Amen

✠ Pastoral Prayers and the Lord's Prayer

Merciful God, as we journey with Jesus through Lent, we are surrounded by murmurs and shouts from a world hungering and thirsting for truth, justice, and compassion. In the ordinariness of everyday life, guide us to discern and distinguish your ways. Empower us as community and individuals to seek answers of truth and substance. Encourage us not to settle for things that do not satisfy.

We pray that you will rise up within us, a fountain of blessing, so that we ourselves may not become inwardly parched and weary. Satisfy the thirst within our souls, that we might all the more vigorously and joyfully serve our brothers and sisters

O God, your thoughts and ways are beyond our comprehension. And yet we trust that you will care for your children and give us what we need. We pray for the well-being of all who are sick and for the whole of creation. We pray for your blessing upon those situations in the world and those individuals within our community and congregation whom we name now in silence or aloud...

Be as water for our thirsty souls, O God. And in your mercy hear us as we pray together
...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

Blessing

Go in peace; be of good courage – hold fast to what is good – render no one evil for evil – strengthen the fainthearted – support the weak – help the afflicted – honour all people – love and serve the Lord and may the blessing of God Almighty, Creator, Christ and Spirit embrace and remain with you forever. Amen