

Worship at home

October 31, 2021

23rd Sunday after Pentecost

Reformation Sunday

<https://pccweb.ca/moorepc/>

God calls us to worship:

Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

We bring our praise and confessions:

God of goodness and purpose,
in you we live and move and have our being.
You are the Fountain of Life, and you refresh us.
You are the Light of the world, and you show us the way.
You are the Spirit of life, and you move in us each new day.
So, we join our voices with the angels and archangels,
with the saints and disciples of every time and place,
to worship you as Creator, Healer, and Source of our hope and our joy.
Praise be to you, God most holy, ever Three and ever One,
world without end. Amen.

God of goodness and mercy,
we confess that we have been indifferent to your will,
staying silent when we should have spoken up for justice.
We have heard your call to put our faith into action,
but fear holds us back.
There is work to be done in Jesus' name,
but we often seek an easier way.
Forgive us, O God, and give us courage and commitment
to serve as your saints in this time and this place,
whatever the challenges may be.

God assures us of his forgiveness:

While it is true that we have sinned, it is a greater truth that we are forgiven through God's love in Jesus Christ. To all who humbly seek the mercy of God I say, In Jesus Christ, our sin is forgiven. Be at peace with God, with yourself and with one another.

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.

Hymn: #484 "The church is where'er God's people"

God speaks to us through his Word:

Holy One, you are the Source of Wisdom for the ages. Prepare us to learn from your Word. Open our minds and hearts to the scriptures by the illumination of your Holy Spirit, that we may grow wiser as we listen, and serve you more willingly as we live.

A Tale of Two Altars

If you were to write a table of contents for the book of Joshua, which is a helpful thing to do when reading a complete book of the Bible to organize the story in your mind, it would probably have 5 sections:

1. The Commissioning Chapter 1
2. The Preparations Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5
3. The Conquest Chapters 6-10 (11-12 are summaries)
4. The Allotment Chapters 13 – 21
5. The Epilogue Chapters 22 -24
 - Chapter 22 Return of Reubenites, Gadites, Half-Manasseh to their inheritance on eastern side of Jordan River
 - Chapter 23 Joshua's final speech to tribal leaders
 - Chapter 24 Covenant renewal, death of Joshua and the priest Eleazar

Commissioning, Preparation, Conquest, Allotments, Epilogue.

Today, next week, and our final week we'll be looking at the epilogue, beginning with chapter 22 and the return of the Reubenites, Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manassites.

This is a lengthy chapter, so it might be helpful to keep in mind the chapter's organization:

Verses 1-9 Joshua commends, charges, and blesses the Reubenites, Gadites, and half-tribe of Manassites and sends them to their inheritance on the eastern side of the Jordan.

Verses 10-12 Just before crossing the Jordan to their allotments, the Reubenites, Gadites, and half-tribe of Manassites build an altar which is a copy of the altar of the Lord that stands before the tabernacle in Shiloh.

Verses 13-20 Those who settle west of the Jordan confront the east-of-Jordanians and accuse them of rebelling against the Lord and Israel.

Verses 21-29 The Reubenites, Gadites, half-tribe of Manassites answer the charges.

Verses 30-34 Harmony is restored among the tribes.

READ JOSHUA 22:1-34.

1. When Israelites first arrived on the eastern shores of the Jordan River, when Moses was still alive, the Reubenites, Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh approached Moses, in the company of the priest Eleazar and the leaders of the other tribes, with a request. They had observed that the territory east of the Jordan – Gilead and Bashan – was good land for raising cattle. They owned “a great number of cattle.”¹ So, their request was simple: to be given the land east of the Jordan River.

When Moses first heard this request, he was upset. The request was initially interpreted as an act of treason. By not wanting to cross the Jordan, it was assumed that the Reubenites, Gadites, and half-tribe of Manasseh were turning their back on Israel, not wishing to support them in the conquest, and thus turning their back on God’s plan and on God.

After some discussion in which the Reubenites, Gadites, and half-tribe of Manasseh promised that while their children, women, and livestock would remain east of the Jordan and start to establish their farms, all warriors and able-men would cross the Jordan with the other 9 1/2 tribes and pull their weight in the conquest. With this condition, Moses granted them the land they wanted.

Now the conquests are complete. At least, for the time being. We know that they did not drive out all the inhabitants of Canaan and that will cause trouble later. Much of the legal and moral codes were developed to help the Israelites live holy to the Lord while among the Canaanites that still remained in the area. For now, the Lord has given

¹ Numbers 32:1

them rest, the land has been divided, and the Reubenites, Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh returned to their land on the eastern bank of Jordan.

The physical landscape has profound spiritual significance.

The Jordan River acts as a divider between these two groups of God's family. The majority inherit land on the west, but there's a perceived sense in which the 2 1/2 were splitting themselves off from the rest of Israel. The east-of-Jordanians were afraid that over time the stories told by the west-of-Jordanians would portray them as rebellious against God and thus disinherited by God and not part of the true faith.

2. Within the Presbyterian Church in Canada there are a number of congregations which, for several reasons, have already, or are in the process of, or are thinking about separating themselves from the denomination.

This is a bit of a complicated process because, although I don't understand all the intricacies, our denominational structure is such that no one congregation owns outright their physical assets. We are not a collection of independent congregations but a denomination. The buildings, land, bank accounts, pews, etc. are held in trust for the ministry of the denomination of which each congregation are unique expressions.

When a congregation closes, the assets are sold and the money is spread throughout the denominational ministries.

But what happens when a congregation chooses to separate itself from the denomination? To remain as a worshiping congregation but not be affiliated with the PCC? Simply put: if you want to leave the denomination, you leave your assets behind and start fresh.

There continue to be attempts at each General Assembly to establish a process of *gracious dismissal* whereby an individual congregation could separate from the denomination together with the building, money, and assets they've so faithfully cared for over the years. The idea is that in so doing, the denomination would bless the departing congregation. They would recognize that although we are parting, we are nevertheless still engaged in the worship and ministry of Jesus. By allowing the departing congregation to keep the building, etc., the denomination would provide them with some assets to help them get started on their side of the Jordan.

There is a special committee that is addressing some of these concerns and working on possibilities, but as yet the PCC has not adopted such a process.

3. There is a sense in which the actions of Moses, and then of Joshua, towards the Reubenites, Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh were in line with the ideals of gracious dismissal.

When Joshua sent them away to their tents and blessed them, he said to them, "Go back to your tents with much wealth, and with very much livestock, with silver, gold, bronze, and iron, and with a great quantity of clothing; divide the spoil of your enemies with your kindred." So, the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh returned home, parting from the Israelites at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan, to go to the land of Gilead, their own land of which they had taken possession by command of the LORD through Moses.²

When the battles were over, Joshua commended them for their faithful service, he charged them to continue observing the commandments – to love God, to walk in all his ways, to hold fast to him, and to serve him with all their heart and soul. And then he blessed them. With words. With livestock. With silver. With gold. With bronze. With iron. And with a great quantity of clothing.

So, they parted. With grace and with blessing.

4. Today is Reformation Sunday. It's the day we remember the event that is upheld as the starting point of the protestant reformation. On October 31, 1517 a monk named Martin Luther posted 95 theological points which he thought needed to be addressed by the leadership of the Roman Catholic church. These were areas in which he believed the church was in error. That event catalyzed a series of reactions in which Luther and those who followed him were labelled heretics and cast out of the church. Eventually we ended up with the Protestant Christians and then the Reformed Protestants, of which Presbyterians were the Scottish expression.

There have been many other reformations, schisms, and separations throughout the years. There continue to be, and will continue to be for years to come. My professor

² Joshua 22:7b-9

of church history when I was in seminary emphasized the observation that in the way the story is often told from the perspective of the predominant group, all of those groups who left after a separation are often portrayed as heretics. They've turned their backs on the church, on the true faith, and therefore on God.

In 1925, the Presbyterian Church experienced a massive schism when 1/3 of the denomination – including overseas missionaries and seminaries – joined with the Methodists and Congregationalists to form the United Church of Canada. As someone raised in what was then called the “continuing Presbyterian” church I developed an understanding that those who continued as Presbyterians were right. The United Church had turned their backs on God, turned their backs on the church, and were not part of the true faith.

By God's sense of graceful irony, I ended up working as an organist in a United Church. I was legitimately surprised when the congregation celebrated an anniversary of the Union and the minister spoke of God's wonderful act of calling together these people to form this true expression of God's love known as the United Church of Canada! I thought the Presbyterian Church in Canada was the true expression of God's love!

The story of reformation and separation is told from the point of view of whichever group you are a part as being the ones who are right.

The 2 1/2 tribes who travelled back across the Jordan to take up residency in the eastern territories were afraid that in time to come such stories would portray their children as heretics who would be barred from joining the others in worship at the tabernacle and excluded from the life of the community.

So, they built this altar to be a visual reminder of their connection with one another in the Lord.

But, when the 9 1/2 tribes saw them building the altar, they assumed that the Reubenites, Gadites, and half-tribe of Manasseh had once again turned their backs on the Lord. They assumed that the altar was for sacrifices and burned offerings. This would have been in direct violation of Yahweh's vision of one place of offering for the one people of the one faith in the God of gods. God appoints the place of sacrifice. And

that appointed place was Shiloh (Jerusalem would later become the place of worship, but not yet.)³

What the 9 1/2 tribes thought they witnessed was the 2 1/2 tribes who never really wanted to cross the Jordan and engage in battle in the first place, returning to their specially granted land, and building their own altar on which to make their own offerings of worship in their own way.

In just a minute our hymn leaders will lead us in the hymn “The church’s one foundation.” Samuel John Stone wrote this hymn in response to a schism within the Church of England in South Africa in the 1860s which grew out of different readings of scripture. Today we would label the two sides as the “revisionists” and the “traditionalists.”

The challenge of this hymn, and of Joshua 22, and of Reformation Sunday is to recognize that it is not possible in this age to have one united church. There will be schisms and separations and reformations. People will move from one congregation to another. Ministers will move from one congregation to another. There will be the traditionalists, and the orthodox, the revisionists, and the progressives.

Our prayer ought not to be that no one ever departs. Our prayer ought to be that each separation allows the various parties to more faithfully and more consistently love the Lord our God, walk in all his ways, keep his commandments, hold fast to him, and serve him with all our heart and with all our soul.

For the health of our souls, the good of the nation, and the glory of God.
Amen.

Hymn #479 “The church’s one foundation”

³ Joshua 18:1

We respond with faith and prayers:

Enduring God,

On this Reformation Sunday, we thank you today for your faithfulness to us and to the tradition that has shaped us as disciples of Jesus.

Thank you for your living Word which continues to reveal him, and for the gift of your Spirit to help us interpret your wisdom in the midst of challenging times.

God of guidance,

Speak into our lives today.

Eternal God,

On this Sunday marking the faithfulness of all your saints,

we give you thanks for people in our lives and across the ages who have shown us your loving kindness through their witness to Christ in so many different situations.

Inspire us by their examples and show us how we, too, can live out our faith in the midst of challenging times.

God of guidance,

Speak into our lives today.

Loving God,

You keep calling us to care for those in need and show hospitality to strangers in our midst.

Thank you for your persistent love which continues to comfort and challenge us all.

Open our hearts and eyes so that we can see how to offer that love to others in the midst of challenging times.

God of guidance,

Speak into our lives today.

Living God,

You bring new life to the discouraged and those facing danger and death.

Thank you for signs of hope which break into pressures of the pandemic and its consequences for so many, in the midst of challenging times.

God of guidance,

Speak into our lives today.

Creating God,

we praise you for the beauty of this world and the rhythms of nature which sustain us.

Give us courage to act on behalf of your creation where it is stressed or broken, and nurture our commitment to act as your stewards within creation in the midst of challenging times.

God of guidance,

Speak into our lives today.

Wise God,

hear us in this time of silence as lay before you the people and places on our hearts this day:

(Keep a time of silence for 15–30 seconds.)

Now we join our voices with the followers of Jesus in every time and place in the words he taught us all:

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.