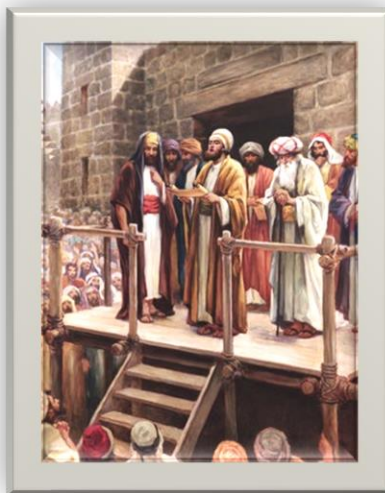


Worship at home

June 6, 2021

General Assembly Sunday



<https://ssnet.org/blog/monday-reading-and-hearing-law/>

God calls us to worship:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.¹

Let us worship God.

Hymn: “Ancient Words”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ouTgX9hchw4&t=160s>

(Michael W. Smith)

¹ Isaiah 55:10-11.

We bring our praise and confessions:

God of creation and compassion,
we praise you for your attention to each and every blessed creature,
marvelling at the detail and the grandeur you call into being.
You tend the fragile beauty and balance in the world,
receiving praise from the depths of the sea to the tops of the mountains.
You have seen your church grow from tiny beginnings
to a worldwide community of those who follow Jesus,
full of diversity in voice and vocation.
Receive our praise as we witness your patience and perseverance
with all you have made.
Open our eyes to the purposes you have for us,
for our congregation, and for our denomination.
Awaken us with the insight of your Spirit
and reveal to us how best to serve you in the world you love.
For we offer ourselves to you in the name of Christ, our Lord.

God of purpose and possibility,
you give us work to do and the skills we need to accomplish your calling.
Yet we prefer to follow our own ways.
We resist your wisdom and fail to consider the suggestions of others.
We think we know better.
Forgive our stubborn nature
and our unwillingness to reconsider our own views.
By the power of your Holy Spirit and the grace of Christ our Lord,
give us a teachable spirit to learn new ways to serve you
and live as good neighbours in church and community.²

God assures us of his forgiveness:

The prophet Micah reminds us that God requires three things of us:
to do justice, to love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.
To all who turn away from self-interest
and seek reconciliation with God and neighbour in kindness and humility,
God offers forgiveness and peace.
The peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

In response to the gospel, we confess our faith and offer our lives and resources:

Please remember to prayerfully make your offerings to the congregation of which you are most associated. If you're a member/adherent of Knox-Moore or St. Andrew's, Mooretown, please send your offering to Howard McKellar or Judy Armstrong.

² From worship resource for June 6, 2021 available at <https://presbyterian.ca/worship/>

God speaks to us through his Word:

No Empty Words: Hearing

One of the defining moments of Israelite history was their time in Babylonian exile which lasted from (605)/586 – 539 B.C. (There were two waves of deportees which makes setting precise timelines difficult.) After breaching Jerusalem's walls and setting fire to the temple and all the key buildings of the city, the army of the expanding Babylonian empire forcibly removed the bulk of the population from Jerusalem and the rest of the Israelite territory. They would spend decades living in exile. Away from all they knew. Away from their centers of worship. Away from the Promised Land. Under the control of a foreign empire. In 539 B.C., under King Cyrus, Persia conquered Babylon and in the following year, Cyrus allowed some of the Israelites to return.

Upon returning to their land, one of their first acts was to rebuild the altar and resume worship (outdoors, mind you, there was no temple yet.)

When the temple was rebuilt and all the Israelites re-settled in their towns, they gathered in the square. The congregated people, hungry to hear a word from God, told the scribe Ezra to present the scrolls containing the Law of Moses.

And, on the 1st day of the 7th month, Ezra began to read.

READ NEHEMIAH 8:1-18

ROMANS 10:13-17

1. Upon returning home, the Israelites found that home was not as they left it. The city walls were thrown down. Weeds grew through the cracked streets. The temple was destroyed. Although they did rebuild the temple, the few who remembered the previous one built by Solomon, wept. (cf. Ezra 3:12) The new did not compare with the old. Life was not the same after the exile as before. And, it would never be again.

But, the Lord God was the same.

The Law of Moses was the same.

Almost everything is temporary: life, family, jobs, community, health. Mountains may shake into the heart of the sea, wrote the psalmist, but the Lord God is constant. And God's Word remains.

As Ezra read the scrolls on which were written the law of Moses (the Torah, the first 5 books of our Bibles), and the people heard the Word of God, they were so overcome with emotion that their worship consumed them entirely. They stood, they bowed their heads, they raised their hands, they wept.

They had just come through a time of immense loss and change.

The rebuilt city and temple were far cries from the Promised Land they remembered.

But, as they heard the words being read once again, they wept.

The Law of Moses is the same.

The Lord God is the same.

When they learned they'd been neglecting the feasts, the entire community changed their holy habits. They ran out to collect the sticks and build the temporary shelters (booths) as tangible reminders of the nomadic life of their ancestors who lived with in the desert with no sense of normalcy but for their trust in the living God.

As Ezra read the scrolls, as the congregation listened attentively, as the community brought their holy habits back in line with what they heard, their faith was rekindled. When they listened, processed, and responded to the ancient words of life, their own faith assumed new life and renewed direction.

Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

2. We have not yet returned from our COVID-exile; although, we might be moving toward that eventuality. When we do, we might find that what we long for as 'normal' is no more. And, maybe that's okay. 'Normal' was familiar, but in its familiarity normal had become our god.

We assumed that family and friends would be always within easy reach. We assumed that stores would be always open. That good food was easily available at any restaurant we wanted, at any time. We assumed that the global village would not come to a crashing halt because of something so small it's not visible to the human eye.

This 'normal' had become our god. And its not that we ignored Yahweh anymore than the Israelites did. We were going to church. We were making our offerings. We just made sure that Yahweh conformed to and blessed our 'normal'.

And, maybe this 'normal' wasn't all that great of a god.

'Normal' involved hugging, shaking hands, and talking or singing without fear. It also involved/involves environmental degradation, air pollution, invasive species; inadequate drinking water for many communities in Canada as well as abroad; human trafficking, opioids, and internal turmoil in hearts and minds!

Life might not be the same as it was before COVID. And maybe that's okay. Because, even 'normal' is temporary.

3. But, the Lord God; the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the same.
Jesus of Nazareth is still the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever.³

If we want to live by the Holy Spirit and thus bear witness to the truth of Jesus for the glory of God, the health of our souls, and the good of the world in both the age of shutdown and the age that's yet to come, then we need to *hear* the Word of God.

Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

This is different than simply reading the text on the page.

One of the challenges of having a sacred book is that when the words are written on the page, yes, we can carry them around with us, we can preserve them, study them, analyze them; we can also, however, control them and make them do what we want.

When we read, we are in control.

However, these are not our words. They are God's revelation which God has gifted and entrusted to humanity.

We need to *hear* what the Spirit is saying to the church.

³ 1st Peter 1:25

*When we **listen**, we **receive**.*

4. Of course, because the Word of God *has* been affixed to the pages of the Bible, we do need to read (or, listen to it being read.) And, it is not an easy text to read! The various documents were written in various periods of history spanning 1,000s of years. The economic, geographical, political, cultural, and environmental contexts are different throughout.

This is one reason why regularly attending to the Word of God as it is preached; why regularly hearing sermons is so vitally important.

There are so many demands on our time that you may not have the mental energy to unpack the readings and go searching for the background information that is required.

Having a good study Bible is helpful because, when you do have a couple of minutes to read one or two verses, or to simply re-read Sunday's readings, the Study Bible with its notes and tables and maps can quickly give you some of the background information you need.

Whether you access God's Word through reading the written text or listening to someone else read it, there are at least three habits that greatly enhance our ability to hear God's Word through the written text of Scripture:

(i) Attentive Listening.

...the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the Law.

This is no more complicated than simply noticing what is being said. What grabs your attention? What can you hold in memory? What comforts or encourages you? What puzzles you? What disturbs you?

(ii) Holy Curiosity.

Don't be content with not understanding or with being disturbed by what you hear.

Ex. Suppose you were reading Nehemiah 8 at home and got to the part about making booths out of branches and how all the people, recently returned to their homes, promptly went to live in these booths, that might raise some questions. Why? What are booths? Why was this so important? You could simply gloss over this passage and move on. But, if you engage a little curiosity, you will discover a rich and worshipful tradition which the people were embracing after having been absent from it for years.

Seek the help of others and wrestle with the difficult parts so that you can understand the reading!

*They gave the sense, **so that the people understood** the reading.*

Get to know the time periods in which the various writings were written. Become familiar with the geography. Get to know the feasts, festivals, and sacrifices. Become familiar with the various genres represented in our Holy Library. Learn to recognize literary devices. Learn to recognize metaphor and embrace the vistas which metaphor makes available to our imaginations.

(iii) We approach Scripture as a sacred moment. When the people gathered around that platform to hear the Word of God, they recognized the holiness of the day. When we encounter the words therein, we encounter the Lord God as he reveals himself. And, when we encounter the Lord God, we encounter salvation in all the vastness that word contains.

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

We approach Scripture as though the Living, Triune God whom we know in Jesus Christ – crucified, resurrected, and ascended – still has something good to say to us through these words that we call the Holy Book.

After **receiving** God's words through the acts of **reading** and **hearing**; engaging **Attentive Listening**, **Holy Curiosity**, and **Sacred Moments**, living the Word of God in reliance on the Holy Spirit requires that we meditate on what we've received.

Just as rain settles into the soil before it can benefit the seeds; and, just as food needs to be chewed and digested before it can benefit our bodies, God's word needs to be mulled over before it benefits our souls, before we can benefit the world, and before God is glorified in our speech, body language, thoughts, and actions.

That's where we'll go next week.

Amen.

Hymn: #500 "Open my eyes, that I may see"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oo-CAfoZ-yw>
(Performed by Golden Ears United Church)

We respond with prayer, faith, and service:⁴

Almighty God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:
we give you thanks for our life together in Christ,
and the work of the Spirit that draws us closer to you and to each other.
We pray for the life of our denomination as it meets in General Assembly.
Send your Spirit to work in and through the commissioners,
even while they gather at a distance and engage through virtual technology.
Speak through your Spirit to open minds and hearts to your leading.
May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ sustain us in communion and community,
even when we differ over decisions and directions.

Thank you for all the ministries and mission Presbyterians undertake together
in Canada and in many places throughout the world.
Thank you for lessons learned and hope inspired
by all the partners we have worked with,
over this difficult year
and throughout many years and many different cultures.
We pray for all who serve in the name of our church
and for those who join in ministries supported by Presbyterians Sharing
and Presbyterian World Service & Development.
Bless the important work undertaken in Jesus' name
which looks so different in each location.
Open all our hearts to support these ministries
with generous giving and ongoing prayer,
so that lives will be healed, transformed and strengthened
according to your compassionate concern.

God of our hearts and our hopes,
We pray for those you have given us to love.
Hear us as we place their needs and hopes before you in this silence.
(Hold a brief silence)

⁴ From worship resource for June 6, 2021 available at <https://presbyterian.ca/worship/>

We pray for those who serve our nation as leaders in business, politics, health care and education. Grant them wisdom in this challenging time, so that their choices consider the needs of the most vulnerable whom we name before you in silence.

(Hold a brief silence)

We pray for those who face uncertainty, unrest and threat from violence day by day. In this moment of silence, we bring before you people in our own community who know upheaval because of the pandemic, and those in places around the world where injustice is unrelenting.

(Hold a brief silence)

We pray for all the families, friends, and communities of the children found dead at the Kamloops residential school.

(Hold silence)

For the families and friends of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls

(Hold silence)

God of the earth and all its fullness,
In this season of planting and growing, of nesting and nurturing,
we pray for the environment and all the creatures it supports.
Awaken us to better stewardship in the garden you have entrusted to us.
Hear our prayers for everything and everyone you have created in love
as we pray the words Jesus taught us:

The Lord's Prayer.

God sends us with His blessing:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Amen.