

Worship-at-home

March 27, 2022

Fourth Sunday of Lent



“Hear and believe the good news!”

God calls us to worship:

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation!

Thanks be to God for such great mercy.

Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Thanks be to God for new beginnings!

God has given us the ministry of reconciliation through Christ Jesus.

Together we will make a new beginning in Christ!

Let us worship God with joyful hearts, trusting God to renew us and all things.

We will lift our praises to God with hearts refreshed by grace.

We offer our prayers:

God of Mystery and Mercy,
we gather to worship you in humility and hope
because we believe you have the power to change the world;
to change the world for the better with your love.

We gather to worship you
trusting that no one or situation is beyond your concern,
or your embrace.

Such love astonishes us.

Without your grace we cannot imagine such love.

Inspire us with a vision of love
which will change the world and our lives
through the love and mercy we meet in Jesus Christ,

your Son and our Saviour.

**Merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed.
We have not loved you
with our whole heart, mind, and strength;
we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.
In your mercy forgive what we have been,
amend what we are,
and direct what we shall be,
so that we may delight in your will
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your holy name.
Amen.**

God offers the assurance of grace:

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:
everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!
in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself,
not counting their trespasses against them.

Accept God's pardon,
and be at peace with God, with one another, and with your own self.

And give thanks to the Lord,
for He is good;
His love endures forever.

We offer our lives and resources:

Offering plates are positioned as you enter and leave the sanctuary. If you'd prefer to use e-transfers, please speak with Rev. Ian, Judy Armstrong (St. Andrew's), or Howard McKellar (Knox)

Hymn: #194 "Come, let us to the Lord our God"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHrDEPPb5n4&t=36s>

God speaks to us in His Word:

READ 2 Corinthians 5:14-21
 Psalm 32
 Luke 15:1-7

Hear and believe the good news

We are now at the mid-point of the season of Lent.

It has often struck me as interesting that this period, which is often a sombre, weighty season as we look toward the cross, falls during the beginning weeks of Spring. There's often a curious juxtaposition between the weather outside and the attitudes and practices of the faithful. Outside birds are singing, days are lengthening, buds are growing; and in our churches the sanctuaries are sometimes stripped of unnecessary frills, the ministers don the deep purple colours of subdued royalty and penitence, the faithful look inwardly in acts of self-examination and contrition.

The word *lent*, or, *Lenten*, has little to do with piety. It has to do with lengthening of days. The word comes from Old English and Middle Dutch adjectives that reference length. Lent means long. In French, the word means "slow", as in the lengthening of the time it takes to complete a task. And, for those who are musically inclined, you will recognize the Latin iteration of the word which means to slow down one's playing of the music. It's use in the season has to do with the lengthening of the days. Or, one could think of it as the slowing of the encroaching nightfall.

So, this holy, somber season of fasting and prayer takes place during the time when the days are getting longer, the sun is becoming brighter and warmer, and the conditions are being shaped for new growth in the natural world.

Now, when you stop and think about that, it makes a lot of sense!

Because of what comes at the end of Lent, because of the cross of Calvary, because of Jesus' sacrificial death thereon; because of Good Friday the Sun has risen in our lives!

Because of Christ's sacrifice for us, in our place, and on our behalf, God has forgiven sin, defeated the power of death, and is victorious over the evil one! Because of the cross, the Shepherd offers to carry us home on his shoulders and invites us into the joy of heaven.

Lent, the season of lengthening and warming days, points us to the cross of Calvary by which the eternal Day in the age that's yet to come has begun in our present reality.

The gospel reading for today, the 4th Sunday of Lent, includes this parable of the shepherd and the lost sheep. The parable is Jesus' response to those who criticized him for befriending the "unwelcome" components of society.

The parable begins with a rhetorical question. And I wonder, how do you answer Jesus' question?

If I had one hundred sheep and lost one of them, would I leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go looking for the one that is lost?

I don't think I would.

Regarding the situation from a human point of view, I would probably do a cost-benefit analysis and conclude that the risk to leaving the 99 in the wilderness outweighed the benefit of reclaiming the 1.

It is probable that shepherds worked together in the same area, so one might presume that there would be someone nearby who could step in to watch over one's flock while they went to look for the stray sheep.

But that's really not Jesus' point.

From a human point of view, the people with whom Jesus was criticized for associating, were not worth the time of day. Their value to society did not merit using public resources to try and help them. The Pharisees and the scribes derogatorily referred to them as "sinners" who were not worth saving.

That's the conclusion reached through a human-perspective cost-benefit analysis.

However, there is a God who regards us not from a human point of view but from the perspective of divine love. And this God ascribes such value to everyone that, like the shepherd in the parable, He has taken the initiative to seek us out and bring us back into the fold.

There is no one whose sin is so great that this God won't expend all the resources He's able to welcome them home.

What we call 'salvation' is the complete healing of mind, body, and emotions which is experienced most fully when we are in perfectly harmonious union with the One who created us.

In the oft-quoted words attributed to St. Augustine:

Thou hast made me for thyself, O God; and my heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.

God regards us from the perspective of divine love. And, like the shepherd, the Lord has taken the initiative to seek us out and bring us back into the fold; to reconcile us to himself in which fellowship is joy and healing and peace.

The errant sheep, upon hearing the Shepherd's calls, had a choice. It could continue wandering in the wilderness, trying to make a home for itself on its own terms, or, it could stop and turn towards the One who was seeking it.

The psalmist reflected that when he persisted in ignoring the grace extended by the Lord, he was tormented as though his body wasted away. But, when he turned towards the Lord, he found himself surrounded in steadfast love, and happy!

That faith-action of *turning towards* is what is usually called *repentance*.

Repentance is a word of grace.

Repentance is the means by which we can enter into and live out of that harmonious state of reconciliation with our heavenly Father, surrounded by the warmth and light of His steadfast love.

Repentance is not a magic formula by which we can manipulate God into receiving us. Like the compassionate shepherd, God is already moving toward us. On the cross, Jesus has already accomplished all that is necessary for the reconciliation between us and the One in fellowship with whom is joy and peace.

Repentance is the action of turning toward the One who is already seeking you.

Repentance requires that we recognize the moments throughout the day when we have stepped out of the circle of God's steadfast love: those times when our hearts have been hardened and our actions and thoughts dictated by a self-preserving cost-benefit analysis rather than by the extravagant love of Christ.

Upon confessing our sin, we hear anew and believe the good news that we proclaim Sunday by Sunday:

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!... In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.¹

Then, in prayer, we return to the circle of the Lord's steadfast love from which place of quiet rest we can serve as ambassadors for Christ, helping others to awaken to the love of Christ who died for all.

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

Hymn: #442 "Speak, Lord, in the stillness"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_kObE4bCvo

¹ 2 Corinthians 5:17-19

We respond in prayers of thanksgiving and intercession:

Gracious God,
you have called us together as your people,
to be the church of Jesus Christ.
Make us one in faith and discipleship,
breaking bread together, and telling the good news,
so that the world may believe you are love,
turn to your ways, and live in the light of your truth.
Faithful God,
Embrace us with your hope.

Creator God,
you made all things and called them good.
We pray for the earth in its vulnerability,
depleted by our lifestyle choices and our economic expectations.
Inspire reverence for the earth in all people.
Guide us all to make wiser choices for the sake of your creation.
Help us use resources wisely, with future generations in mind,
guarding the fragile balances you have set between many precious species.
Faithful God,
Embrace us with your hope.

Jesus Christ, Prince of peace,
you taught us of God's reconciling grace
in the story of a father who welcomed back his wandering son
and invited his jealous son to open his heart.
Speak to the hearts of all your people
in this time when so many neighbours and nations sit in judgment on each other,
provoking conflict and resentment.
Teach us how to seek peace on earth together.
Call those in positions of power and influence to work for the common good.
Turn us away from anger, fear,
violence or vanity,
which can turn neighbour against neighbour and nation against nation.
May all who claim your name be known as makers of the peace.
Faithful God,
Embrace us with your hope.

O Christ, healer of hearts and hopes,
you desire health and wholeness for each one of us:
We pray that those who have lost their livelihoods in this pandemic
may find true abundance.
Grant rest and renewal to those who are broken in body, mind or spirit,
and bring comfort and hope to all who face loss and loneliness.
In silence we lift before you the names of those on our hearts today:

Silence for 30 seconds

Faithful God,
Embrace us with your hope.

Spirit of power and promise, embrace us with hope this day
so that we may live faithfully,
encouraging each other by the commitment we see in Jesus Christ
who taught us to pray together:

The Lord's Prayer

God sends us with God's blessing:

Hymn: #479 "The church's one foundation"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHMxve5Rgjo>

Blessing