



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon
“At Home” Worship
January 3, 2021

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. (If you have a prayer request you would like added to the At- Home Worship service, please email Brooke office@wpceugene.org)

Call to Worship

The Lord redeems the life of his servants.

Thanks be to God!

No one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.

Praise the Lord!

OPENING HYMN

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

#119

CALL TO CONFESSION

Because God is near to the brokenhearted, let us consider how we have lived, confessing our sins and trusting in God’s mercy to save.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

God of our redemption, we confess that we have not been faithful servants. We have not served you with sincere hearts nor trusted in your salvation. We have forsaken you, the living God, and have chosen to follow the lifeless idols of worldly power and wealth. Forgive us our sin, O God. Lead us to heartfelt repentance that we may honor you with our lips and serve you with our lives; through our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

Hear the good news: Christ himself is the Word that offers eternal life to all who receive him. This proves his love for us. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

The Word

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lord Jesus Christ, as we hear the reading of Holy Scripture, speak to us your words of spirit and life. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 34:15-22

The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry. The face of the LORD is against evildoers, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth. When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears, and rescues them from all their troubles. The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD rescues them from them all. He keeps all their bones; not one of them will be broken. Evil brings death to the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned. The LORD redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

Old Testament Reading: Joshua 24:1-2a 14-18

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, "Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.

Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."

ANTHEM

"Still, Still, Still"

SERMON

"An Act of Remembering"

Rev. David Ukropina

Well, this Sunday we find ourselves both in the middle of the Christmas season, which lasts from Christmas until Epiphany, which is January 6, and also it's the first Sunday of the new year, 2021. I know most of us are glad to see the end of 2020, and we're looking forward with hope for an end to the pandemic and hopefully less turmoil than last year.

There's something about the transitions of life that naturally lead us to marking the occasion. It just doesn't seem right to have a big life event without marking the occasion somehow. When you think about it, most of our rituals and celebrations come from some kind of transition.

We have wedding ceremonies when two people go from being single to being a married couple. As Christians, we have baptism services for joining the Christian community. There are funerals to mark the transition from this life to the next. We have birthday parties to mark the transition from one year to the next.

Celebrating the new year also falls in this category. It's an interesting celebration in a lot of ways. On the one hand, it's very universal. Unlike birthdays or weddings, it's something that everyone has in common. We all experience the new year's transition. At the same time, New Year's doesn't have much of a religious or spiritual connection, like many other rituals do. Whenever I think of New Year's, I immediately think of growing up in the city of Pasadena. When I lived in Texas, I had to remind people that it was the one in California, and not the Pasadena near Houston.

In Pasadena, our big claim to fame was the Rose Bowl and Rose Parade. As you can imagine, New Year's Eve was one big party every year in Pasadena. People would line up around the parade route that night, and spend the night camping out, so that they could watch the parade the next morning.

As much as I like the Rose Parade and Rose Bowl, camping out on the parade route just never sounded

too appealing to me. I was able to avoid this experience for most of my childhood, but one year, my family decided to spend the night out on the route together.

Imagine trying to sleep in the middle of a giant outdoor New Year's Eve party, sleeping on hard ground in a sleeping bag, and then waking up around 5am to several hours of marching bands and cheering crowds of people. Call me crazy, but as a child, this was just not my way of ringing in the New Year.

Now the Bible passage we just heard from Joshua records a covenant renewal ceremony that took place at a major transition point as well. The people of Israel had spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness, and now they had finally completed their occupation of the land that God had promised them since the time of Abraham.

Now that they had left Egypt and the desert, they were beginning a new life in a new place. Some of them may have wondered if God was still present in this new place. They also would have looked around and seen other people worshipping other gods in this foreign land. They had to make a renewed decision to follow their God, or to choose other gods.

Most of us are fairly familiar with the words, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." You often see it in homes, either framed or embroidered. I've seen it in lots of Christians' homes. We've had it in ours before. There is certainly nothing wrong with these words placed in one's home as a symbol of faith.

There is however a slight danger of these words becoming too domesticated. There's a bit of a danger of missing the larger context of the passage and all of Israel's recent history of leaving behind Egypt and spending forty years in the wilderness. While these words are a powerful statement of faith, I think they are even more powerful within the context of the struggle the Israelites went through.

As Joshua and the people of God faced the transition of leaving the wilderness for the land promised to them by God, they took a moment to look back and remember all the ways God had been with them through their journey. I'm sure they thought about God's mighty acts in delivering them from Egypt, and God's ongoing provision for them in the desert.

It was helpful for them to stop for a moment and have a ritual and a ceremony marking this transition, as they both looked back at the years behind them and as they looked to the future ahead of them. It's interesting to notice the various actions that they took that we read about in this passage and in other parts of Joshua 24.

One thing they did, as we have heard, is make a public affirmation of their faith, which again remembered God's activity, when they said, "He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed." I'm sure this was a comforting remembrance, as they considered their new future in a new land.

Elsewhere in Joshua 24, Joshua also wrote down words in the book of the law of God, and later set a large stone of witness there in Shechem where this passage takes place. These features of remembrance, writing words of faith and making a physical place or remembrance all have resonance with our worship today.

These words from Joshua 24 also call on the people to put away other gods that they might have been tempted to worship. Joshua told the people to put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the river and in Egypt, and the people responded by saying, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods."

These words may seem far away from us in time and place, but there are always temptations of the people of God to forget who they serve and chase after other gods. In our own day, there is the risk of chasing after money and power, getting lost in anxiety and worry, or in trusting too much in the power of military might or hoping too much in politicians.

I'm reminded of another time in 20th century history when during the Nazi regime in Germany in the 1930's, Christians were tempted to go along with the Nazi attempt to place all social institutions, including the church, under the power of Hitler and the Third Reich.

Even before Hitler came to power, but as he was ascending, the great theologian Karl Barth reflected on the political situation in Germany. He once wrote to a friend of his in Switzerland, saying the current situation was "like sitting in a car which is driven by a man who is either incompetent or drunk."

In the same letter, Barth, who was a professor at the time, wanted to "urge the students for whom I was responsible to keep on working as normally as possible in the midst of the general uproar." He also went on to say that it was his job to help the church "to maintain the biblical gospel in the face of the new regime and the

ideology which had now become prominent.”

Barth is well known today for writing the Barmen declaration, which challenged the attempt by the Nazi's to make the political state and the Fuhrer supreme over the church and over God. Barth gave a lecture at the time in which he argued that the basis for all theological work was that “other gods” were “all the other authorities which for some reason are thought to be important.”

What I hear in Barth's words during our own current situation is a call to continue our faith and our worship, even when times are challenging. I hear a call to continue to worship, to pray and to study our faith, even when we cannot meet in person. I also hear the call to remain loyal to our God and not to be chasing after other gods that may tempt us.

In many ways, we find ourselves alongside the elders, the heads, the judges and the officers of Israel, and deciding for ourselves if we will keep connected to God and tied to our faith journey, even during times that are challenging and fatiguing. I'm sure there were times when the Israelites tired of their journey, or wondered what the future held.

It would be easy for us to make a connection between this text and our current lives. Just as the Israelites wondered what life in the new land might look like, I know we at times wonder just when the pandemic might be something like over, and we might live in some kind of “new normal” where we can congregate and work and go to school something like before.

At a time like this, and perhaps at a time of transition into a new year, it can be helpful for us to mark the occasion and pattern ourselves after the renewal service at Shechem. We have had renewal services near other New Year's, but this year, it is obviously not possible to meet together.

Still, we can look to the ancient Israelites in their worship, by keeping the faith, continuing to worship God, to read the scriptures, to pray, and to stay connected with each other until that time that we can really be together physically in person as well as in spirit.

I find myself wondering sometimes how in the future, several years from now, we will all look back on this time in our lives. It's strange in a way to reflect on a future that hasn't come yet, but at times like this I find it can be a useful exercise, both as individual people of faith and as a community.

My hope is that in the future, we will all look back at this time kind of like a time in the wilderness, where we faced challenges and trials, but one during which we stayed close to God and held onto the promises God has given us, to be with us, to love us, and to guide us into a good future.

My hope is that like the Israelites, we will look back and remember the way that God was faithful to us during this time, providing for us and remaining active in our lives. So much depends on the people of faith remembering the acts of God, and you have heard me say before the way that remembering is also an act of remembering, or putting back together.

When we remember, when we worship, when we read and study, when we pray, we are putting ourselves back together as individuals of faith and as a community of faith. In the midst of pain and suffering and struggle, we discern the promises of God in the midst of our experience. The bold promises of God stand against the world and all that it throws at us.

In a way, we here in 21st century America find ourselves in an interesting place. Several decades ago, most families and most children just grew up going to church. Today, things are a bit different. There have been a few generations that have grown up largely un-churched.

Being part of a church today is not an automatic decision. There are many options for someone growing up today, and church is just one of those options. And there are many, many different churches one could choose to be a part of.

While this is disappointing in some ways, it also brings with it some freedom as well. We have the freedom to claim our own belief not because it's what our parents believed or because the majority of other Americans believe, but because we have experienced God and the gospel of Jesus Christ, and in response we join in community to affirm what we believe.

So with the people at Shechem, and with Karl Barth, and with the faithful witnesses through all time, I hope we can continue in the new year to stay faithful, to keep worshipping and witnessing, as we all together look forward to a promised future of being together and living in faith. Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH from A Brief Statement of Faith

We trust in God the Holy Spirit, everywhere the giver and renewer of life. The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church. The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the church. In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace. In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Responding to God's Word

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

As Christ offered himself for the life of the world, let us pray for the needs of the world.

Loving God, we pray for the church in every land: Help all who serve the living God to be strong in the power of God...

We pray for those who lead the church. Guide pastors, elders, deacons, teachers and leaders who order the life of the Christian community...

We pray for those who govern the nations. Give our officials wisdom for the administration of justice, compassion for the sake of mercy, and determination to pursue the common good...

We pray for the sick, the poor, and the oppressed. Save those who are in need and strengthen those who minister to them...

We pray for our planet. Save our world from war, waste and exploitation, for the good of the earth...

Merciful God, hear the prayers of your people and grant that what we ask in faith we may receive according to your gracious love, through Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray...

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

We Three Kings

#151

BENEDICTION

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

-Genesis, 31:49