

The Presbyterian Church in Canada

## St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

Epiphany Sunday

January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Minister: Rev. Dr. Emily Webb

Clerk of Session: Mary Strong

Director of Music: Dr. Foster Hill

Office: 519-332-2662

### WE GATHER IN GOD'S PRESENCE

Prelude "Humble us with thy goodness" Bach

\*Entry of the Word

Welcome and Announcements

Introit "Lord, enthroned in heavenly splendour"

Call to Worship

\*Hymn "God is love: come heaven, adoring" #314

Prayer of Approach and Lord's Prayer

Assurance of Pardon

Minister: The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

People: And also with you.

\*Sharing the Peace of Christ May the God of hope

\*Hymn "There is a redeemer" #358

### WE LISTEN TO GOD'S WORD

Children's Message

Prayer of Illumination

Responsive Psalm #73:1-5, 21-28

Old Testament Lesson:

Lamentations 3:1-3, 19-24.....Page 766

Large Print Bible.....Page 1286-7

New Testament Lesson:

Luke 13:1-9.....Page 76

Large Print Bible.....Page 1630-1

Reader: The Word of the Lord

People: Thanks be to God

Anthem "Eat this bread, drink this wine"

Message "Potholes"

### WE RESPOND TO GOD

The Offering "Bless this house"

\*Doxology "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" #830

\*Prayer of Dedication

The Invitation to the Table

\*Hymn "All who hunger, gather gladly" #534

### WE ARE SENT OUT AS GOD'S PEOPLE

\*Hymn "Amazing Grace" #670

\*Charge and Benediction

\*Blessing "Sing amen" #264

Sing amen! Amen, we praise your name, O God.

Sing amen! Amen, we praise your name, O God.

Sing amen! Amen, amen, amen, amen,

Amen, we praise your name, O God.

\*The Word Goes with Us

Postlude "Tuba Tuba" Lang

## February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2020 – St Andrew's [Travel Light/Potholes]

We've kind of ground to a halt  
 on our journey with Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem.  
 Last week, Jesus was talking about setting aside our worries,  
 figuring out what we value most  
 and investing our hearts into that....  
 ...for Christ-followers,  
 that's got to be the kingdom-work God.  
 Jesus, his followers, the crowd and us,  
 we're still having that same conversation.  
 And although no miles have been travelled,  
 a lot of ground has been covered.

Jesus and his followers continued to have a private talk  
 about the burdens and responsibilities of discipleship,  
 but then Jesus turned to the crowd again.  
 He begins to try and convey a sense of urgency to them  
 about the reality of God's kingdom coming,  
 of learning to read the signs of that kingdom,  
 as easily as looking at a cloudy sky  
 and knowing it'll likely rain.

Jesus tells a story about getting in right relationship with God before it's too late.  
 As Jesus is speaking – and this is where we picked up the story today –  
 news reaches the crowd of an awful event,  
 what we would call a state-sanctioned act of religious violence.  
 Because the only way Jewish blood  
 would be mixed with Jewish sacrifices  
 is if Pilate had them killed  
 during their worship.

Jesus brings up a second tragedy that has recently occurred:  
 a random accident in which a tower,  
 likely part of the wall of Jerusalem, collapsed and killed 18 people.  
 Both events saw people's lives snuffed out,  
 suddenly, unexpectedly and for no clear purpose.  
 And Jesus says, unless you repent

– turn away from sin and toward God –  
you will all die too.

When we think about what Jesus was like during his time here on earth,  
we remember his healing miracles,  
his generous welcome of outcasts  
and those on the margins of polite society;  
we remember his love,  
his hands outstretched to children;  
we remember how he cried and grieved  
when a friend died.

We sing beautiful hymns about Jesus' character:  
softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling,  
or what a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear...  
...in his arms he'll take and shield thee,  
thou will find a solace there.  
Warm, patient, nurturing, empathetic.  
That's the Jesus we take solace in,  
the Jesus whose gentle and loving call  
we are happy to respond to.

Well, Jesus is not calling softly and tenderly right now;  
he's calling loudly and urgently.

Back then, most Jewish people thought that  
if something bad happened to someone,  
they deserved it because of some sin that they themselves  
or even their parents had done.  
The worse a person was,  
the worse they and their children  
and even their grandchildren suffered.

It sounds brutal, but there's a certain amount of comfort in that...  
...it makes suffering understandable.  
Those people were bad, horrible sinners,  
and they got what was coming to them.

I'll be okay, though, since I only sin a little bit.

No, Jesus says.

Those Galileans who were killed, murdered, while worshipping?

They weren't the worst sinners in Galilee.

And those poor folks who got a ton of rock  
dropped on their heads when the tower fell,  
they weren't the worst people in Jerusalem.

They didn't do anything extra-awful  
to deserve such an awful fate.

Jesus is not denying cause-and-effect;  
there are things you can do that'll lead directly and unavoidably  
to pain and suffering,  
like touching a hot stove and getting a burnt hand.

What Jesus is telling the crowd is,  
don't think you're somehow safer  
from death by violent Roman governor  
or shoddy masonry than they are,  
than your neighbors are;  
you aren't.

Don't look at those people  
and think you're better  
or more loved by God  
than they are;  
you are not.

We all need to repent,  
to turn toward God,  
before it's too late.

Jesus has kicked the crowd right in their complacency.  
Those reassuring things they'd been saying to themselves,  
about being somehow protected from tragedy  
if they were good enough people, are,  
according to Jesus,  
false reassurances.

And that makes the world a much more dangerous place for the crowd,  
 because it means that they have no control  
 over whether or not they suffer,  
 no virtuous padding,  
 between them and trouble.  
 Jesus is pushing the crowd out into uncertainty,  
 because he is telling them  
 that sin does not make  
 tragedies come.  
 Tragedies just come.

These days, I hope that no Christian, no follower of Jesus,  
 would ever look at suffering and be satisfied to see it  
 or think it well-deserved or earned.  
 When we look at the big tragedies happening in our world,  
 Christians shouldn't attribute it to people being bad.

When we saw the bushfires in Australia on the news,  
 the awful devastation to people's homes and farms,  
 the destruction of the landscape, the loss of human life,  
 the painful, frightening deaths of thousands of animals...  
 ...we didn't think for a moment  
 wow, those Australians  
 must have done something  
 really awful to deserve all that.

This exchange between Jesus and the crowd  
 tells us that he would not have thought so;  
 Jesus is very clear that bad things just happen,  
 and blaming the victim is not the right answer.  
 That's what Jesus says.

But it's really interesting what Jesus does not say to the crowd.  
 Jesus does not try to offer any explanation for those accidents,  
 for the violence and devastation  
 that human beings and nature  
 regularly inflict upon unsuspecting people.  
 He does not attempt to defend creation,

or even God himself  
 against charges of  
 mismanaging the universe.  
 At least in this conversation,  
 Jesus offers no explanation or rationalization at all.  
 All Jesus says is, they didn't suffer because God's punishing them...  
 ...so don't get complacent.

But let's scale it down from big, international disasters and conflicts,  
 from state-sanctioned violence and random accidents,  
 to small, personal tragedies.  
 Let's imagine stepping out our front doors,  
 out St. Andrew's front doors,  
 and seeing the quiet and intimate tragedies  
 in the lives of those in our communities.

How do we respond when we hear about someone on social assistance?  
 Do we think that they're lazy or not trying to get a job?  
 The reality is in Sarnia that a lot of people with a job  
 need extra help to make ends meet.

Or what about a teenager who's homeless or couch-surfing from friend to friend?  
 Do we think they should've smartened up and stayed  
 with their parents or in that foster home?  
 Many teens who run away do it because  
 they're experiencing significant abuse at home.

Or what about someone struggling with depression?  
 Do we think, buck up and pull yourself together?  
 Or drug and alcohol addiction?  
 Why don't they just stop?  
 We could argue about choices and cause-and-effect,  
 family histories and bad decisions, but...  
 ...if Jesus was standing beside us,  
 what would he say?

I don't want to point any fingers here,  
 but I live on a street with a stretch that seems to be

mostly made up of potholes with a bit of road in between.  
When I first moved there,  
I drove as slowly as possible over them  
to keep from ruining my car's suspension,  
gritting my teeth  
and thinking dire thoughts  
the whole way.

But very quickly, I worked out a level path to drive on  
through this obstacle course,  
weaving and dodging at speed  
and barely hitting any bumps at all.  
My pothole-y street  
doesn't really even register much at all,  
unless I meet an oncoming car  
and can't glide around  
the rough spots like I want to.

It's easy to weave and dodge  
and let our eyes and hearts glide around  
the suffering, pain, tragedy and the struggles of those around us,  
in our lives and in our communities.  
It's easy to build our lives on those rationalizations  
that allow us to get through the day feeling  
blessed, safe, and able to presume upon  
a better fortune than those around us  
whose lives seem to be  
mostly made up of potholes  
rather than smooth pavement.  
"There but for the grace of God go I?"  
That's not in the Bible, you know.  
And God's grace is not about protecting us from tragedy;  
it's about saving us, transforming us,  
drawing us into communion,  
into relationship with him.

Fueled by raw memories of rubble and blood on the ground,  
 by awful things happening to people no worse,  
 no more deserving of suffering than anyone else,  
 Jesus asked the crowd hard questions  
 about what they believed about themselves  
 and about the suffering people  
 in their community.  
 And then he told them a story about grace.

A sensible landowner sees an unproductive fig tree in his garden  
 and tells his gardener to stop messing around  
 and just cut down that waste-of-space tree.  
 The gardener...  
 ...asks for a little more time,  
 another chance to nurture and support the tree,  
 to see if it really is a waste  
 or if it might just fruit after all.  
 Identifying the landowner as God,  
 the gardener as Jesus,  
 and the tree as whoever it is we wish  
 would hurry up and repent...  
 ...that's oversimplifying things.  
 And nowhere else does the gospel writer imply  
 that Jesus talks down  
 a God who is too eager to clean house.  
 The power of this story is that it creates urgency and uncertainty;  
 but it also creates possibility,  
 and room for grace.  
 Will fruit emerge in time to thwart the ax?  
 How will this season of second chances play itself out?  
 Can the gardener save the tree?  
 Is this one last opportunity for grace?

In the language of our travels with Jesus,  
 maybe, in our dealings with the world,  
 we need to let our hearts hit the potholes sometimes.  
 We have been blessed,  
 because we have experienced God's grace outpoured in our lives.



But that grace is not meant to insulate us against tragedy  
or blind us to the awful things that are happening in the world around us,  
nor is it meant to make us complacent about our own fruitfulness  
or to offer us false reassurance.

No, God's grace calls us  
– loudly and urgently –  
to love actively and generously,  
to help the gardener in his work  
in even the smallest of ways.

We can read the signs:  
we know that God's grace is still urgently needed  
in our world and in our communities.  
Amen.