



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon
“At Home” Worship
Fourth Sunday of Lent: March 22, 2020

Gathering Around God’s Word

If you are worshipping with another family member or with children, you are invited to have different voices share and read the various parts of the service. You can also call/FaceTime someone to worship together.

Call to Worship

In Jesus Christ, God’s Word to the world, is life. The life is the light for all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn’t extinguish the light.

The light came to his own people, and his own people didn’t welcome him. But those who did welcome him, those who believed in his name, he authorized to become God’s children.

The Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

Opening Hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!* #1

CALL TO CONFESSION

Let us confess our sins, for God is gracious and always ready to forgive.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

God of love and compassion, you have come into the world and yet we have not recognized you. Forgive our lack of insight and open our eyes to see you here and now, that we may receive your grace through Jesus Christ. Amen.
(Prayers may continue in silence).

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Friends, hear the good news of your salvation: God freely bestows God's grace on us through Jesus Christ. In Christ we receive redemption and forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of the grace that God lavishes on us.

The Word

Prayer for illumination

illuminating God, by the power of your Holy Spirit reveal to us through the reading of these words your Word become flesh, living among us full of grace and truth. Amen.

Scripture Readings

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

New Testament Reading: John 1:1-9

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Reflection **“Apart and Together”** The Rev. David Ukropina

One of the words we often use for church is congregation. With this word, we define ourselves by congregating, by meeting together. So at a time like this, when we are not physically meeting together, it is not only incredibly strange, but we all feel the loss. Marta and I want you to know how much we personally miss worship and seeing all of you, and how corporate worship is so central to our pastoral identity and our identity as a community.

Having said that, it is very clear why we are not meeting. From a practical perspective, we are following the guidance of national, state and local leaders, as well as our denominational leaders. But from a theological perspective, we are also listening to the witness of scripture, which has always spoken with a unified voice of God's special compassion for the vulnerable.

In the Old Testament, we hear repeatedly about God's concern for those who are vulnerable, often described as the widow and the

orphan. In the New Testament, Jesus offered compassion for the outsiders and marginalized, for lepers, Samaritans, widows, for all those who he compassionately called the least of these.

When we as a society and a church agree not to congregate, we are doing so to help everyone, but especially those most likely to be harmed. An international illness reminds us that we are all one another's responsibility, and despite the physical distance this may create, it brings us closer because it is practiced out of compassion and out of a sense of community.

At the same time, our current situation has created enormous fear and anxiety, which are understandable. Whether or not we are in vulnerable populations, we all have loved ones who are. As a community, whether that community is a church, a nation, or a family, we all experience anxiety. The big question is how will we handle that anxiety?

Marta sometimes gives me a hard time because I frequently talk about family systems theory, which evolved out of psychology but has been applied to churches and any group of people. While it is not the end-all-be-all of theories, I've found it very helpful at times in thinking about church, and one of the central themes of systems theory is anxiety and how to handle it.

Anxiety is always present, in people and in groups. However, at stressful times it is even more present. During those times, groups of people will often react to anxiety the way individuals do, which is the "fight or flight" response. We react to anxiety by either running away, in various forms, or in lashing out and attacking each other, in various forms.

Sadly, we see this play out in lots of ways. We see it in our current situation with generational tensions. Older people may lash out at younger generations in saying they just don't understand the real threat this poses to those who are older or may have more health problems. Younger people may say older generations don't understand the incredible stress this situation places on their ability to earn an income and support their families, and how they struggle to work and care for children who are out of school for months.

A more healthy response is to check our anxiety and remind ourselves that we are all in this together. If this virus has taught us one thing, it's that we are all connected, across generations, across nations, across parts of the country, and across any boundary you want to think of. Still, anxiety threatens to create divisions.

When we think of health care, I have incredible admiration and compassion for the workers around the world and in our communities who are battling this disease. We should all be incredibly grateful to all those who are working so hard to help the rest of us. Still, I'm not surprised when anxiety leads people to lash out at inadequate health systems or decisions.

Sadly, this time of anxiety is also a time when various marginalized people can be targeted as an expression of anxiety. In the 1860s and 1870s, when typhoid, typhus and cholera were rampant, the poor and immigrant families were often blamed and depicted as carriers of the disease.

With our current virus, we have seen racist responses towards those who are blamed, and also mounting anxiety about the virus spreading through homeless populations. At the same time, a more level and compassionate response seeks to hold our anxiety in check and compassionately help those who are the victims of anxiety-based responses.

One thing that also tends to happen when anxiety moves through any system is that it tends to land on leaders. That is just a natural occurrence. Marta and I have seen that in our own ministry, with some parishioners upset that we are closing worship, and some who were upset we did not close it sooner.

I can understand the anxiety and anger. When we are scared and anxious, church is a place of comfort and security. It's doubly painful to cancel corporate worship at just a time when we really need it. Still, I think that just because we have cancelled worship, it does not mean we are unable to connect with God and with each other.

Our challenge during this crisis is how to distance ourselves physically but not distance ourselves emotionally. One hope I have is that the absence of worship in the sanctuary serves to remind all of us just how valuable and sacred it is. They say absence makes the heart grow fonder, and I hope that is the case for all of us with church.

One thing that will allow us to stay connected is that, as Marta mentioned in her message last week, God is always with us, across time and space, and regardless of where we worship, in home or in the sanctuary. That helps remind us that ultimately the church is not a building, but it is an interconnected web of relationships.

Years ago, I talked with a church consultant who worked with churches that were in some kind of crisis. As an exercise, he asked the church members to imagine for a second what would happen if a tornado came and completely leveled the church. As awful as that sounded, he asked them if there would still be a church.

The members said yes. He asked them why. They said because the people would still be there. His exercise was meant to show them that the real church is the connection all the people had, with Christ as the cornerstone and the Holy Spirit drawing everyone together. As I picture all of you worshipping in your homes, that is what I picture.

Rev. Dr. Craig Barnes is a Presbyterian minister and current president of Princeton Theological Seminary. He is one of my favorite preachers and writers, and I've read a number of his books. In his book *The Pastor as Minor Poet*, Rev. Barnes talks about what often happens during a crisis in regards to church. He writes:

“A disaster is anything that makes us feel like the stars are falling down. That’s why it is called a dis-aster. The late University of Chicago theologian Mircea Eliade claimed that all religions are centered on an axis mundi, or a sacred pole that keeps earth connected to heaven. This can be a totem pole, the center pole of the tribal hut, the temple, or the cross of the Christians.

“Whenever there is a disaster, no matter how personal or global in scope, people rush to their axis mundi to insure that the heavens are not collapsing on top of them. If they think, for one moment, that they have been abandoned by their sacred pole, they’re plunged into anomie and chaos.” (Barnes, p. 44).

In the midst of anxiety, and without the comfort of corporate worship, we can feel like that connection between us and God is threatened. Yet when we worship in our homes, when we turn to God in prayer, we are reminded that the connection can never be severed. When facing an unknown future, turning to almighty God is a good place to start.

For our sermon text today, I’m going slightly off lectionary in choosing John 1:1-14. I say slightly because while it is not our assigned text for today, the gospel of John is frequently read during Lent, and the themes of the passage about light and darkness are common ones for the season of Lent.

I also chose this text because we often don’t hear it in worship. It is assigned to Christmas Day, which unless it’s a Sunday, it’s not a

day we usually congregate. It is also assigned to the second Sunday of Christmas, which in some lectionary years does not get used, depending on when Baptism of the Lord is celebrated.

Because it is a such a foundational text, and because we don't often hear it in worship, and because it is so Lenten, I turned to it this week. I also found myself, in the midst of crisis, turning to something so central in our faith. The first chapter of John is like his nativity story, reminding us that Christ has been with us from the very beginning of time, and will be until the end of time.

I also find myself responding to both the acknowledgment that darkness is a reality, but how the darkness will not triumph. John writes, "What has come into being was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:4-5).

When we are threatened by anxiety over what might come, we are threatened by the darkness taking us over, whether it's as individuals or a community. Yet Jesus calls us to remain rooted in him, rooted in the light and the life, and resist being overtaken by darkness, anxiety, attack and blame.

I'd like to finish the later part of my sermon today with a recollection I have of the wonderful book *Soul Survivor* by Philip Yancey. Some of you were part of a class I led using this book, which profiles a number of people who influenced Yancey, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Annie Dillard, Henri Nouwen and others.

One of the chapters I did not have time to include was on John Donne, the famous English poet and minister. Yancey recalls that while Donne was dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, the largest church in London, the plague swept through the city. During that time, in the early 1600's, a third of the city's people died, and a third fled to the countryside, turning whole neighborhoods into ghost towns.

Many Londoners went to Donne for a word of comfort, but then the first spots of illness appeared on his body. The doctors told him it was the plague, and that he was close to death. Donne received treatments as bad as the disease, including bleedings, toxic treatments, and the application of vipers and pigeons to remove evil vapors.

While he was confined, Donne could not read or study, but he was allowed to write. Convinced he was dying, Donne recorded his wrestling with God. He first asked why this was happening to him,

and why was it happening to everyone else. Like Job, John Donne never received an answer to his questions.

However, in his reflections, he discovered a gradual change in his thinking. He realized that the plague really didn't change all that much. Life had always included fear, illness, financial hardship, poverty, rejection, loneliness and failure. He also found his thinking moving from asking why, to asking the question, what will be my response?

He asked, will I turn away from God in bitterness and anger, or will I turn toward God out of my need? Donne realized that to learn how God views suffering on this planet, we should look to Jesus, who moved toward the paralytics, the widows, the lepers, and healed them with compassion.

One day, believing himself to be terminally ill, John Donne heard church bells tolling out a declaration of death. For a moment, Donne wondered if his friends had ordered the bells rung for his own impending death, but he soon realized that the bells were marking another person's death, one more plague victim.

In response, John Donne wrote one of his most famous works, Meditation XVII from his Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions. It includes the following famous lines, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

In his chapter, Yancey writes, "What should a plague or contemporary disaster teach me? Humility, for one thing. And gratitude for the life that I still enjoy. And compassion, the compassion that Jesus conveyed to all who mourned and suffered. Finally, catastrophe joins together victim and bystander in a common call to repentance, by abruptly reminding us of the brevity of life." (Yancey, p. 217).

During his illness, John Donne himself reflected on how he had lived. He began devoting more of his efforts to prayer, and to the others afflicted in London. He grew in humility, trust, gratitude and faith. He directed his spiritual disciplines to prayer, confession of sins, and keeping a journal. He got his mind off himself and onto others.

He had begun his prayers that his pain be removed, but he ended his prayers that his pain be redeemed, and that he be “catechized by affliction.” He still hoped for a cure, but even if it did not come, he prayed that God would change him to become more of the person that God wanted him to be.

After weeks of his struggle with death and with God, it turned out to everyone’s surprise that John Donne did not die in 1623. He was misdiagnosed, and his illness turned out to be a spotted fever like typhus, and not the plague. He survived his doctors’ treatments, and lived eight more years as dean of St. Paul’s.

Toward the end of his life, under orders from St. Paul’s to design a monument for him, Donne posed for a sculpture in the posture of death, with a sheet wrapped around him. His hands were folded, his eyes closed. The sculpture was carved from a single piece of white marble. The monument is still there. It was the only object of St Paul’s to survive the great fire of 1666. Donne wears a serene expression, one that survived the fire, attaining peace in death that had eluded him much of his life.

As we consider John Donne and the current crisis our world is in, may we avoid descending into anxiety, may we keep ourselves turned toward compassion and away from attack, and may we stay rooted in prayer to God who is our rock and our salvation. As Yancey ends his chapter, I’ll leave you with this quote from one of John Donne’s sermons:

“Our last day is our first day; our Saturday is our Sunday; our eve is our holy day; our sunsetting is our morning; the day of our death is the first day of our eternal life. The next day after that... comes that day that shall show me to myself. Here I never saw myself but in disguises; there, then, I shall see myself, but I shall see God too...Here I have one faculty enlightened, and another left in darkness; mine understanding sometimes cleared, my will at the same time perverted. There I shall be all light, no shadow upon me; my soul invested in the light of joy, and my body in the light of glory.” (Yancey, p. 224).

Amen.

Affirmation of Faith

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

Responding to God's Word

Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer

God our faithful Shepherd, we depend on you for everything we need: for daily food, for guidance and protection, for healing and comfort. Thank you for your care of us. Thank you for healing the wounds of this life. Thank you that in the presence of enemies, especially the last enemy of death, you are with us, as shepherd, host and home...

Knowing your faithfulness in our lives, we bring before you the lives of others, the cares of this world, entrusting all things to your goodness and mercy. Bring healing to those who are ill in mind, body or spirit. Bring release to those who are held captive by old hurts or worries. Bring relief to those burdened with debt, and comfort to all who suffer...

We pray for those living precariously. Protect those who are in harms way. By the power at work in Christ, break down the walls of hostility we build so that we may learn to live together graciously...

Loving God, help us to see the world as you see it; to see others as you see them; and to see ourselves rightly, too. Pursue us all with your goodness and faithful love until goodness and

faithful love fill every heart and inform every action. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying...

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.

Sending of God's Word

Closing Hymn: *The Church's One Foundation* #321

Benediction

I thought this benediction was appropriate, given the circumstances. It comes from Genesis 31:49:

And now may the LORD watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other.