



**Westminster Presbyterian Church**  
Eugene, Oregon  
“At Home” Worship  
**April 25, 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 Jesus Christ is our shepherd.

**He lays down his life for his sheep.**

The Lord Jesus Christ is our shepherd.

**He knows us, and we belong to him.**

The Lord Jesus Christ is our shepherd.

**He speaks, and we listen for his voice.**

**OPENING HYMN**

*Great Is Thy Faithfulness*

#39

**CALL TO CONFESSION**

If we are honest with ourselves, our hearts condemn us. But God, who knows everything, is greater than our hearts; and God’s deep desire for us is mercy, love, and peace. Therefore let us confess our sin.

**PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

**Lord, have mercy on us. We talk about love, but our actions betray us. We talk about love, but we neglect the poor. We talk about love, but we fail to love one another. Lord, have mercy on us. Forgive us, and abide in us by the power of your Spirit so that our lives may show our love for Jesus Christ, in whose body we live and in whose name we pray. Amen.**

**DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS**

We seek God’s grace because we trust in Jesus Christ, the One who loves us and laid down his life for us. This is the good news of the gospel: in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

*The Word*

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lord God, by the leading of your Spirit, help us to listen for your voice and follow in your paths all the days of our lives; in Jesus' Name. 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: Acts 4:5-12*

The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

ANTHEM

*There Is a Higher Throne*

Jordan Andreasen

SERMON

"April"

Rev. David Ukropina

There's a very famous first line to a very famous poem that came to my mind recently. The poem is *The Waste Land* by the great 20<sup>th</sup> century poet T.S. Eliot. And the first line to *The Waste Land* that came to my memory was, April is the cruelest month. At first, I didn't know why that line came to my mind, but after thinking about it, it made some sense.

The whole first sentence reads, "April is the cruelest month, breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain." After these verses came to my mind, I looked them up online, and I found that I wasn't the only one who was connecting April of 2021 with *The Waste Land*.

Other commentators and even some memes drew comparisons and connections between Eliot's poem and this particular month of this particular year. One obvious reason for this connection is that in the particular month of April 2021, we are mixed with feelings of hope and ongoing feelings of anxiety and pain.

We are feeling hopeful because of the continued rollout of the covid vaccine, which is giving us an optimistic feeling that the pandemic may soon be behind us. I've heard from parishioners that getting the vaccine felt like a liberation from the long trial that we have all been through together.

At the same time, we are seeing cases continue to rise in our area and around the country and around the world, and we continue to grieve those lives that have been lost, as well as the profound economic toll the pandemic has taken. I think it's fair to say that even as we hope, a lot of our nerves are feeling frayed.

When T.S. Eliot wrote that April is the cruelest month, he was not making a general comment about the month of April, which is not somehow inherently cruel. He was making a comparison between the month of April and the time and place he was living in, which was Europe just following World War I and the global pandemic caused by the Spanish Flu between 1918 and 1920.

Both T.S. Eliot and his wife Vivienne caught the Spanish Flu, and he wrote much of the poem during his recovery. Eliot and his wife also both went through something like nervous breakdowns around this time, and given everything that was going on in the world, it may not be hard to guess why.

World War I itself caused around 40 million casualties, with around 20 million dead and 20 million wounded. Estimates of the Spanish Flu were that it killed around 50 million people, and perhaps as many as 100 million. This was at a time the world population was about 1.8 billion, far fewer than today.

All of that death and suffering greatly affected Eliot's poem, and much of post war literature of the time. He also wrote *The Waste Land* under the influence of a book called *From Ritual to Romance* by Jessie Weston, that looked at the way cultural stories traveled from paganism to Christianity.

In the central story, a king is wounded, and his wound leads to barrenness throughout the land. Nothing grows, and the only way to heal the land is for a hero to go on a journey to heal the king. The arc of this story goes back to ancient times, and once Christianized, became part of the myth of the Holy Grail.

Eliot's poem saw in this story of the wasteland a metaphor for the destruction that followed the great war and the pandemic. In his poem, Eliot writes, I had not thought death had undone so many.

April is the cruelest month in the wasteland because usually, April is a time for growth and rebirth and renewal. The snow melts, the flowers grow, and people plant crops with hope for a harvest. April is a time for hope, but in the wasteland, nothing can be crueler than hope, since it can only lead to disappointment.

And in our Christian tradition, the great theological virtue of hope can be a dangerous emotion. Cynicism and irony are safer. They keep you guarded and protected. But when you hope, you open the door to disappointment and rejection. To hope is to make one vulnerable to your hopes being crushed.

As we turn from *The Waste Land* to this week's passage from the Book of Acts, we find it refers to another healing. Just as Eliot and perhaps the world longed for healing in post war Europe, the man born lame longed to be healed. And just before our passage in Acts, Peter tells the man that he is healed in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Now you would normally think this would lead to rejoicing. The healed man himself dances and leaps around, giving thanks to God. However, for their act of healing in the name of Jesus, Peter and John are thrown in prison, and then hauled in to the authorities to account for what happened.

It's interesting that when the rulers and elders and scribes stand the prisoners in their midst, their first question to them is, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Instead of giving thanks for this good work that has been done, they change the subject to the question of power and authority.

There is a reason the authorities do this, and the reason is control. They were the ones who controlled religion, and every religious act had to be done under their authority. That is the main reason they are questioning Peter and John and the disciples. If the disciples were practicing religion, it needed to be under the control of the officials.

Now it's interesting to note that the Book of Acts is not inherently anti-institutional. It is not inherently against the system of temple worship and religion. Notice in the previous chapter that Peter and John were actually on their way to the temple to pray when they encountered the man who had been born lame.

The problem here is not inherently with religion or religious institutions. The problem is that those religious institutions were not being responsive to the Holy Spirit of God. This has been true throughout history, whether with the temple, or the medieval church in need of reformation, or the German churches that supported Nazis, or American churches that supported slavery.

Whenever the church is not responsive to God, the Holy Spirit will eventually break it down and then rework it to be more responsive to God. But these temple authorities were not interested in the Holy Spirit.

They were interested in their own power, so instead of great rejoicing, this healing from God leads to misunderstanding, confusion and arguing.

There are some parallels I see between this result of squabbling in response to a healing by God, and our current moment in society and history. In Acts, we have a man miraculously healed, but the result is arguing instead of rejoicing. With us, I see in the historically fast development of an incredibly effective vaccine a miracle of modern science.

As a society, we ought to react to this with great joy and relief and gratitude, as some have, individually. But collectively, I see a lot more misunderstanding and arguing than gratitude and joy. As a country and a society, I would not describe the collective mood as one of peace but one of being moody and unsettled.

There are many who think the whole pandemic is a fraud and the vaccine is a fraud, and they openly deride past efforts to distance or slow the spread of the virus. Others are deeply angry at those who won't practice precautions, and it's amazing to me the degree to which the whole response has been politicized.

I remember over a year ago, the New York Times writer David Brooks went back at the start of the pandemic, and researched what he could about previous pandemics. And although it was a lengthy article, what he said was that by the end of this pandemic, we would not like what we saw of ourselves. He said that if history repeats, the pandemic will show us a version of ourselves that is not very appealing.

As a minister, I try to respond to all of this pastorally. I could very easily get mad at a lot of our collective behavior, especially the lack of gratitude, but at the same time, I do understand that a lot of society's response is due to the fact that we have been collectively traumatized by such an overwhelming and destructive experience. I understand that our nerves are frayed, and we are behaving accordingly.

As I was preparing and writing this sermon, I took a step back and thought a little bit more about the life of T.S. Eliot, the writer of *The Waste Land*. As a young man, he tended toward depression, and I mentioned before that he had a kind of personal breakdown during the writing of his great poem, and he and his wife eventually divorced.

In a way, it took him about a decade to recover from his breakdown, and perhaps to recover from the traumas of the World War I and the Spanish Flu pandemic. However, during that time, his personal views evolved and changed. He went from being caught in the general malaise to someone who, ten years later, converted to Anglicanism and a faith in Christ.

You see this reflected in his poems. By 1930, Eliot had written the poem *Ash Wednesday*, in which you can see the beginnings of faith and hope. And later on, in the late 1930s and early 1940's, he wrote *Four Quartets*, which Eliot considered his masterpiece and fully expressed his faith, drawing on such Christian greats as Dante, St John of the Cross and Julian of Norwich.

In the arc of these poems, we see a journey and a movement from lack of faith to faith, and from barrenness to hope, and in that journey, we can see aspects of our own collective journey. The effects of the pandemic will be with us a long time. Many have lost loved ones, many have lost economic security, and we all have experienced a collective trauma that will take time to heal from.

Still, hope is not absent. The pandemic will eventually end. The rain will fall again. The spring rain will renew the earth. And ultimately our hope will be not in the miracle of a vaccine, as amazing as that is, or the abilities of political leaders, however much we may hope in them or rely upon them.

Our ultimate hope is in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the one who raises our hope, and this is a hope that does not disappoint us. Hope in anything else can lead to our hopes being dashed, but our hope in Christ will not let us down. Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH - from A Brief Statement of Faith

**We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God. Jesus proclaimed the reign of God; preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel. Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal. Amen**

*Responding to God's Word*

**PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LORD'S PRAYER**

Let us gather together in prayer...

We pray for the church in every place. Gather us together and make us one, in ministry and mission to the world...

We pray for the nations of the world. Grant all leaders your wisdom so that they will use their power to help the poor and defend the vulnerable...

We pray for this community. Strengthen those who work each day to heal the sick, welcome the outcasts, and help those in need...

We pray for friends and loved one. Comfort those who are suffering. Walk with them through dark valleys and restore them in body, mind and soul...

Loving God, by the power of your Spirit, help us to keep your commandments and to love one another with the love of Jesus, 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

*My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less*

#353

BENEDICTION

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

-Genesis, 31:49